



THE  
MACDONALD FAMILY  
TRILOGY

RITA AWARD WINNER

Five Days  
in  
*Skye*

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## CHAPTER ONE

AT LEAST THEY COULDN'T FIRE HER.

Andrea Sullivan propped her elbows on the bar and buried her head in her hands. How had things gone wrong so quickly? One minute she'd been on the verge of closing a half-million-dollar deal. The next, she'd nearly broken her hand on the jaw of a client who thought her company's offerings extended to favors she had no intention of delivering. Three years of working her way up the ranks toward VP of Sales all down the tubes because one man couldn't keep his hands to himself.

No, her company certainly wouldn't risk an ugly public legal battle. They didn't have to. Her boss had other, more subtle means of showing his displeasure.

As punishments went, Scotland was a big one.

“What’s so terrible about Scotland?”

Andrea jerked her head up and met the bartender’s gaze. Had she said that aloud?

The man’s eyes crinkled at the corners as he ran a towel along the polished mahogany surface of the bar, evidently amused by her slip. Round faced and topped with a thinning mop of dishwater-blond hair, he looked as stereotypically English as the London pub in which he tended bar.

She let out a long breath, her shoulders slumping. “Scotland’s cold, it’s miserable, and the food is horrible.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad as all that, is it?” His expression turned from amused to sympathetic. “Take in some countryside, tour a castle or two, maybe some high street shopping . . .”

“This is a business trip. Trust me. My dream vacation involves sunshine and umbrella drinks on the beach, not rain and fog in some backwater village.”

If she’d only managed to keep her temper in check, she’d have been spending the next week in the tropics with the promise of a fat commission and a guaranteed promotion, not serving time in Scotland babysitting a celebrity client who suddenly wanted to dabble in the hotel business.

James MacDonald.

She’d never heard of the man. Then again, she didn’t own a television. She spent so much time on the road, she wasn’t even sure why she owned an apartment. She seemed to be the only one on the planet, however, who hadn’t heard of the Scottish celebrity chef. Half a dozen restaurants, four cookbooks, his own television show. Even her taxi driver had been able to name MacDonald’s three London restaurants without hesitation.

Andrea toyed with her half-filled wineglass, watching the golden liquid slosh around the bowl. "I should be on my way to Tahiti right now, not sitting in a pub drinking a rather mediocre glass of wine."

"That's because you go to Paris to drink wine," a deep male voice said over her shoulder. "You come to London to drink ale."

Andrea straightened as a man leaned against the bar beside her. He was tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in a pair of dark slacks and a business shirt, the collar unbuttoned and sleeves rolled up to show off muscular forearms. Dark hair worn a little too long, brilliant blue eyes, handsome face. Handsome enough she took a second look and immediately wished she hadn't been so obvious about it. His grin made her heart do things it was certainly not intended to do.

She couldn't prevent the corners of her mouth from twitching up in a smile. "Now you tell me."

He glanced at the bartender. "Get me a 90 Shilling, and whatever light's on draft for the lady." He looked back at her. "We can't have you leaving London thinking that pathetic chardonnay is the best we have to offer."

"That's very thoughtful." She offered her hand. "I'm Andrea."

"Mac." He held her hand just a moment too long while he studied her face. Her stomach made a peculiar little leap. She quelled it ruthlessly and drew her fingers from his grasp while he slid onto the barstool beside her.

"Now tell me why you're sitting here instead of on what sounds like a brilliant holiday in the South Pacific."

*Because my temper finally got me into more trouble than I*

*could talk my way out of.* Aloud she said, "I'm doing research on the owner of this pub."

"Ah, the illustrious Mr. MacDonald. Brilliant chef, but not the full quid from what I hear." The sparkle returned to those devastating blue eyes, and she had the feeling she was the butt of a private joke.

Andrea couldn't pass up the opportunity to gather some local gossip. She plowed onward. "You know him?"

"That depends on why you're asking. Is it business, or is your enquiry of a personal nature?"

"Business. I'm supposed to meet him in Inverness tomorrow, and I'm looking for a little background."

"Are you always so unprepared for meetings?"

Andrea bristled. "Of course not. I only got the call from my office a few hours ago. I'm now fortifying myself for a long night of web browsing back at the hotel."

"I can see that. Well, I'd say this pub is a pretty good reflection of him. Comfortable, slightly sophisticated. Best selection of locally brewed beers in England and some truly inspired food."

