

Excerpt from
Coming Home (The Santa Monica Trilogy, #2)

by Jill Blake

“Grace?”

Her fingers tightened on the wooden armrest, but otherwise she remained still, eyes closed. A light breeze rustled through the leaves above her, providing welcome relief from the unseasonable heat of the day.

“Grace!”

She frowned. Twenty-nine was too old to start having hallucinations, wasn't it?

Yet the voice was unmistakable. And getting closer.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and blinked.

There he was. All six feet, two inches of him. His blue eyes glinted behind gold wire frames. Wild black hair curled over his ears. She recalled the texture of those strands, gliding through her fingers. Dark scruff dotted his jaw. The ubiquitous backpack hung off broad shoulders. A faded Caltech T-shirt stretched across a chest that seemed even wider than she remembered. But the waist and hips, encased in worn jeans, looked as lean as ever.

The years fell away. She was eighteen again, her heart racing, her thoughts scattering.

He moved closer, bending forward, as if to catch her eye. His lips, which had tasted every intimate inch of her body, curved into a smile. “Grace King! I can't believe it. What are you doing back in L.A.?”

“Logan.” She rose from the bench, struck anew by how small she felt standing before him. He towered above her, a full head taller than her ex-husband. Instinctively, she tensed. *Don't be*

an idiot, she told herself, forcing her muscles to relax. She even managed the semblance of a smile. “It’s good to see you. How have you been?”

“Great.” He slipped off the backpack and nodded toward the bench. “May I?”

She backed up, giving him room. When he sat down, she hesitated a moment before sliding her shoulder bag and jacket out of the way. Perching gingerly on the edge of the bench, she tucked one ankle behind the other, and clasped her hands together in her lap. He grinned, angling his body toward her, his denim-clad knee nudging hers.

“So what are you doing here, Grace?”

She eased back an inch, putting some space between them. “Interviewing for a job.”

“Oh? Where?”

“At the medical school. Psychiatry department.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No. I’m doing my last residency rotation here. They get to see me in practice, and I get first dibs on the opening for assistant professor. Sort of a clinical/teaching/research hybrid.”

“Unbelievable.” He shook his head. “I didn’t see this one coming.”

“What do you mean?”

“Us. Together again.”

She stiffened. “Excuse me?”

“I’m in the Neurobiology department. Tenure track. I run a lab jointly with one of the M.D.’s from the psych department.”

“Oh.” They’d be colleagues. That’s what he meant.

He chuckled. “You’re still so easy to rile.”

“And of course you can’t pass up any opportunity to try.” It was starting to come back: the

things that used to annoy her when she and Logan were together.

“Yep, you’ve still got it.” He cocked his head. “That looking down your nose thing. Scary, how well you channel the judge. How’s the old man doing, by the way?”

“He died. Six months ago.”

“Oh, Grace.” His hand covered hers, warm, solid, familiar. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

She swallowed. “No reason you should have.”

There had been a large obituary spread about her grandfather in the *L.A. Times* and *Santa Monica Mirror*, but she wasn’t surprised that Logan had missed it. He focused intently on things that mattered to him, but otherwise remained oblivious to the world around him. Sometimes she wondered whether she’d ever had his undivided attention. Maybe when they were in bed, without any other distractions. But those moments were fleeting. And ultimately, Logan chose to let her go, proving beyond a doubt where she fell on his list of priorities.

Had any other woman managed to secure a place for herself higher up on that list?

She glanced at the hand covering hers. No ring. Not that the absence of a ring meant anything. She’d taken hers off long before the divorce was finalized.

Damn. What was she doing, speculating about Logan’s marital status? She’d barely escaped one disastrous situation. Stupid to dive headlong into another. And it wasn’t like she was interested in any case. Definitely not.

Too much time had passed, too many things had happened in the interim. And when you came right down to it, they hadn’t parted on the best of terms.

Eight years on, and she still felt an echo of resentment over how easily Logan had dismissed her. As if their four years together were of no consequence.

Had he bothered to ask, she would have told him everything. But no. He’d simply wished

her good luck, explained that a long distance relationship wouldn't work, and gone off to Caltech.

It took her two years to start dating again. Another three before she agreed to marry Harry. And look how well that turned out. A restraining order and the entire span of the United States as a buffer between them, and she still tensed every time the doorbell rang.

So no, she wasn't interested in rekindling anything with Logan. Even if he was available and willing. She was done with men.

