

THE  
MACDONALD FAMILY  
TRILOGY



# London *Tides*

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## CHAPTER ONE

SHE SHOULDN'T BE HERE.

Grace Brennan snapped several pictures of the fog-shrouded river, forcing down the tide of anxiety that threatened to rise up and engulf her. Chances were he wouldn't be here either. People changed in ten years. She certainly had. What kind of man stuck to such a rigid schedule for over a decade?

She ambled down the cement embankment to where the muddy waters of the Thames lapped the bank and raised her camera once more. Even in the dim morning light, her telephoto lens captured every detail of the boats rowing against the ebb tide, from the markings on the shells to the club crests on the rowers' kit. Grace had photographed enough

regattas in her career to recognize the different clubs and schools by their colors, to distinguish the casuals from the competitive rowers. To know from a distance she hadn't seen him yet.

It was a mad impulse that brought her here anyhow. Her regrets should have stayed in the past, where they belonged, with the rest of her mistakes. Back then, her fears had clouded her judgment, skewed her perspective. And no matter how far she'd come, there might always be parts of her that were broken. What would coming back here do but remind her of what she'd given up?

She was about ready to move on to some street-level shots when a sleek red eight glided with precision toward the bank on which she stood. Again the camera came up to focus on the crew, and her heart rose into her throat when her gaze landed on the man in the stroke seat nearest the stern.

His dark hair was short now, thick waves cropped into submission, but she would have recognized him anywhere. He radiated capability and confidence with an oar in hand, and even his rowing waterproofs couldn't hide a physique that was as lean and muscular as a decade before. Clearly she'd had good reason to believe things hadn't changed.

Grace's hand tightened convulsively around the column of the thick lens as she let the neck strap take the camera's weight. Her muscles tensed, her heart pounding. Should she call to him? Would he even speak to her?

Then he turned her way and stopped, the oar frozen in midair. He saw her, no mistake. She held her breath, waiting to see what he would do.

Just as quickly, he turned away, his movements brusque

and businesslike as he removed his oar from the lock. Her hopes rushed away as quickly as the tide.

Ten years wondering how she'd feel if she saw him again. Ten years convincing herself that time and distance would change things. Pure rubbish, all of it.

She still loved him. And he still hadn't forgiven her.



Grace wound her way into the Regency Café, ignoring the irritated looks from waiting patrons. Even at eight in the morning, the greasy spoon was packed with diners, the queue stretching out the door, voices raised in a hum just short of deafening. She scanned the crowded room until her gaze landed on a beautiful Indian woman staking out a corner table.

Asha held up her arm and pointed to her wristwatch with raised eyebrows.

"I know, I know, I'm late."

Grace grimaced as she approached the table, but Asha pulled her into a bone-crushing hug before she could get out the rest of her apology.

"Only by about two years! When did you arrive in London? Before you called this morning, I didn't even know you were coming."

"Landed last night." The tightness in Grace's chest eased as she slid into a chair and placed her gear bag between her feet. "It was a last-minute decision. Did you order for us?"

"Of course. I didn't queue for an hour for tea. I got your usual. It *is* your usual, right? You didn't go vegan on me or anything . . ."

Grace laughed. "Absolutely not. I live on bacon. Besides,

Paris hasn't been as much fun since they stopped sautéing everything in a kilo of butter. You know you're in trouble when even the French turn health conscious."

Asha laughed too, her expression radiating happiness. Since they'd met on a medical mission in Jaipur twelve years ago, Dr. Asha Issar had become her close friend and confidante. Grace had no doubt that her joy was genuine.

"So tell me, why *are* you back in London?"

"To see you, of course." At Asha's disbelieving look, Grace smiled and amended, "It was time, Ash. I couldn't avoid an entire country forever. I'm considering moving back."

"I'd love that. But you said you'd never leave the field. What happened?" Asha's attention settled on Grace's right arm, where it rested on the table. "Does it have something to do with the new tattoo?"

Grace touched the tiny green dragon that curled around her wrist like a bracelet, melding seamlessly into the design of colored flowers and wrought iron above it. It was good work—artistic work—but she should have known Asha would understand this was no more a whim than the other tattoos that covered her right arm to the shoulder.

"Brian is dead."

"Oh, Grace, I'm so sorry. What happened?"

Grace swallowed hard while she brought her voice under control. "You hear about the incident in Syria?"

"That was him?" Understanding dawned on Asha's face. "That was you. You were the other photographer who survived the blast. Grace, why didn't you tell me?"

Because she hadn't told anyone. Because the grief was too fresh. And deep down, she felt responsible.

Sure, she'd not been the one to fire the grenade. She'd

warned Brian that their position was too exposed, had been trying to get them out. But he was so young and eager to get the shot, and it had been her responsibility to rein in that reckless enthusiasm, just as her own mentor Jean-Auguste had done for her.

She'd failed miserably.

"So that's why I'm here," Grace said at last. "I'm supposed to be in Aleppo, but I couldn't get on the plane."