Andrea looked around. Typical decor, lots of wood and brass, dim lighting. Stained glass and leather accents. Upscale but not uptight. Welcoming but not sloppy.

"Middle of the road," she murmured. "But that still doesn't tell me much about the man."

"And why do you need to know so much about him?"

The bartender returned with Andrea's drink and poured Mac's from the bottle into a glass, watching them as if they were his evening's entertainment.

"My job requires rapport," she said. "I can't convince someone we're right for the project if I don't know what he's

looking for. I can't win him over if I don't know which buttons to push."

"Hmm." He sipped his ale, his eyes dancing over the rim of the glass.

Was he laughing at her? "What?"

"I've just never heard a woman worry about which buttons to push when she's wearing a skirt that short and heels that high."

Heat crept up Andrea's neck and into her cheeks as she tugged down her suit skirt. It wasn't as if she were wearing a miniskirt. The length was perfectly modest when she wasn't sitting on a barstool. The heels were admittedly less conservative, but she wore them for height, not for looks. Then she realized he was watching her with a satisfied smile. She had taken the bait. Who exactly did he think he was?

She stilled her fidgeting and fixed him with a direct stare. "I could close a deal in jeans and tennis shoes. I just don't like being unprepared. Besides, I'm used to dealing with hotel groups with hundreds of properties, not celebrities with nothing better to do than play innkeeper."

"So MacDonald's a dilettante?" He swiveled on the stool and leaned back against the bar, arms crossed over his chest. Repressed laughter flashed in his expression.

"Frankly, I don't know the first thing about him. I've never seen his show, I certainly don't cook, and I can't fathom why anyone with a successful career in London would want to open a hotel on the Isle of Skye."

"Now that just sounds like bigotry. We Scots have an overabundance of national pride."

Andrea's cheeks heated again. How could she not have noticed? His accent, while refined, had a distinct Scottish

burr. She was really off her game if she had failed to pick up something that obvious. Still, he had needled her about both her clothing and her professionalism, and she had to pry the apology from her lips. "I didn't mean to be rude."

He waved a hand in dismissal. "You've got bigger problems if you know so little about your client. Though you'll do fine if you avoid the pejoratives about his native land. I do think you have one thing in common."

"What's that?"

"You both think work is a terrible reason to cancel a trip to Tahiti."

A reluctant smile crept onto her face. "I can drink to that."

"*Slàinte*, Andrea." He clinked his glass to hers, took a long pull of the ale, and hopped off the stool. "I should get going now. I would suggest you do the same, Ms. Sullivan. You've got a long day ahead of you tomorrow."

She blinked at him. "How did you—"

"Night, Ben. Her drinks are on the house."

"Night, James."

Mac—or the man pretending to be Mac—winked at her and sauntered out of the pub.

"That was . . . He was . . ."

Ben seemed to be fighting a smile. "Mr. MacDonald, yes. I daresay that's the first time not only has a woman *not* fallen all over him, she's actually insulted him to his face."

Andrea's heart sank to the soles of her Jimmy Choos. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"I wouldn't worry too much. I rather think he liked you."

Right. She glanced back at the door, but James MacDonald had already gone. Why, oh why, did this happen now? She had to hook this account if she had any hope of getting back



into her boss's good graces, and now she'd be spending the next few days trying to placate a celebrity ego.

She'd never been particularly proficient at groveling.

Andrea hopped off the stool and reached for her purse before she remembered Mr. MacDonald had taken care of her bill. She found a couple of one-pound coins in her change purse and set them on the bar as a tip, even though Ben had done nothing to signal her impending disaster. Would it really have been so difficult to give her a shake of the head, a raised eyebrow? But of course he'd stay out of the matter when his boss was involved.

"Thank you, Ben." *For nothing.*

"Good night, Andrea." He slipped the coins beneath the bar and added, "Don't think too badly of Mr. MacDonald. He's a good man, beneath it all."

Andrea forced a smile and hiked her handbag onto her shoulder, then escaped onto the dark London street. At nine o'clock on a Sunday evening, traffic had tapered off, and the usual haze of diesel fumes faded into the musty scent of damp concrete. She made a left and strode toward the Ladbroke Grove tube station, irritation speeding her steps.

How many times had she lectured her junior account managers on the importance of maintaining professionalism at all times? Every contact was a prospective client or referral. She'd just proved her own point in a particularly embarrassing manner.