But she couldn't resist a quick look. Her eyes traced a path from his hand, along the corded muscles of his arm, across the impressive chest and flat abdomen that even his ratty shirt couldn't disguise, before settling on his groin. Her cheeks flamed. She dragged in a breath and jerked her gaze away.

He stroked a thumb across her knuckles and she shivered. "How's your grandmother?"

"So-so." She withdrew her fingers to the safety of her lap. "Last week she fell and broke her hip. The surgery was Monday."

"Is that why you came back?"

"No. I was planning to leave New York anyway. This just sped things up."

A bird took flight from a nearby bush, circling back once before soaring above the opposite tree-line. She watched its progress until it disappeared.

"I heard about your divorce," Logan said.

"I imagine the entire world's heard about it."

He slanted her a glance. "Was he in on it? Your ex, I mean."

She brushed aside her disappointment. She'd been asked the same question in a dozen different ways over the last five months. Why should Logan be any different? He might prefer to

focus on other things, but even he wouldn't have been able to tune out what the press dubbed the swindle of the century. News coverage had been unrelenting ever since the story broke in December.

Was Logan simply curious, like everyone else? Or did he have a more personal stake in the issue? She hoped he and his family hadn't been affected by the Ponzi scheme. She didn't need that guilt on top of everything else.

Rationally, she knew it wasn't her fault. She'd been on the periphery of it all, unaware of her father-in-law's shenanigans until the night her ex-husband showed up on her doorstep, going on and on about calling the FBI.

She flushed, remembering that her first reaction had been dismay. Not over the allegations, but over the belief that Harry had gone off his meds again. The pressured, disjointed speech, the flight of ideas, the agitated movements as he paced her living room. Mania tipping over into paranoia, she thought. The story he told sounded too bizarre to be true.

But once the feds got involved, and the investigation gathered momentum, the reality proved even more devastating. Decades of deceit, billions misappropriated, retirement funds, charities, and thousands of people facing sudden bankruptcy.

For months she'd kept her head down and repeated, *No comment*. Even though she didn't owe it to Harry to keep quiet. And she certainly felt no compunction in laying the blame squarely where it belonged: on William Blackwell, her former father-in-law.

But the fact was, she had nothing to add to the outrage that buffeted them all. Though ignorant of the crime, she'd been tarred with the same black brush as the rest of the Blackwells. Guilt by association. Never mind that she'd filed for divorce long before the scandal erupted. Or that she'd tried repeatedly to sever all ties with Harry and his family, going so far as to relinquish

any claim to marital assets or community property during the divorce.

Sitting here, in the dappled shade, with the man who had known her before her life had spiraled out of control, Grace felt all her accumulated anger and anxiety bubbling to the surface. How would Logan react if she told him what she really thought and felt right now?

She took a deep breath. Then another.

“No,” she said, keeping her tone even. “Harry wasn’t part of it. He was the one who turned his father in. The day he found out about it, he called the FBI.”

Logan’s chuckle caught her by surprise.

She glanced at him. “What?”

“Sorry.” He shook his head. “And here I thought my family was screwed up.”

She should have felt insulted. Would have, if not for Logan’s crooked smile, which seemed to invite her to share the joke.

“Right.” The animosity seeped out of her, like air from a punctured tire. “What’s your father up to these days?”

“Same old. Chasing women half his age. Getting sued for sexual harassment. Doing joint replacements in his spare time.” He looked at his watch. “They’ll be shutting the gates soon. You want to grab some food?”

That was another thing that used to drive her crazy. Logan’s tendency to change the topic whenever it touched a nerve. Tossing out a sardonic remark was fine, but God forbid she actually wanted to pursue and discuss the issue.

“So, how about it?” Logan prompted. “There’s a great Mediterranean place just down the street.”

“Thanks, but I need to head home.” She got up and brushed a hand down her skirt,

smoothing out the wrinkles. The hem of her blouse came loose on one side, exposing a narrow band of skin. She tucked the fabric back in place, flushing when she noticed Logan's gaze following the movement. She turned away and grabbed her jacket. "It was nice seeing you again."

"Here, let me help." He rose and plucked the jacket from her grasp, holding it open for her.

As she slipped her arms into the sleeves, Grace tried to ignore the heat of his body behind her. But when his big hands settled on her shoulders, she couldn't ignore the flurry of sensation that spread down her arms and across her chest, pooling in her belly and weakening her legs. He'd always had that effect on her, and it was almost a relief to feel it again. To know she was *capable* of feeling it again.

His breath caressed her ear. "One meal, Grace. For old time's sake."