Asha reached for her hand across the table and squeezed it hard. "I understand; I really do. But you love the work. Surely you don't want to quit."

"Come on, Ash. You know shooting conflicts was supposed to be a short-term plan, not the past ten years of my life. Everyone with half a brain is out, onto something safer."

"But you've worked for this since you were nineteen!"

"And look where it's gotten me."

"Achieving a level of success most people never imagine. *Newsweek* and *National Geographic* have you on speed dial. You were listed as one of the most influential photographers of the decade, for heaven's sake."

"One of the most influential photographers of the decade." Grace gave a short, humorless laugh. "Had I died along with Brian, would anyone have missed me besides you and Jean-Auguste? I'm thirty-four, Ash. I can pack up my entire life in three cases and a duffel bag. My parents don't talk to me anymore, and the only person to send me a birthday card was the president of my photo agency."

Asha's gaze drilled into her. "You're back for Ian."

"When you say it that way, I sound completely pathetic."

"Not *completely* pathetic. Just a little bit."



"It was daft," Grace said. "If you could have seen the look on his face—"

"You saw him? What did you do? What did he say?"

"I don't know. I didn't stick around to find out."

"Grace—"

"I know, I know. But what do you say in that situation? 'Hi, I'm sorry I ran out on you six months before our wedding. How have you been?' Besides, for all I know, he's married and has half a dozen kids now."

"He's not married."

The pronouncement stunned Grace into momentary silence. "You've seen him?"

"He and Jake go out for a pint on occasion. He dates, but as far as I can tell, nothing serious. It leads one to believe he's waiting for something. Or someone."

Grace's heart jolted at the words, but she shook her head. However much she might want to put things right, what she had done to him was unforgivable. What kind of woman left the man she loved without a proper good-bye? What kind of man forgave that sort of betrayal?

"You should talk to him, Grace. Even if it's just to put him behind you."

As Grace opened her mouth to reply, the woman behind the counter shouted a familiar order. "That us?"

"Yeah. I'll get it." Asha pushed back the chair.

"Bacon, egg, mushrooms, tomatoes, two toasts! You comin' to get it, or you want me to fax it to ya?"

Grace chuckled. "Let me. Least I can do after you saved me the hour wait."

She pushed her way back to the counter, relieved to escape her friend's scrutiny. Maybe Asha was right, but she'd been

trying to put Ian behind her for ten years. What made either of them think she'd be any more successful now?

By the time Grace returned with their breakfasts, she'd steeled herself for more analysis, but Asha didn't bring up the subject again. Instead, she asked, "Where are you staying?"

"Hotel."

Asha reached into her handbag and slid a key across the table. "You know the address."

"Ash, I couldn't—"

"Nonsense. Of course you could. How long will you be here?"

"At least through the end of August. A friend is putting together a showing of my portraits at his gallery in Putney. After that, I'm not sure."

"You just got here, and you're already looking for an excuse to leave." A smile softened Asha's words, though, and she reached out to squeeze Grace's hand again. "I'm glad you're back."

"Me too." To stave off further discussion, Grace dug into her breakfast and barely stifled a groan of pleasure. Paris might be the culinary center of Europe, but nothing beat an old-fashioned fry-up from this landmark diner. She allowed herself to savor a few more bites before she shot a stern look at Asha. "So. Jake. Don't think you're going to slip that one by me. Did you finally say yes?"

Asha shrugged. "After five years of asking me out, it seemed only fair to give the bloke a chance."

"It's about time. I've always thought you two would make a great couple."

She laughed. "It had crossed my mind over the years. But one or both of us were always seeing someone else. He was



busy with work; I was splitting my time between here and India . . . It wasn't the right time for a relationship."

If anyone understood that, it was Grace. Still, after Asha had broken off a tumultuous romance with a fellow physician, Grace had wondered if she would ever take a chance on another man. "We should have dinner, then, the three of us. I haven't seen him in ages."

"You haven't seen anyone in ages," Asha countered, but it was without heat. She glanced at her watch and grimaced. "I have to go or I'll be late for my shift. Move your things to the flat, yeah? I'll be back later tonight."

"Thanks, Ash. It means a lot to me." Grace gave her a quick hug, then watched her stride from the restaurant. Of all her friends, Asha was the most dependable, the most understanding. But then, she had a better perspective on what Grace did for a living, having spent much of her early career in conflict zones herself. It took firsthand experience to understand how it felt to live day-to-day in varying degrees of danger.

She turned back to her plate, but her mind returned to Ian. She should have stuck around and talked to him, told him the conclusions she'd reached in the three months since Brian's death. After all these years, he deserved to know why she had run away. Deserved to know it hadn't been because she'd stopped loving him.

And maybe he deserved to know that leaving him had been the biggest mistake of her life.

## CHAPTER TWO

“YOU ALL RIGHT THERE, MATE?”

Ian MacDonald stared at the place Grace had occupied moments before, his limbs frozen. It took several seconds for Chris’s words to sink in. “Fine. Someone I thought I knew.”

