



Robbie (European Romance Suspense #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: A security expert dodging his past.

The sassy angel he left behind.

Will their love survive a deadly game of cat and mouse in the Italian City of Canals?

Robbie Perrine left home and the love of his life at eighteen and didn't look back.

He has excelled as an Army Ranger and a security specialist but he's never found the happiness of love again.

When a friend sets him up on a European adventure with his former love, Robbie agrees to keep Alice safe from a serial killer but far away from his wounded heart.

His plans to stay detached and hide behind his thick beard unravel quickly as Alice melts away his walls and pain.

Alice Marshall chose to stay with her mother and excel as an architect over following Robbie to the military.

She never thought Robbie would ditch her for fifteen long and lonely years.

When a serial killer targets everyone close to her, she's left alone and terrified.

Reunited with Robbie, Alice has to push away all her feelings of love, or he will be the next victim.

Robbie's safety has to matter more than her longing to be with him again.

Will Robbie and Alice find the courage to give their love a second chance, or will the killer chasing them through the narrow streets and canals of Venice get them first?

Total Pages (Source): 28

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:26 am

Chapter

One

Retired Army Ranger Lieutenant Robbie Perrine trained himself to never be distracted by the physical effects of nerves.

Running through enemy fire, infiltrating a trafficking ring, taking down a crime lord ...

he'd done it all and more. He'd acquired the ability to be more machine than man, pushing human connection, warm memories of Alice Marshall, anxiety of death, and the chance of failure far from his mind.

But right now? He was nervous and feeling every annoying symptom. Palms sweating, neck prickling, heart racing, mouth dry, stomach heaving ... any indications of nerves that were possible to feel were manifesting themselves, and he hated every second.

Robbie paced the gorgeous penthouse patio overlooking the matrix of buildings and canals that made up the epic city of Venice, Italy, as he clung to his phone.

He shot a glare at his lifelong friends Brandon Richards and Rockwell Pierre.

Brandon wasn't brave enough to face him in person, or more truthfully, Brandon, Rockwell, and Brandon's girlfriend Madelyne had been busy at home in America making certain all of their friends' adventures started off well.

He was on a video chat with the two of them, and Brandon was attempting to talk Robbie into being ‘hyped’ about the upcoming adventure .

These nerves were a hundred percent Brandon’s fault. If his billionaire friend were here in person, Robbie might throw a punch, regardless of the fact Brandon was dying of brain cancer.

“Why did I agree to this?” he groaned.

“You’re going to protect Alice, find and dismantle a serial killer, and the two of you are going to fall in love again.” Brandon bounced on the screen, giving Robbie the perception of vertigo, which didn’t help his already tumbling stomach.

Robbie rubbed at his throbbing forehead, at his too-hot neck, and then tugged at his too-thick beard. “Stupid ideas like that will make me go catch a plane from Venice back to San Diego,” he muttered.

He’d be happy to dismantle a serial killer, but fall in love again? Not a chance. Alice most likely hated him.

Alice used to be a sweetheart to everyone, most of all him.

The day he had enlisted in the Army and left her behind while she cared for her ‘sickly’ mom was the last time he’d seen her.

Their epic fight when he’d asked her to go with him still stung.

He’d said things he shouldn’t have about her mom.

She’d said there was nothing for her in Fort Moore.

His parting shot had been, ‘Nothing you care about, obviously.’ It all still hurt when he pulled it out to examine it, so he never did so.

When he went home to visit his parents and siblings in Marietta, Georgia, he avoided any of the places she might be.

Luckily, there were over sixty thousand people in Marietta and almost five hundred thousand in nearby Atlanta.

Their families didn’t know each other, as his family was humble and her mom was insanely wealthy.

It had worked to avoid Alice. For fifteen gut-wrenching, soul-killing years, he hadn’t seen the only woman he’d ever loved.

Now he was going to have to not only face her but spend at least two weeks with her.

Alice was in danger. Robbie had agreed to keep her safe from a serial killer who had murdered her boyfriend, her two closest friends Natalie and Ruby, who he’d always thought were fun girls and great friends to Alice, and her cute little dog Odie over the past year.

All the while taunting Alice with untraceable emails that she would turn to him for love soon.

The murderer called himself ‘Big Buddha’. The guy was disturbed, and so far there had been no leads with the Atlanta police or the FBI. Every death was different—stabbing, gunshot, strangling, and asphyxiation. No patterns besides a card or note near each body that said:

Alice,

You'll only have me to love soon.

Big Buddha

Maddening. If Robbie could talk her into it, he'd have Aiden Porter's tech team and several of Aiden's top operatives get involved. They could investigate and likely find the man.

Another maddening fact, which he didn't want to think about, was the fact that Alice had a serious boyfriend before the man was murdered.