Not that she excused James MacDonald for his role in this debacle. She knew his type. Wealthy, good-looking, famous. He expected women to fall at his feet, and God forbid one had a mind of her own. She'd probably be dodging his advances for the next three days while she tried to convince



him she was more than a pretty face. He was lucky she hadn't smacked him for commenting on her clothing in the bar.

Truthfully, she hadn't been in much shape to do anything but put her foot firmly in her mouth. It had been years since she'd let a man rattle her, and it had taken only a smile and a lingering handshake to do it. Heaven help her.

She only made it a few blocks from the pub before the stiletto pumps began to rub blisters on her heels. She gave up on her plans of an indignant walk to the tube station and raised a hand to the first black cab she saw. She climbed into the rear and gave the driver her destination.

She could salvage this. She'd spend the rest of her evening with her laptop, finding out everything she could about the man. From here on, she would act with the utmost professionalism. She hadn't gotten this close to VP through years of seven-day weeks and grueling round-the-clock hours to blow it now. Her boss may have given her this assignment as some backhanded punishment—after all, it had been years since he'd wasted her on a barely five-figure deal—but there had to be some sort of cachet to landing a celebrity client like James MacDonald. Surely she could turn it into bigger accounts. But first she had to repair the damage she'd done with her big mouth.

The cab pulled up beside the imposing Victorian brick edifice of the Kensington Court Hotel. Andrea paid the driver and climbed out with a wince, once again regretting her choice in footwear. She limped into the richly decorated lobby and rode the lift to her fourth-floor room.

The lush carpeting muffled her footsteps to a whisper when she let herself in. She certainly couldn't complain about her accommodations. She had stayed in the hotel

dozens of times over the years, and each room was impeccably decorated in its own style. Her current space featured an enormous tester bed, framed by blue silk brocade draperies that spilled from a gilded corona above the headboard. She gingerly eased off her shoes, sank onto the luxurious mattress, and heaved a sigh.

She was tired, and not the kind of tired a good night's sleep in a fluffy bed could solve.

She lay there for a long moment, then threw a glance at the clock and calculated back five hours. Her sister should just be getting supper ready in Ohio. She pulled her cell phone from her pocket and dialed.

Becky answered on the fifth ring. "Andy! Why are you calling me? Aren't you supposed to be on a plane right now?" Something sizzled in the background, punctuated by a child's scream.

"Did I call at a bad time?"

"No more than usual. I'm frying up some chicken for dinner—Hannah! Leave the cat alone!"

Andrea smiled. Becky was almost eight years older than Andrea, and she had three children: a nine-year-old son and three-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. "I can call back later—"

"David! Don't hit your sister! I'm sorry, what were you saying? Aren't you supposed to be on your way to Tahiti?"

"Change of plans. Michael booked me a consultation with some celebrity client while I'm here. I'm flying to Scotland tomorrow."

"And you're okay with that?"

"I'd rather be in Tahiti, for sure."

"No, I meant—"

"I know what you meant. I'm okay. What's one more, right?"

"Oh, I don't know, the difference between a luxury vacation and a padded room, maybe?"

Andrea chuckled despite herself. Even from Ohio, Becky couldn't resist the urge to mother her. "It's my job. What am I going to do, say no?"

"That's exactly what you say. 'Michael, I've planned this vacation for over a year. Find someone else to do it.'"

"I know." The smile faded from Andrea's face. Had it not been for the disastrous outcome of her last appointment in London, she would have said exactly that. She'd gotten away with plenty of attitude in the past based on her unmatched sales record, but in this business, she was only as good as her last deal. "I'll be fine. Really. I'm meeting the client in Inverness tomorrow, and then we're driving to Skye. I should be back in New York on Wednesday."

"Maybe you should take a few days off while you're in Scotland. Your vacation is blown anyway."

"I don't think that's such a good idea. I'm staying at the client's hotel."

"Who's the client?"

Andrea paused. "James MacDonald."

The squeal that emanated from the speaker belonged to a teenage girl, not a thirty-eight-year-old mother of three. Andrea held the phone several inches from her ear until she was sure her eardrums were safe.

"And here I thought your job was completely boring!"

"Strictly business, Becks. I've got less than two days to put together a proposal, and he doesn't seem like the easiest client to deal with. It's going to be a long trip."

"I bet you don't even know who he is," Becky said reprovingly.