Chris followed Ian’s gaze, but the space between the club’s boathouse and the neighboring building was now vacant. “Nice one today. Still set a good rhythm.”

“If by good you mean sadistic,” Marc muttered from the back of the boat.

Ian grinned at their coxswain, who also happened to be an old Cambridge teammate. “Sadistic? That was barely twenty-five.”

“Thirty-two on the push,” Marc shot back.

Ian's smile widened. By today's standards, thirty-two strokes a minute was barely a race pace, but it was close to what they'd managed back in the day. The crew for his week-day outings was made up of men like him—former Oxbridge and British Team rowers whose competitiveness hadn't diminished with their available training time. Still, seeing the younger crews on the water made him realize how much time had passed since he was in his prime.

Back then, the only thing that had mattered to him more than rowing was Grace. He'd abandoned his career, his sponsorships, his dreams of Olympic gold. And she'd disappeared without a word, taking every last possession but her engagement ring.

"Waist, ready, up!"

Marc's command cut through the memory, and in unison, the eight-man crew lifted the boat to waist level. At the cox's next command, they pressed the boat upside down over their heads. The familiar routine gave Ian something to focus on, but he barely avoided banging the stern on the doorframe as they carried the shell back to the club's boathouse.

After that, he managed to keep his mind on his actions, but he still showered and dressed in a daze, letting the jokes of the other men in the changing room flow around him until Chris stopped behind him.

"Coming to breakfast? Or do you have someone waiting?" Chris waggled his eyebrows suggestively while Ian stared in confusion. "Your date last night?"

He finally followed the insinuation. "Ah . . . no. We wrapped it up early. Not that I'm in the habit of taking home women I've just met."

"You're not in the habit of taking home *any* women. I've

set you up on three dates and none of them have made it past dinner. What's wrong with this one?"

"Nothing's wrong with her. She's a perfectly lovely woman—"

"She's gorgeous!"

"—who is about as interesting as watching paint dry—"

"So? Did I mention she was gorgeous?"

"—and did nothing but talk about the last case she won."

Chris shot him a reproving look. "You're a lawyer too."

"I used to be a lawyer." Now he didn't quite know what he was. "I don't know why you keep insisting on setting me up."

"At this point I'm not sure either." Chris heaved a sigh that made it clear Ian's lack of interest in casual dating was a disgrace to men everywhere. "Anyhow, breakfast?"

"Brunch at Mum's. We're taking out the quad on Tuesday?"

"I'll be here."

Ian hiked his kit bag onto his shoulder and clambered down the stairs to ground level. Instantly, his unanswered questions crowded in. What was Grace doing back in London? Had she been looking for him? Or had he imagined the petite blonde standing on the bank? The woman he'd seen had much shorter hair than his Grace—

*His Grace.* The words, even spoken in his head, made his stomach clench. She had made it clear she had no interest in being his Grace when she left. They'd shared a life, a bed, a home for two years, but when it had come time to make it permanent, she'd run. Even in retrospect, there'd been no signs it was coming.

No. He wasn't going to do this today. He'd already wasted far too much of his life rehashing what went wrong with Grace. Regardless of her location, he was better off without her.



Forty minutes later, Ian knelt on the cold cement of an underground car park in Emperor's Gate to unlock a heavy cham-  
ois cover. A smile came to his face for the first time since  
leaving the club. If he were honest, his dutiful attendance at  
his mother's monthly garden brunches had far less to do with  
the overly fussy food and pretentious conversation than his  
method of transportation.

A 1966 Austin-Healey BJ8, a classic piece of British  
automotive history and the one car he'd dreamed of owning  
since childhood. It had taken him two years and considerable  
expense to restore her, from the rusted-out two-tone paint job  
to the ripped black leather interior. The classic car always  
served as an excuse to avoid the gossip and slip away with  
the other auto enthusiasts, including his uncle Rodney. In  
fact, Rodney was solely to blame for the vehicle's existence.  
He'd been the one to take Ian and his younger brother, James,  
to races at Silverstone and the occasional classic car meet.  
James had never latched on to the idea, but those outings had  
been the highlight of Ian's childhood.

Now that he owned his dream, the trouble was finding  
time to enjoy it. London's traffic and its congestion zones  
made it hardly worth the effort to drive, and work and rowing  
kept him well tied to the city. Maybe he should take another  
trip to Scotland and check on the progress of the Skye hotel.  
Completely unnecessary, of course—Jamie and his fiancée,  
Andrea, had matters well in hand—but it would be a useful  
excuse for a short escape.

The twenty-five-minute drive to Hampstead went much  
too quickly, and he'd barely managed to settle the tension

from Grace's unexpected appearance before he turned off to his mother's estate. He punched in the gate code and waited for the wrought-iron gates to swing inward. Somehow the opulence of the house struck him as even more excessive than usual as he navigated through the newly landscaped allée to the front of the spectacular Georgian-style manor, all heavy red brick and mullioned windows. He might have spent school holidays here while at Eton, but he'd never dared call it home.