She flinched at the unfortunate choice of words and stepped away.

For old time's sake. How innocuous it sounded.

Harry had whispered the same thing, that last time. Just before he'd shoved her back on the sofa and crushed her body with his. She'd barely had time to think, let alone say the word *no*.

For weeks afterward, she woke up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, screaming. *No, no, no.*

Picking up her bag, she schooled her expression into one of polite neutrality before facing Logan. "Maybe another time. I've had a full day."

"Tomorrow, then. Seven o'clock?"

She frowned. She'd deliberately given Logan a noncommittal response that didn't obligate either of them to anything. Why wasn't he taking the out? No doubt they'd run into each other on campus, and she was prepared to be pleasant. But fascinating as this impromptu reunion had

been, she wasn't looking for anything more.

Besides, the past loomed between them, unresolved.

Did he have any regrets? Or had he, in typical Logan fashion, accepted her departure as disappointing but ultimately immaterial?

He'd always been good at compartmentalizing. And she certainly couldn't accuse him of misleading her about what he considered important in life. Sure, he loved his siblings. And he was pretty compulsive when it came to sports—running, biking, or swimming almost every day. But even those things couldn't compete with his single-minded focus on career.

Grace was no slacker herself. She had worked hard to get through medical school. Another six weeks, and she would be done with residency training as well. She enjoyed evaluating and treating patients, and appreciated working with other clinicians. But at the end of the day, she looked forward to hanging up her white coat, putting away her prescription pad, and heading home.

There was a time when she'd envisioned having someone there, waiting for her. Someone who would share her joys, disappointments, and dreams. Someone she could love and trust.

Harry certainly hadn't fit the bill.

As for Logan...he'd been all too willing to abandon her in favor of his career. Odds were, he'd do the same thing again, given the opportunity. Assuming he wasn't already off the market. They hadn't gotten around to discussing vital statistics. Which was irrelevant anyway, since she wasn't planning on taking any more risks. Not with Logan, or anyone else.

It was time to put her foot down. "Logan—"

He interrupted. "Where are you staying?"

She shouldered her bag and started walking. "I'm not having dinner with you."

“Okay, lunch.” He grabbed his backpack and matched his stride to hers. “You pick the place.”

Persistent as ever, she thought. No wonder he excelled in research. He simply didn’t know how to give up.

“I can’t,” she said. “I’m starting my rotation on Monday, and I still have a ton to do before then.”

“Come on, Grace. We both need to eat. I’ll bring take-out. Tell me the address.”

She shook her head. “You haven’t changed, Logan. You’re as much of a pain in the—”

“Don’t say it, Grace. You’ll hurt my feelings.”

That startled a laugh out of her. As unbending and self-absorbed as Logan could be, he’d always had the ability to lighten her mood. And he was right, they both needed to eat. As long as they kept it casual. One meal. What could it hurt? “Fine. You win.”

“Dinner?”

“Lunch.”

“Where?”

“Surprise me. Twelve-thirty tomorrow.” She turned into the lot where she’d parked that morning.

Logan trailed after her. When she stopped beside an old Jaguar XJ6 that looked like it ought to have diplomatic plates, he whistled. “This baby yours?”

“It used to belong to my grandfather.” She tore off a corner from one of the left-over CV’s she’d tucked in her bag earlier and scribbled her cell number. “Here, in case you change your mind.”

“And the address?”

“La Mesa and 24th, overlooking the country club. Big Spanish-style gates. Can’t miss it.”

“You’re staying with your grandmother?”

“For now.” She unlocked the car.

He held the door for her, waiting until she was settled before leaning down. “I’m glad you’re back, Grace.”

She blinked and held her breath until he shut the door and stepped away from the car. Her hand shook as she started the engine.

In all the months of planning her return, the countless emails and phone calls she’d made to arrange this final rotation, the reams of paperwork she’d completed to transfer her DEA and receive her state medical license, never once had it occurred to her that she might run into Logan.

Now, idling in Friday evening traffic crossing the 405, she wondered at that oversight. Sure, the Greater Los Angeles area boasted upwards of eighteen million people. But somehow she’d forgotten, or conveniently blocked out, the fact that Logan had always talked about returning to UCLA.

Damn. As if her life wasn’t complicated enough.

Maybe Logan would cancel tomorrow’s lunch after all.

Yeah, and maybe William Blackwell would be declared a national hero.

The driver behind her leaned on his horn, and Grace turned her attention back to the road.

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