"Oh, I know who he is." *A self-absorbed celebrity with the sexiest smile I've ever seen.* She yanked her mind back from that precipice before she could slip over. "I need to do some research for my meeting now. I'll call you from Skye."

"All right, have fun," Becky said in a singsong voice. Andrea could practically hear her grin from four thousand miles away. "I expect an autograph, by the way."

*Not likely.* "Love you, Becks. Give the kids a kiss for me."

Andrea clicked off the line and pressed her fingertips to her eyes, trying to calm the urgent thrumming of her heart. The last thing she needed was to think of her client in anything but a professional fashion. Men like MacDonald were predators—any sign of weakness and she'd never be able to shake him. She knew all too well what could happen if she succumbed to an ill-advised attraction. She'd been there once, and she wasn't going back there again.

"Strictly business." The steadiness of her voice in the quiet room reassured her. She took a deep breath and levered herself up off the bed. Enough procrastinating. She still had work to do.

Andrea slipped out of her suit jacket and skirt, hung them carefully in the closet, and ensconced herself in a luxurious hotel robe. Then she chose an obscure Dussek piano concerto from her phone as mood music and dragged her laptop onto her legs.

*James MacDonald chef*, she typed into the search box, and waited. Page after page of results appeared: restaurant reviews, interviews, television listings. Andrea clicked through to his official website first and quickly read through

his bio. Born in Portree, Isle of Skye, schooled in Scotland. Completed a degree in business at the University of Edinburgh, followed by culinary training at Leiths School of Food and Wine in London. A long list of assistant and sous-chef positions at some of London's most prestigious eateries culminated in his first restaurant, a gastropub in Notting Hill. That first location was quickly followed by smaller, more focused restaurants in Knightsbridge and Covent Garden, then Cardiff, Edinburgh, and Glasgow.

Last year he had been invited to prepare his take on traditional English food for the prime minister. A few months ago he had been named a member of the Order of the British Empire for his philanthropic work with at-risk youth.

She blinked at the screen. Wonderful. She'd just insulted a member of a British chivalric order. That was a distinction not many women could claim.

Andrea moved on to the newspaper articles, all of which called him the standard-bearer for nouveau-British cuisine, then scanned a Wiki page listing each of his six restaurants. All of them had received starred reviews in the Michelin Red Guide. The Hart and the Hound, the flagship pub she'd just visited, received one of only a dozen two-star ratings in Britain.

She should have bypassed the wine and ordered dinner instead.

MacDonald couldn't have accomplished all that by age thirty-five without a sharp mind and plenty of talent. Somehow that just stirred up her irritation. She'd half-expected to find evidence he had simply ridden his looks and charm to success, but every detail pointed to hard work and sacrifice. For heaven's sake, the man had even established a vocational cooking program for secondary-school dropouts.

“The perfect man,” she muttered. “Just ask him.”

She scrolled through the search results until gossip sites began to appear. Photos of MacDonald with a string of beautiful women—models, actresses, dancers—at exclusive parties and club openings. So he was that sort. Never with the same woman twice.

Great. Her hand still hurt after the encounter with the last wannabe Don Juan. Now she had to spend the next three days trying to get James MacDonald’s signature on a contract while keeping things strictly professional. The fact he’d already turned her into a blithering idiot once didn’t bode well for her quick thinking.

But she’d manage. She had to. She hadn’t come this close to achieving her goals just to let a man get in her way.





## CHAPTER TWO

IAN WAS A DEAD MAN.

James gave the cabdriver his South Kensington address and settled back against the seat. It was just like the man to make a unilateral decision without consulting him. James might be the president and CEO of a multimillion-pound culinary empire, but his older brother still seemed to think he needed guidance. Ian hadn't even given him the courtesy of a full day's notice.

A reluctant smile tipped up one side of James's mouth. He must not have read his brother's e-mail very thoroughly in his annoyance, because he'd been under the impression he was to meet an Andrew Sullivan at Inverness Airport tomorrow. Even after he'd realized his mistake, it had taken a few

moments to reconcile the Irish name with the saucy, auburn-haired beauty at the bar.

No, *saucy* was an understatement. She was a firecracker in spiked heels. Dancer's body, fine-boned face, full lips. Perhaps not conventionally pretty, but exotic. Every time she moved, he'd caught the faintest hint of an Oriental perfume, so subtle it made him want to move closer to find out if he'd imagined it.

For one mad second, he'd actually considered trying it.