He left the car beside several other expensive vehicles, shrugging his suit jacket on as he went, and headed to the center of the parterre, where several tables had been set up. At least a dozen people milled about, glasses already in hand. Almost immediately, an elegant, dark-haired woman in a cream-colored suit and matching hat caught sight of him and made her way over.

"Ian, darling!"

"Mum." Ian accepted her embrace and kissed her on the cheek. "You look lovely."

"And you look quite dapper yourself, Son." Marjorie took a surreptitious look around. "You didn't bring anyone, did you? Good. I want you to meet Rachel Corson. You remember the Corsons, don't you? The father is in shipping, and the mother—"

"Mum, stop." He cut her off before she could go further in her description. Knowing her, she already had them married in her mind. She'd been fairly vocal about his inability to accomplish it himself. "The last time I met one of your friends' daughters, it was a disaster. Let's not repeat history, shall we?"

Marjorie leveled a look at him that managed to fall short of motherly concern. "Five minutes."

“No.”

“I knew you’d see it my way. Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

Ian sighed and tugged on his tie, which had already begun to feel too tight. Twenty-five minutes in the Healey did not in any way make up for this.

“Run, while you still have the chance.”

Ian twisted toward the voice at his shoulder. “Rodney, you startled me.”

“Bloody Mary?”

Ian took a glass from his uncle and looked him over. If Marjorie was impeccably put together, her younger brother always had a studiously mussed air, as if he had been rudely summoned away from a game of snooker. His suit was expensive but rumpled, and he might have forgotten to comb his hair that morning. His eyes, however, missed nothing. Unfortunately.

Ian sipped the cocktail and barely covered his cough. “Might you add some tomato juice to the vodka next time? It’s not yet noon.”

“Only way I can get through these events of your mother’s. And you’ll need it if you plan to stick around for her latest matchmaking attempt.”

“That bad?”

“Pretty, but insipid.”

Ian took another drink, intending to fortify himself for the inquisition, but the trail it burned down his throat convinced him to set the glass on a nearby table. He decided to cut to the chase. Rodney would get it out of him eventually anyway. “Grace is back.”

“Ah.”



"That's all you've got to say? 'Ah'?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"That I'm mad to be thinking about her after what happened."

Rodney shrugged.

"You don't think so?"

"You were happy with Grace right up until she disappeared."

"We were too different. Look at Mum and Dad. They were happy for a while; then Mum left."

"There's much more to that story than a few differences." Rodney tossed back the rest of the cocktail, then set his glass down beside Ian's. "And you are not as much like your mother as you think. You drive the Healey?"

"Of course."

"Let's go have a look, then."

Ian cast a glance back at Marjorie, but she had been waylaid by a group of her guests, none of whom could possibly be Rachel. He hoped. A judge with his family, or maybe an MP. They all looked alike to Ian. He followed his uncle back around the side of the house to the drive.

"How's work?" Rodney asked.

"Work is . . . work." It wasn't that Ian disliked his job exactly. His brother, Jamie, was a renowned chef who had built his first restaurant into an empire that now included six locations, several cookbooks, and a recently completed television cooking program. There was no way he could handle the details himself, and Ian was good at details. But it wasn't exactly the career Ian had envisioned for himself.

Fortunately Rodney didn't press, instead stopping next to the Healey to give it an admiring once-over. "Beautiful car,

this is. Shame the only time you bring it out is for your mum's brunches."

Ian crossed his arms over his chest. "Say what you really want to say."

"Am I that transparent? Fine, then. I want to know when you're going to give yourself permission to do what *you* want to do."

"I am doing what I want to do."

"Are you? Just because Grace left doesn't make your mother right. Not about who you are, what you do, who you love."

"You're telling me that I should give Grace another chance."

"I'm telling you that you don't need anyone's permission. Your life is between you and God. And don't give me that look. I know I'm a drunk. God loves me anyway." Rodney circled the car, squatted down to examine the grille.

Ian shook his head and repressed a smile. No matter what other family members might think about the conflict between Rodney's professed faith and his drinking habit, Ian couldn't disagree with the sentiment. God knew he and Jamie had given Him plenty of reasons to despair about their life choices over the years.

Rodney stood up again and winked at his nephew. "If a beauty like that belonged to me, I wouldn't be spending my Saturday here with the rich and boring."

Rodney wasn't entirely talking about the car. Ian loosened his tie and strode resolutely back to the gathering, hoping his mum wasn't yet looking for him. She'd more willingly excuse murder than rudeness. A sign of poor breeding, she'd say, which was ironic considering most of her English friends

thought Ian's Scottish upbringing made that a foregone conclusion.

Sure enough, his mum wore a look that told him his escape had not gone unnoticed, and she unleashed the full force of her glare as soon as he got within shouting distance. Fortunately, one of her staff drew her off before she could head his direction. A reprieve, if only temporary.