It had been in the information he'd read and re-read on the plane ride over.

How serious was a serious boyfriend? Why had she never married? Did she ever think of Robbie?

He shook off the inconsequential questions and turned his thoughts to Brandon and Madelyne. They had roped Robbie and four of their other friends into protecting endangered women while having a European travel adventure. Who did that? Only Brandon. He was one of a kind for sure.

Robbie felt naked with no weapons except a knife.

He would have the aid of four bodyguards, so at least he wouldn't be on his own for the op, or with Alice.

That was somewhat of a relief. He had no clue what he'd even say to his long-lost love.

His hand shook as it held the phone. This was a nightmare.

He was the farthest thing from a 'hand trembling' kind of guy.

The bodyguards would be accompanying Alice from the Venice airport. Brandon's jet transporting Alice and the four men from Georgia had touched down an hour ago. They should be here by now.

He studied the narrow canals and tight walkways between buildings.

He was more of a wide-open spaces kind of guy.

If only he could go back to mountain biking the trails of Jade Valley, Arizona, where he'd been on an assignment a couple months ago.

Red rock mountains, desert beauty, spacious valleys, very few humans around.

That was a vacation to him. Not fourteen hours on an airplane, thousands of people swarming tiny streets between red brick and stone buildings, and a language that wasn't in his repertoire. At least the food should be good .

Even alone on this patio, gazing down at the murky canals and the people weaving through streets and over bridges on foot or on the canal in gondolas and small boats, Robbie felt claustrophobic.

How would he run, bike, lift weights, or swim for the next two weeks?

More importantly, how would he be around Alice and keep her safe without losing his heart to her again?

He was a hardened security operative for the famous and charismatic Aiden Porter.

Love and soft touches and angelic soul mates were not part of his present or future.

He heard the beep of the electronic keypad to the lock on the condo's front door and whirled.

"They're here," he barked into the phone. "What do I do?"

Brandon woofed out a surprised laugh, and Rock's eyebrows went up.

"I don't think you've ever asked one of us what to do before," Rock said in a too-serious voice. "You all right, man?"

"No," Robbie admitted, clenching his free hand into a fist and holding the phone more tightly to keep from trembling.

Footsteps sounded and four men strode into the airy and swanky living area with three-hundred and sixty-degree views of the city below.

The penthouse was two spacious and expensive stories.

All the bedrooms and en-suite bathrooms were on the upper level.

Robbie recognized the men, all fellow security operatives for Aiden Porter. That was a relief.

"You've got this," Brandon encouraged like some kind of hopped up on caffeine cheerleader. "Alice has always loved you. You'll keep her safe and she'll love you again."

Robbie's eyes widened at his friend's cheesy and inopportune words.

Alice stepped out from behind Captain Price Sanderson and gaped at Robbie.

“Robbie?” she whispered, putting her long fingers to her full rosebud lips. Lips he had captured in heated exchanges on sweltering summer nights in Georgia.

It felt like a lifetime ago, but somehow those memories were a living, breathing thing at the moment. It was all he could do to restrain himself from storming across the distance, sweeping the angel off the floor and into his arms, and savoring those lips once again.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded, pulling her hand away and straightening her shoulders.

He’d always loved Alice’s tall, curvy shape.

She wasn’t some wilting flower, and she was tall enough to match his large stature.

Still, he could easily pick her up and cart her around.

She’d always laughed when he did that, claiming no one else could sweep her off her feet and make her soar like he did.

She wasn’t laughing right now. Her dark eyes were shooting sparks at him, and she’d asked him a question.

“Is she there?” Brandon’s voice came from the phone.

Robbie ended the call and slid the phone into his pocket. He clenched both hands into fists.

“Was that Brandon?” she asked, her smooth brow wrinkling. She tossed her dark, curly hair over her shoulder. Striding up to him, she tilted her head back to meet his gaze. Her own deep-brown eyes were angry.

The scent of sweet raspberries and cream wafted over him. Robbie had to spread his stance and command himself to hold his ground. He either wanted to step in and hold her close or run the other direction.

“Yeah,” he grunted.

“Get him back on the phone. That jerk lied to me.”

“Lied to you?” Robbie arched an eyebrow. His phone buzzed in his pocket. He ignored it. He wasn’t getting Brandon back on the phone. He could only imagine the crap that would spew from his friend’s mouth with Alice on the line.

He rubbed at his neck, wishing Aiden had an assignment for him that no one else could possibly complete.

He’d vacate this awkward situation and never see Alice again.

Seeing Alice again, and her not looking at him with love but with contempt, made him feel like someone had gutted him with a dull knife.

He didn’t need or want this kind of agony.

“He and Madelyne told me I was coming to Venice for an epic adventure to stay safe from Big Buddha with bodyguards from Aiden Porter.” She gestured behind her.