Probably best he hadn't. The flash of irritation in those gorgeous caramel-colored eyes said she was used to being in control of every situation and she didn't appreciate being treated like an object. Or even a woman. Still, he hadn't imagined the current of attraction between them, and he certainly wasn't going to pass up the chance to explore it.

Maybe he'd let Ian live after all.

James dug out his mobile phone from his trousers pocket and dialed his assistant. The glare from the streetlights crawled across the tinted rear windows of the cab while the line rang. He didn't even wait for her greeting after she picked up. "Good, you're home."

"It's nine o'clock on a Sunday evening, James," came Bridget's dry voice. "Where else would I be?"

He smiled. The fiftysomething Londoner had been his personal assistant for years, and her voice had never wavered from its half-bored tone. She was efficient, though, and she possessed an uncanny way of anticipating his needs before he ever thought of them. "I need to change my Inverness flight to 10:00 a.m."

"That's why God invented the Internet, James."

"You changed my password on the airline's site. I can't access my account."

Silence stretched until the clacking of keys indicated she was seated at her computer. "All right, you said ten o'clock, Gatwick to Inverness?"

"Yes, thank you."

"What happened? I thought you weren't leaving London until tomorrow night."

"Ian's consultant happened."

"Oh, that."

"You knew? You might have tipped me off."

"Well, I assumed he'd told you." More clacking. Then the sound stopped, and he could almost hear her hesitation. "Don't be too hard on Ian. He's doing what he thinks is best. You did make him COO of your company for a reason."

"For the restaurants. Not for this."

"He's your brother. You might cut him some slack."

"You might mind your own business."

Bridget chuckled. "If you hadn't noticed, you are my business. And you're all set for tomorrow. I e-mailed you the change confirmation and your password. Oh, and Madeline needs to move the filming of the promos. I'll call you in the morning when I know all the details."

"Thanks, Bridge. What would I do without you?"

"One shudders to think. Good night, James."

James clicked off the line and sighed as the cab turned onto Exhibition Road toward the Kensington museums. When had this business gone from being about cooking to press releases, book signings, and after-parties? Some days he wished he could just slip on his chef's whites and spend an evening in the kitchen. But there were always appearances and promos demanding his attention, not to mention the travel it took to ensure his managing chefs were upholding

his vision for each individual restaurant. At what point had he become a brand instead of a man?

Ian certainly couldn't separate the two. The hotel on Skye was supposed to be about family, about a return to the things that had been important to his father before James got caught up in all . . . this. Instead his brother wanted to treat it like just another business venture, apparently one James couldn't be trusted to take seriously. Otherwise Ian wouldn't have felt the need to spring the consultant on him the night before his flight back to Scotland.

The cab pulled up outside an elegant five-story Victorian just off the main street. Unlike the restaurant's trendy Notting Hill location, which buzzed with foot traffic almost every hour of the night, this upmarket residential district rarely saw activity after sundown. It may not be the solitude of Skye, but at least here he could draw a deep breath at the end of a long day.

James let himself into the building's colonnaded front entrance and paused to collect yesterday's mail from the post boxes located on one wall of the vestibule. He flipped through the stacks of envelopes—bills, adverts, more bills—until he came to an envelope addressed to him in a flowery, feminine hand. He tucked the rest of the mail under one arm and slid his thumb beneath the flap as he started up the four flights of stairs to his penthouse flat. Who would send a letter here? Most of his friends knew the surest way to get something into his hands was to send it to his office.

He pulled out a battered newspaper clipping with a sticky note affixed to the top, but the lighting in the stairway was too dim to read it. He shoved it back into the envelope and jogged up the remaining steps to the top-floor landing

of his flat. He punched a six-digit entry code into the keypad, and the high-tech lock disengaged with a metallic click. Modern conveniences in a historic building. Had to love the contrast.

The door shut with a soft hiss and a click of the lock engaging behind him as he stepped into his foyer. He took the envelope with the newspaper clipping and tossed the rest of the mail onto the entry table without looking. They skidded across the polished surface onto the floor. He didn't bother to go back for them, eyes already scanning the unfamiliar handwriting on the sticky note.