Outdoor brunch at Leaf Hill was distinguished from indoor brunch only by the location: the china, crystal, silver, and linen were simply transported onto the patio in their entirety. Ian followed the flow of guests to the patio table and found his designated spot to Marjorie's left. The judge stopped on his mum's other side. When the older man leaned down to whisper something in her ear, Ian's eyebrows reached skyward. Was this more than just a political connection?

"Ah, I should have known." A pretty young woman—ginger hair, pale skin, warm brown eyes—appeared beside him. She held out a hand. "Rachel Corson. And let me apologize in advance for however my matchmaking mother set this up."

This was Mum's mystery woman? He briefly shook her hand, then pulled out her chair. "Ian MacDonald. And I rather think we have *my* mother to thank for it."

"Or they're in collusion together." A hint of wry humor lit her eyes. "Mum's been after me to give her grandchildren, and she'll take any excuse to foist me off on an unsuspecting bachelor. Embarrassing, isn't it?"

At least Rodney had been wrong about one thing. Rachel wasn't insipid. She chatted amiably about various topics as they devoured the impressive brunch spread: scrambled eggs with salmon, eggs Benedict, and truffled brioche with sautéed mushrooms. Only when she began talking about her studies at

the London School of Economics did he figure out she must be nearly twenty years younger than him. Mum must have been getting desperate if she was thrusting girls not even out of uni at him. As if that wouldn't make him feel ancient.

By the end of the meal, he just wanted to make a quick escape. Climb into his car and drive, watch the speedometer climb and enjoy the wind-up of the roadster's throaty engine. But he knew he would sedately navigate the traffic back to the garage in Emperor's Gate and walk the handful of blocks home to his flat.

"What did you think?" Marjorie asked when he said his farewells.

"She's practically a child, Mum."

Marjorie fixed him with a reproving look. "I'm trying to help."

"I know you are. But this is the sort of thing a man needs to work out for himself. Right?"

She didn't answer, a sure sign the subject was far from dropped, but she made him bend so she could kiss his cheek. "Don't work too hard."

"I won't," he promised, aware it was somewhat of a lie. Besides rowing, what else was there?

He turned the Healey back to west London, but he couldn't even take his usual pleasure in the trip. By the time he let himself into the first-floor flat of his historic Gloucester Road building, his resigned mood had turned downright foul.

It was completely irrational, of course. The brunch at Leaf Hill had been fine. His mother's meddling had resulted in a rather pleasant conversation, even if Rachel hadn't sparked the least bit of interest besides the acknowledgment that she was a very pretty girl.

Why exactly was that? Age aside, she was one of the more interesting women he'd met recently. And yet it hadn't even crossed his mind to get her phone number.

The beginnings of a headache throbbed in his temples as he crossed the modest reception room into the kitchen. He poured himself a glass of orange juice from the refrigerator and stood in the wash of cold air, his fingers clenched around the tumbler. Blast Grace. He'd been doing fine before she'd showed up on the bank this morning with her camera, looking . . .

. . . like Grace. The mere sight of her was enough to bring up long-buried memories—the smell of her skin, the taste of her mouth, the way her body fit against his. The brogue that her years away from Ireland hadn't completely eradicated, a lilt that surfaced when she was angry or upset.

Those last months, her eyes had lost their haunted look. She had smiled more freely, laughed more often. And then she had simply disappeared without a word. How could he have been so wrong about her?

*Let her go.*

As if he had any choice. No matter how hard he'd tried to move on, the past still held him by the throat.

Ian went to the shallow drawer by the sink and lifted out a stack of publications. Ten years of newspapers and magazines, Grace's career documented in print. Photos from the *Times* and the *Guardian* that had been picked up from the AP wire. Beautifully composed essays on African farmers or bush hospitals from the magazines of humanitarian organizations. The *National Geographic* story about Ugandan child soldiers being treated in trauma counseling centers, an essay as powerful as it was heartbreaking.

Grace possessed the rare ability to capture the humanity in any subject, whether it was the unemployed worker angry with the establishment or the hollow-eyed boy wielding an automatic weapon. In the last several years, her work had gotten more daring, the settings progressively more dangerous. Only someone who had endured her own share of tragedy could see beneath the surface of the story to the hurting souls beneath.

Now she was back—not in Los Angeles, where she'd begun her career, or Dublin, where she'd been raised, but London, where she'd once intended to make a life with him. That had to mean something.

Jake would know where Grace was staying, especially now that he was dating her friend Asha. Ian had his mobile phone out of his pocket and a number on the dialer before he realized what he was doing and slammed it back down on the counter.

No. He wasn't going to run after Grace and beg her for an explanation. If she wanted to talk, she obviously knew where to find him.

### CHAPTER THREE

ASHA LIVED ON THE THIRD FLOOR of a typical redbrick mansion block in Earl's Court, a transitional neighborhood in central London not far from the museums and Hyde Park. Or it had been transitional once. As Grace hefted her cases and bags out of the black cab at the curb, it was clear more things had changed in ten years than just her. This little neighborhood was no longer a haven for broke students and immigrants, if the shiny new Jaguar parked a block down was any indication.