Robbie knew each of the men, Captain Price and Lieutenant River Einheart the best. These men would be trustworthy and qualified, and it was comforting to have a familiar face and know how the other guards operated.

Price arched his eyebrows. River smirked at him. A lot of help they were.

“Yeah.” Robbie nodded. “That’s the plan.”

“He never said one word about you.” Alice folded her arms underneath her chest and gave him a pointed look, obviously wanting an explanation.

Robbie had no idea what to say or do. Call Brandon back and tell him the deal was off as he’d gotten Alice here on false pretenses?

Yank Alice in tight and never let her go?

Run and jump off the balcony and hope he hit the canal and not a side street?

He might break every bone in his body, but that would hurt less than Alice being here and not wanting him here.

He stared into Alice’s dark eyes. She was obviously angry and obviously not wanting to be with him.

Back when he was an untested Army Ranger and had felt the effects of nerves strongly, he’d stepped forward with faith. He’d prayed hard and then plunged into the battle or the assignment. His focus had come, the Savior had strengthened him, and nothing else had mattered.

He was in the midst of a battle right now, and he had no clue how to focus on anything but Alice’s beautiful and distraught face.

The nerves weren’t going away anytime soon.

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Chapter

Two

Alice Marshall could not believe she was face to face with Robbie Perrine. A throwback to her past. A past that had been happy and carefree and full of love. She was far from any kind of happiness or love now.

She couldn't have imagined when Robbie left at eighteen to go save the world that she'd never see or hear from him again. He'd asked her to go with him, live on the army base two hours from home at Fort Benning. Leave her mother, who adored her, alone with her poor health and no family support.

Alice couldn't do it. They'd fought for the first time in the nine months they'd spent falling in love.

He'd said her mother was selfish, manipulative, making up her symptoms, and holding Alice down.

She'd defended her mother, told Robbie he was the selfish one.

Alice had a coveted Tuten Scholarship at Georgia Tech for the architecture and design pursuit she'd dreamed about all her life.

She could be twenty minutes away from her mother.

At Georgia Tech she could be independent but still visit home regularly.

She had tried to explain there was nothing for her in Fort Benning. Robbie had stormed out the door muttering, ‘Nothing you care about, obviously’. She wished she had chased after him, or tried to contact him one of the thousands of times she had thought about him. Too late now. Far too late.

He was bigger than she remembered, thickly muscled and at least six-five.

He was also hairy. Like a Sasquatch had taken over the face and head of the man she’d once loved.

Those startling blue eyes peered out at her from above a thick, deep-brown beard that obscured his handsome face.

That face she’d once loved was shadowed by a head of dark, curly hair.

There was something dangerous, mesmerizing, and thrilling about this new Robbie, but she missed her Robbie—smiling, teasing, clean-shaven, devastatingly handsome, strong, and brave.

He used to pick her up and carry her around as if she were petite and light.

She’d loved soaring in his arms while teasing him that no one else could sweep her off her feet.

Who was this new Robbie—serious, manly, heroic, and hairy, his piercing blue eyes striving to see into her soul—and how in the world had she gotten stuck with him for two weeks? All the pain of him leaving and never coming back smacked her in the face.

“This isn’t going to work,” Alice snipped. “I can’t be alone with you for two weeks.”

Robbie splayed his hands as if trying to calm her down. The muscles in his shoulders and arms engaged, and her mouth went dry.

Stupid, visceral reaction. She wasn't attracted to this new Robbie. How would she even kiss him through all that hair?

Oh, my! She wasn't kissing him. Where was Natalie when she needed her?

Like a slap in the face, she remembered that Natalie was dead.

It was a gaping wound that would never heal.

Natalie had been murdered six weeks ago.

Because of Alice. Everyone had died because of Alice.

Big Buddha had killed her boyfriend Jack first, almost a year ago now, on the Fourth of July.

Her close friend Ruby had been next on Christmas Eve.

Then her dog Odie on Easter morning. Now he'd taken Natalie on Memorial Day.

She had no support. No close friends. No one to turn to. Her dad had died of a prescription drug overdose when she was twelve. She'd adored him and everyone had been stunned that he'd taken his life .

She had her mother, who thought the sun rose and set on her face.

Even though her mother loved her, Alice wasn't immune to her faults.

Marianne Marshall was constantly sick, miserable, snarky, unwilling to turn to her Savior, and honestly a drain on everyone around her.

Alice visited her mother every day and stayed for at least half an hour.

Her mother always told her how brilliant and ‘stop dead gorgeous’ Alice was.

She made Alice laugh with her sarcasm, but she also frustrated Alice when she wasn’t nice to her staff or complained the entire visit.

It wasn’t always easy to make the visits, but it was her mother, her only living family member, and so she went.