*James, I'll owe you forever for the introduction!  
I hope you'll come see the show when we open  
in June.*

He peeled the note off the clipping to reveal the headline: "Cast Announced for New West End Production of *Top Hat*." Down below, a line had been circled in red pen: *The role of Dale Tremont, originally played by Ginger Rogers in the 1935 film of the same name, will be performed by talented Welsh newcomer Olivia Carey.*

"Good on you, Olivia." He'd be in Scotland on opening night, but he'd have Bridget send flowers to the theater. An absurdly showy bouquet of roses would do—yellow, not red. The last thing he wanted was to send mixed signals about his intentions. He'd been very clear about the arrangement. He got a beautiful young woman to accompany him to the necessary events. She got exposure in the press and access to people she'd never have met otherwise. They both won, and no hearts had to get involved.

James dropped the clipping onto the countertop and jerked the refrigerator door open, perusing the contents with better humor than they deserved. Just a half carton of eggs, some milk that looked dangerously close to the expiry date, and a couple of bottles of Guinness. He really should look into one of those grocery-delivery services. He never could remember to go to the supermarket when he returned to London. He retrieved an open box of Weetabix from an equally bare cupboard and plopped a shredded wheat biscuit into a bowl. He sniffed suspiciously at the milk before drenching the cereal with it. Lovely. Prize-winning chef, and here he was eating cereal for dinner. If he hadn't taken the joke with Ms. Sullivan so far, he might have talked her into enjoying a pleasant meal with him in the pub. It certainly sounded more appealing than his empty flat.

He kicked off his shoes by the counter and carried his bowl into his impeccably decorated reception room, where he flopped onto a sleek leather sofa. He put his feet up on the glass coffee table and clicked on the enormous television. It was the one concession he'd wrung from his designer. A man needed an obscenely large plasma screen on which to watch sports.

He scanned through his recordings with the remote and found the London evening news. He clicked it on and settled back to eat his pathetic dinner while he watched tonight's report—a petrol spill on the M1 motorway, a bomb threat at the Israeli embassy, a fare hike for the Underground. Then a story made him sit straight up in his seat. He set his bowl aside on the sofa and turned up the volume.

“—award-winning actress Cassandra Sinclair was mar-

ried to fellow actor Philip Kane in a private ceremony on Mykonos today—”

James stared at the television as it flashed paparazzi shots of a smiling Cassandra in a short wedding dress, her arm linked with the handsome English actor's. His chest spasmed, momentarily blocking off his air. His pulse pounded in his ears so loudly he almost missed the newscaster's next words.

“—also known for her very public relationship and subsequent breakup with former fiancé, Scottish television personality and restaurateur, James MacDonald.”

He swallowed hard and clicked off the television. Married? After less than two years and to the man she'd left him for? Dampness spread across the thigh of his trousers, and he looked down to find he'd tipped his bowl on its side. He righted it, then stood and strode back to the kitchen, his appetite gone. The remainder of the cereal went into the rubbish bin, the bowl in the sink.

He braced his palms against the countertop and dropped his chin to his chest. It shouldn't bother him. He didn't want her back. Not after her lies, and certainly not after the humiliation of finding out she'd been having an affair with Kane the entire time they'd been engaged. It was just a shock, finding out about her marriage on television along with millions of other viewers. Not even the courtesy of a warning after he'd so carefully kept the reason for the breakup out of the press in order to save her squeaky-clean image.

Not tonight. He'd already let Cassie poison enough of his life. He wouldn't let her spoil the lovely glow left from his encounter with Ian's spunky consultant. He drew himself up



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and briskly washed the bowl and spoon, then set them in the drainer to dry.

Tomorrow he was going home. And it certainly wouldn't hurt to have the lively Ms. Sullivan with him.

### CHAPTER THREE

ANDREA WOKE TO THE moody chords of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, her heart pounding. She grabbed her cell phone from the nightstand and shut off the alarm with trembling hands. Panic rushed in with the silence when the pitch-black room gave no hint to her location. New York? Chicago? London?

London. She was in London. She fell back against her pillows, clutching the phone. This was the worst part of the job, waking up not knowing where she was. This month had been particularly bad, coming off a string of appointments without the advantage of decompressing in her apartment in between.

Andrea's heart slowly returned to its normal rhythm, but it

was too late to stop the familiar knot of anxiety from tightening in the pit of her stomach. She clicked on the lamp by the bed and squinted in the harsh glare as she fumbled to dial room service. She'd be calm enough to eat by the time her breakfast arrived, but it would take a straight shot of caffeine to the bloodstream before she'd be ready to do battle.