Grace paid the driver through the open front window and palmed the key Asha had given her, the pile of belongings in front of the stairs making her wish she had packed more lightly. Even so, she'd brought hardly any personal items. The



stack of black hard cases held her camera bodies and lenses, her lighting setups, and most importantly, her film archives.

Four trips up and down three flights of stairs later, Grace collapsed against the door marked *14*, shoved the key into the lock, and pushed. Nothing happened. She held down the latch and threw her shoulder into the door until it opened with a crack. Grace grinned. The door had stuck for as long as she could remember—only worsened with every coat of new paint—but Asha refused to have it shaved down. An extra layer of security for a woman living alone, she said.

The interior of the flat, however, had changed, the warm jewel tones that her friend had once favored now painted over in shades of cream and white and gray. There was a new pullout sofa in the living room that would serve as Grace's bed, and photography hung on the walls. Grace didn't need to look to know they were the framed shots of India she had sent Asha for her last birthday. Their prominent positions warmed her.

It took nearly as much work to get her things into the flat, where she stacked the cases neatly in the corner, taking up as little of the tiny space as possible. Then she wandered into the kitchen, which featured a table and four chairs, a two-burner hob, and a small refrigerator. Grace opened the door and smiled when she saw the fridge was empty but for a bowl of fruit and a half-finished carton of milk. So maybe Asha's quick offer of hospitality hadn't been completely unselfish. They'd once lived together, and Grace had quickly discovered that Asha's idea of cooking was heating up takeaway.

Tandoori chicken for dinner it was.

Grace double-checked the pantry and freezer to see what ingredients she would need to buy—all of them—and then

popped down on Asha's sofa with a notepad. This was one of her favorite dishes, learned on the trip to India during which she'd first met Asha. It also happened to be one of Ian's favorites. She and Ian's brother, James, had tinkered with the recipe in Ian's kitchen, arguing over the right proportions of cinnamon and black pepper and ginger. The memory, fond as it was, made her insides clench. When she'd left Ian, she hadn't just abandoned the man she loved; she'd abandoned her adopted London family as well. James . . . Ian's sister, Serena . . . all their mutual friends. Naturally, when it was clear Grace wasn't coming back, everyone but Asha had rallied around him and shut her out. She'd been arrogant to think it didn't matter, naive to think they'd come around.

She sighed and tossed the pad onto the sofa next to her. Thinking about the past was pointless. Ian's reaction had told her all she needed to know: her return was an unwelcome surprise. If she really wanted to make a life for herself in London, she would have to do it without him. It had been only nostalgia and grief that made her believe she could change things.

Grace's mobile pulled her out of her introspection. She fished the phone from her jacket pocket and pressed it to her ear. "Grace Brennan."

"Grace! You're here!"

The clipped London accent of her friend and gallery owner Melvin Colville, brought a smile back to her lips. "You got my message."

"I did. Are you free to come by the gallery today?"

"Of course. What time?"

"Four this afternoon? And bring your slides if you have them."

"I do. See you then." Grace clicked off the phone, her spirits rising, then glanced at her watch. It was barely eleven, which gave her plenty of time to buy groceries and get the chicken marinating for dinner, then dig out the slide negatives that corresponded to the scans she had e-mailed Melvin before she left Paris.

At least there were still some people in London happy to have her back.



Grace climbed the stairs from the Underground platform and emerged to a street-level cloud of diesel fumes over musty river water. Her stomach immediately began to do backflips. It was one thing to have her photos printed in magazines, picked up on the AP wire. That was her job, her calling even. But this collection of portraiture, taken as a personal mission and the fulfillment of a promise . . . that was something entirely different. Her job as a war photographer was to show other people's tragedies, but this collection hit far too close to her own.

She'd never been a coward, though, and if she could trust anyone with her work, it would be Melvin.

Her steps slowed before a glass storefront beside a corner pub, an elegant black sign with gilt letters proclaiming *Putney Bank Gallery*. Kraft paper obscured the view through the windows, but a brick propped open the door to let in air and let out the sound of hammering.

Grace stepped inside, pausing by the door so she could watch the activity unnoticed. Several men with tool belts were securing false walls faced with plasterboard to chains

from the ceiling joists, and a ginger-haired woman rolled a layer of new white paint on the permanent walls.

“Grace!”

She turned from the preparations to the man striding across the polished concrete floor toward her. Midsixties and trim, with a shaved head and neat beard, he seemed far more comfortable in his prestigious London gallery than he ever had in an editorial office. Even then, his taste had been impeccable and his influence wide.

Grace accepted his hug and quick kiss on the cheek. “Melvin, this looks amazing! Who is it?”

“Gordon Wright. Abstract oils. We’ll be cutting it close for Friday, but we’ll make it. We always do. How about you? How does it feel to be back in London?”

“Like home, surprisingly. It’s changed a bit since I spent any real time here.”

“It always does. Come, I’ve something to show you in my office.”

Grace followed him around piles of tools and paint buckets into a small office at the back of the gallery, sparsely furnished with a desk and two inexpensive chairs, its walls covered with whiteboards and pin boards and light boxes. It was a nod to his former life as a photo editor at *Londinium Monthly*, one of the first publications to print Grace’s photography. Her long and eccentric friendship with Melvin had spanned years and multiple changes of career direction, but it was the only reason she had considered his request to open her archives.

He unbuttoned his blazer as he settled behind the desk and gestured for Grace to take one of the chairs. “I have to admit, Grace, you shocked me. What you sent me was not at all what I expected.”

Grace's stomach immediately took a nosedive into the soles of her green Doc Martens. "I told you, Melvin, it's a personal project. I didn't shoot them to be exhibited—"

"No, you misunderstand me." He leaned forward and folded his hands on top of the desk. "They're fantastic. I've only seen your editorial work, your war photography, which is very good. Poignant, painful, often shocking. But these . . ." He stood and slid a whiteboard out of the way of a wall-mounted corkboard. "These are incredible."

Grace twisted around and then rose, amazement swelling in her chest. He had printed two dozen of the photos she'd sent him as black-and-white four-by-sixes and pinned them out in what she assumed was the order he'd want to display them in the gallery. She'd taken the photos, scanned the slides, viewed them on a screen, but somehow seeing them this way gave them heft. Importance even.

"See what I mean? These are art, Grace. I can't believe you've never shared them before."

She stepped forward to view each of the photos close up. Men, women, children from around the world, captured in the midst of their normal activities. Mourning. Celebrating. Living. Even she could admit there was a melancholy beauty to them, a common thread between composition and style that seemed to unite people across cultures and countries.

"Hope," Melvin said softly. "Even in the ones that show someone's worst moments, you somehow captured hope."

Grace flicked her gaze to his face, then away, too embarrassed to see the admiration in his expression. "Are these your final selections?"

"No. But I thought we'd start here. Which of them must you absolutely have exhibited?"

"I trust your editorial vision."

Melvin rubbed his bearded chin thoughtfully. "You did these on an M3, yes? Thirty-five millimeter?"

"You know I did."

Melvin's expression softened then. "How are you doing? I heard about Brian. It must be very difficult for you, especially coming on the anniversary of Aidan's death."

Grace swallowed hard and bit her lip in a vain attempt to stem the swell of tears. Each time she thought she'd made peace with the incident, the grief came back in full force. The irony of the timing had not been lost on her. Every year, she commemorated the day her photojournalist brother had been killed during a Northern Irish nationalist riot, and every year, the grief rushed back as keen and sharp as the day it happened. To lose another young man on that day—especially one close to Aidan's age—it had felt like God was trying to tell her something.

Maybe He was.

She forced a watery smile. "Let's just say it will never be my favorite day."

"I can understand that." Melvin seated himself behind the desk again and slipped on a pair of black-rimmed glasses. "Did you bring me the slides?"

Grace fished a small box from her rucksack and pushed it across the desk to him. He lifted the top and thumbed through the mounted negatives, then placed the box in his drawer. "I'll take good care of these, Grace. I'll start on some tests this week and then we can fine-tune the final prints. Eight weeks feels like a long time, but I can guarantee you we'll be working up until the last minute. What are you doing with the photos once the exhibit is over?"

"I hadn't thought that far ahead. I'm still trying not to hyperventilate over the thought of people viewing work I've hoarded for the last decade or two."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that." A peculiar glint in Melvin's eyes raised warning flags. "You should sell them. Especially if you never plan on exhibiting or printing these again."

"I'm not interested in selling them. Besides, who would want something like this hanging in their home?"

He stared at her in disbelief. "I don't think you understand quite how well-known you've become. A one-off print from the renowned Grace Brennan could bring in a fair bit of money."

"I'm not interested in the money."

"Who says you have to keep it?"

That stopped Grace's next protest before it could form.

"I know you, Grace. You've never been about the money. As long as you could afford a bed, food, and film, you were happy. I also know that you're not exactly hurting for funds these days, despite the fact you've been wearing those same blasted steel-toed boots for the last ten years. But can you think of what one of those charities could do with, say, two hundred thousand pounds?"

"No one would pay ten thousand pounds for one of my photographs," she said, but she knew Melvin caught the doubt in her words. Even after Melvin's commission for the showing and the cost of production, that was a massive amount of money that could be put to good use. "May I think about it?"

"Of course. I know what these mean to you, and I'm honored you'd trust me with them. You've become quite an artist. Aidan would be proud."



It felt like a dismissal, so she pushed her chair back from the desk. But Melvin's eyes traveled instead to a spot over her shoulder. "Ah! You got my message. You're just in time."

Grace twisted in her chair and blinked in surprise at the tall, blond man standing in the doorway. "Henry? What are you doing here? When did you get back to London?" She looked between the two men, scowling halfheartedly at Melvin. "Did you set this up?"