Irish oatmeal with fresh berries and two cups of strong coffee improved her mood considerably, as did a hot shower. She was in the middle of blow-drying her hair when the room phone rang. She raced to the nightstand and jerked the handset off the cradle.

"Ms. Sullivan," the desk clerk said in her polite London clip, "your car has arrived."

"My what?"

"Your airport transfer. It's waiting for you outside."

"I didn't . . ." MacDonald. Of course. He would send a car, just to prove he knew where she was staying. "Thank you. I'll be down in a few minutes."

Andrea returned to the bathroom and flipped the hair dryer back on. She had three hours until her flight left. The car could wait. Once she'd straightened and smoothed her shoulder-length bob into place, she shoved her brush and cosmetics bag into her carry-on and took one last look in the full-length bathroom mirror.

She'd chosen her most conservative outfit today, a subtle gray tweed pantsuit with a ruffled peplum jacket and a lilac silk blouse. She still wore towering heels, but she'd abandoned last night's scarlet platforms for a stunning pair of Louboutin peep-toe pumps. She checked herself over and smiled. Feminine armor. Clients might pay more attention to her looks than her business sense at times, but she wouldn't

let them force her to dress like a man just to prove she could work like one.

As she turned away from the mirror, the gold cross resting at her collarbone caught her eye. Her fingers drifted to the necklace, and she rubbed the cool metal pendant between her fingers. The symbol felt like a lie now. What would her mother think if she could see what she'd become? Would she be proud of what Andrea had made of herself? Or would she be disappointed that a piece of jewelry was all she retained of her past?

Andrea drew in a deep breath and forced down the unproductive thoughts. Her mother was gone, and whatever hopes she'd had for her daughter had gone with her. Maybe it was for the best. It would have broken her heart to see her younger child abandon the beliefs that had sustained her through her own trials.

She straightened her jacket, extended the handle of her rolling suitcase, and mentally prepared herself for what awaited her. Today was the day she would turn this whole mess around. She'd close this deal, and then she'd be back on the fast track to promotion. She could forget this whole disaster in London and move on with her orderly, predictable life.

The bill had already been settled by credit card, so Andrea breezed through the lobby downstairs, her carry-on bag whirring across the marble floor behind her. The doorman opened the glass door for her, and she stepped outside to find a black sedan at the curb, a uniformed driver waiting casually by the rear bumper.

He strode toward her with a polite nod. "Ms. Sullivan, may I take your bag?"

Andrea handed it to him with a smile and followed him to the curb. Then the car's back door opened, and James MacDonald stepped out, wearing a broad smile. "Good morning."

She faltered, her smile slipping at the sudden lurch in her chest. Somehow it had never occurred to her that he would be in the car—the car she had kept waiting for twenty-five minutes.

There went her plan to use the trip to the airport to prepare her pitch. There would be no thought-gathering now, not when those thoughts solely consisted of how attractive he looked in his impeccably tailored charcoal suit and crisp white shirt. Rather than dwell on those details, she focused on the two paper cups he held. "You brought coffee?"

"Call it a peace offering." He held one out. "After a long night of research, I figured you'd take yours black."

"Clever." He *would* rub in last night's faux pas. Still, she took the offered cup—no doubt already cold—while the driver placed her suitcase in the trunk of the sedan.

James stepped out of her way and gestured toward the car. "Shall we?"

She slid into the backseat, and he closed the door behind her before circling around to the other side. She settled her shoulder bag on the floor next to her feet and laid her wool overcoat on the seat between them.

The rear of the car seemed roomy enough until he climbed in the other side and shut the door behind him. She slid away an inch or two and jerked her head to indicate the vehicle. "Yours?"

"Hired. I don't keep a car in London."

"And I suppose you know my flight the same way you knew my hotel?"

He flashed a grin. "I'm very efficient."

Andrea sipped her tepid coffee and looked out the window as the sedan pulled away from the curb. She'd have to stay on guard against that smile. He used it like a weapon, and no doubt it slew females by the dozens. She'd already fallen victim to it once. "So, Mr. MacDonald, tell me what you have planned for us today."

"Mr. MacDonald? Are we so formal? I thought we were on a first-name basis now, after I complimented your legs."

She whipped her head toward him and then cursed herself for letting him catch her off guard again. "If I recall, you noticed my skirt and my shoes. Legs were never mentioned."

"They were implied. Just like you implied I was a self-indulgent playboy."