Henry laughed and pressed Grace into a friendly squeeze. "Hey, Grace. In answer to your questions: I heard you were here, I moved back to London a year ago, and yes, of course he set this up."

Melvin was grinning at both of them, evidently pleased at her reaction to the impromptu reunion. She took a seat in the far chair, leaving room for Henry to sit in the one she'd just vacated. "I don't understand. I didn't even know you two knew each other."

"Melvin knows everyone," Henry said. "But it was actually one of my old editors who called me. Melvin told him you might be moving back to England, he gave me a call, I got in touch with Melvin, *et voilà*, here I am."

"So, you quit too. You're out."

"Seemed like a good time. Ella is having a baby in the fall, and these days conflict isn't the safest place to make a living when you have a family to support. Not that it ever was."

Now Grace understood. This wasn't just a visit; this was an impromptu intervention. Henry had been one of the last foreign correspondents from her batch to stay with the job, but he'd spent the last several years in Eastern Europe while she covered the Middle East. "I can hardly believe it. I thought you'd be the last one standing. What are you doing now?"

Henry exchanged a look with Melvin. His expression turned a little sheepish. "I just took a position in communications with Children's Advocacy Fund."

Grace let out a laugh of disbelief. "You're working for an NGO. After all the times we said that was the last job we'd ever take?"

"Times change, Grace. You of all people should know it's not so easy to let go of your life's work. Besides, I believe in this organization. They're actually doing things right. And it lets me use my experience doing something other than sitting behind a production desk."

"Well, I'm glad you've found something that makes you happy. And Ella has to be thrilled."

"She is. So am I." He paused long enough to fix her with a serious look. "That's why I want you to come work for me."

Grace blinked at him. "Work for you in what way?"

"I need a creative director, someone with experience in the field who has a strong editorial eye. I've been following your work for years, Grace. These photos here—" he waved at Melvin's board—"prove your talent doesn't just lie in conflict. These are the kinds of photos our donors need to see."

"So you want me to be a fund-raiser?"

"No, I want you to be a journalist. The marketing collateral coming out of London right now is slick. Commercial. It doesn't tell a story. It's all smiling African children and happy farmers. It doesn't communicate our needs, or why donations are important. I think you're the perfect person to change that."

Grace sat there, stunned. Yes, she had come back to London wanting to make big changes to her life. But she'd been thinking she might go back to commercial photography.

Working for a charitable organization had never occurred to her. She'd always had the impression of the head offices being filled with do-gooders who had never put a foot on the ground, who had absolutely no idea what the program directors in the far-flung reaches of the earth went through. Westerners came to Asia and Africa and India, mucked up what was actually working in the villages, and left them worse off than before, all in the name of charity. And now he wanted her to be one of them? Melvin's earlier words began to make sense.

"See what we're about first and then decide." Henry pulled out a heavy square of vellum from his inside pocket and passed it to her. "We're having a fund-raising dinner on Friday. Come, see the presentation, talk to the board of directors. You know me, Grace. I'm not going to be involved in something that isn't making a difference to the people we're trying to help."

Grace turned over the invitation in her hand. The Savoy hotel. Possibly the poshest venue in London, and the last place she wanted to spend a Friday night. But she couldn't bear to dash the hopeful looks on both men's faces. "Okay. I'll go. But I'm not promising anything."

"Fair enough." Henry gave Grace's shoulder a squeeze, then rose to shake Melvin's hand. "Nice seeing you, Melvin. I'll see you Friday, Grace."

Grace nodded as he left the room, then turned an accusing stare on her former editor. "You set me up."

"What? I've known you forever, Grace. You're not going to be happy shooting weddings and births and skyscrapers for a living. You need more meaning to your life than that. What's wrong with having a little security at the same time?"

Grace shook her head and shouldered her rucksack as she rose. "You meddle more than a little old lady."

"So my wife says. You can thank me later."

A reluctant smile crept onto her face. "We'll see about that. Call me when you have the test prints started."

"Will do, Grace. Don't cause any trouble in the meantime."

It sounded like a challenge, but that was because she felt backed into a corner. She wound her way back out through the construction zone and took a deep breath of exhaust-filled air. Of all the nongovernmental organizations she'd interacted with, the Children's Advocacy Fund was one of the better ones. Asha volunteered with the organization for part of the year, claiming it was one of the few that focused on local development rather than handouts. Still, Grace had spent her life being an observer, a dispassionate reporter, a watchdog of sorts. It was her job to record the truth, to witness the things that no one wanted to acknowledge.

*And look where that's gotten you.*

She plugged her earphones into her ears and started back the way she had come. Melvin might think her return to London was assured, but he'd unintentionally given her more reasons to doubt. "*You need more meaning to your life than that,*" he'd said. Even he didn't understand the whole truth of it. It wasn't just about meaning. It was about identity.

If she wasn't a war photographer anymore, then who was she?