"You *are* a self-indulgent playboy." The words came out before she could think better of them. She softened her tone and added, "But that has nothing to do with your business sense. I did my research. You don't get to this place in life at thirty-five without hard work and vision. It's impressive."

Surprise flickered across his face. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, you didn't answer my question. This would go a lot more smoothly if I knew exactly what you expected from me."

"This was Ian's idea. Frankly, I've no idea what you're doing here."

Andrea blinked. "Who's Ian?"

"My chief operations officer. He owns a one-third interest in the hotel, and he took it upon himself to set this up."

Andrea's heart sank. Great. No wonder James was so resistant to treating her like a colleague. "If you don't want me here, why go to all this effort?"

"I didn't say I didn't want you here." The twinkle in his eye raised warning flags. "I just said it was Ian's idea. Why don't you tell me exactly what you hope to accomplish?"

She straightened in the seat and smoothed her jacket. No chance she would let some internal corporate power struggle ruin this for her. "Morrison Hospitality Consulting is a boutique firm specializing in unique, historic properties. Our clients rank among the most impressive hoteliers in the world, including Excelsior Properties and Hôtel du Soleil, but we also work with other smaller, more focused—"

"I know all that," James said. "I read the website last night. I want to know why *you* are here. You, specifically."

Very well, she could deal with straightforward. "I'm here to evaluate your hotel's needs, from infrastructure to marketing and competitive analysis. Before I leave, I'll provide a detailed proposal for the areas in which I think we can help you. I'm awarded 90 percent of the projects I bid on, and my accounts see a minimum 55 percent increase in revenue within nine months. In the eight years I've been in the industry, I've never had a client go out of business."

"So if we contracted your company, you would be the one doing the work?"

She searched his expression, wondering if there was more to that question, but he seemed serious. "I work out of New York, but I would be your account manager, yes. It's my job to make sure our team in London accomplishes what we lay out in the next two days and to ensure your revenue goals are being met."

Now his expression turned guarded, the perpetual half



smile fading. "I'm not in this for the money. This is a personal project."

Andrea nodded and swallowed her response, but she hadn't gotten this far in her career by questioning her gut. "May I speak frankly?"

"Please."

"You obviously know how to run a restaurant. But a hotel is another venture entirely. Most fail within the first five years, many within the first two years. If you're serious, you need us. Your COO chose us because we're the best. And out of all Morrison's account managers, *I'm* the best. So if this is all just some bed-and-breakfast fantasy, you might as well tell me now, before this becomes a colossal waste of my time. And yours."

James held her eyes for a long moment, appraising, as if he were trying to see deep inside her. She struggled to keep her breathing even and just barely managed to avoid shifting under his gaze. Then he smiled again, and it felt like the seat had dropped out from beneath her. "All right, I'll give you a shot. If only to prove I'm not a dilettante."

She nodded. "Fair enough. That's all I ask."

The twinkle returned, a sure sign he was preparing another onslaught of charm, but before he could speak, his phone rang. He shot her an apologetic glance and answered briskly, a smile creasing his face. "Hello, Bridget."

Bridget? A girlfriend, maybe? A man like him would never be single for long. Which, of course, made his flirting all the more unsettling.

"No, that's fine. I'll be back in London at the end of the month. Just change my flight to Cardiff from eight to three."

Not a girlfriend, then. His assistant. Not that it was her business anyway.

She leaned back into the plush leather seat and watched him arrange his month, his tablet balanced on one knee, notebook on the other, phone braced against his ear. His overflowing schedule eased some of her concern. James MacDonald might like to tease and flirt, but he was serious about his career and the management of his business. He couldn't fail to recognize the value she and her company brought to his project as long as she could keep their relationship on friendly, professional terms.

When he hung up, Andrea said, "I'm curious. Why Skye? Why not Edinburgh or Glasgow or Inverness?"

"When we arrive, you'll understand." His phone rang in his hand again and back to his ear it went. "James."

Andrea pulled a small notebook from her purse and jotted down a few thoughts on how to pitch her company—*time sensitive, capable, turnkey*—while James rearranged his schedule yet again in order to fly to Canada to judge a televised cooking competition.

He hung up his phone as the driver pulled up to Gatwick's north terminal. "Sorry for that." He fixed his intense blue stare on her, the businessman gone and the charmer firmly back in place. "There's no mobile signal at the hotel. Once we arrive, you will have my full and undivided attention."

It sounded like a promise, but the wicked glint in his eye told her she'd be safer taking it as a threat.