Thankfully, her mother was insanely wealthy, so she had the top bodyguards and security system in all of Georgia.

She bragged to Alice she was ‘safer than the governor’ and ‘who would want to kill a bitter witch like me’.

Her mother believed Big Buddha had no hope of murdering her.

Alice hoped it was true. Her mother was sometimes difficult, but Alice loved her.

Brandon Richards’ random phone call had felt like a lifeline, a gift from heaven.

He’d offered her this escape to Venice, Italy, one of the many European cities she’d dreamed of visiting since she fell in love with architecture as a young teen.

She’d also loved the movie *While You Were Sleeping* as a young teen.

She, Ruby, and Natalie had watched the movie every Christmas and sighed about

going to Venice on their honeymoons.

Ruby had married Joshua Payne two years ago.

The newlyweds had been saving for a trip to Italy.

Now Josh was a young widower. Natalie had dated 'all of Georgia and still not found her prince'.

Once upon a time, Alice thought she'd found a prince among men.

Now she was face to face with him again, and all she wanted to do was run the other direction.

Brandon's trip offer felt like a nightmare being stuck with the man she'd loved deeply and now couldn't have.

There was also the terrifying fact that if she stayed with Robbie, Big Buddha might somehow find out about their dating history and young love, think she still loved Robbie, and kill him too.

Her mother had been right. She shouldn't have come.

Alice was destined to be alone and miserable, just like her mother.

A serial killer was trying to make certain of that.

Her mother kept reminding her she could turn to Preston Lavity, her lifelong family friend, for comfort and love.

Preston would marry her tomorrow, if she'd agree.

How could she explain she wasn't attracted to the wealthy, slightly pompous pretty boy?

The rough and tumble, smiling, and unexpected Robbie was more her type.

With a little less hair than he had currently.

"Not alone," Robbie said in a consoling tone she didn't appreciate. "We'll have our four new friends with us."

Alice rolled her eyes. Like these stoic bodyguards were going to be great company or insulate her from the heart-racing effects of Robbie Perrine.

She looked away from Robbie and tried to appreciate the penthouse.

An open floor plan with floating stairs to the upper level and a modern kitchen design were highlights.

Even more intriguing was the three-hundred and sixty-degree views of Venice.

The floating city was a marvel, renowned for its Gothic architecture with its pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and intricate stonework.

It was a cruel joke that Brandon would bring her together with him here. Had Robbie told his lifelong friend about her obsession with having a honeymoon in Venice just like *While You Were Sleeping* ?

Robbie stepped around her, ripping her focus back to him.

He had the gall to brush his arm against hers.

The simple touch sent off a mess of tingles in her arm.

She could smell him. That clean and luscious mint, bergamot, and ginger scent was all primeval Robbie mingled with his favorite Swiss Army Cologne because he'd always claimed he could be a lover and a fighter, versatile just like a Swiss Army knife.

Too many memories came rushing back—warm summer nights sharing heated kisses; cold winter days laughing and playing like children at his favorite spot, Activate Games Park; learning and geeking out over her favorite spot, the Museum of Design Atlanta; and Sunday dinners at his parents' house after going to church with his family, feeling loved and accepted by her Savior and the entire Perrine family.

She couldn't believe at this moment he had the gall to brush against her or to still be wearing that same cologne.

Ugh! She really needed Natalie. Instead of her best friend to confide in, she was stuck with five burly military studs, the most prominent of which was Robbie Perrine .

She whirled to watch him strut over with his hand outstretched to greet their bodyguards, who were obviously familiar, if not friends.

Alice knew he didn't strut purposely. It was simply the way he walked, as if he were in command of the entire world. He used to be in command of her world, though he'd claimed she was in command of his. She touched her fingertips to her lips in remembrance.

Their guards had all given her their first names, Price, Curtis, River, and Merrick, when she had met them at the airport in Atlanta before boarding Brandon Richards' luxurious jet.

The men shook hands, conferred in low voices, and then the leader, Price, said, “We’ll let you two work this out while we set up security and get settled in. Did you find your suite upstairs? Miss Presley had arrangements made.”

“I didn’t look too closely at any of the rooms.” Robbie glanced back at her. “I left my duffel in the hallway. I’m great with whatever room.”

Price looked at her and then back at Robbie. “Miss Presley has you next door to Miss Marshall and had clothing and toiletries delivered for both of you.” He arched his eyebrows and mouthed, “Good luck.”

Alice threw her hands in the air. “No!”

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Next door to Robbie? She wouldn't survive.

She couldn't survive emotionally if Robbie broke through to her heart again.

She also couldn't live with herself if she put him in mortal peril should the monstrous Big Buddha discover they were together.

Not together, together, but that was what it would look like.

Staying together and traveling through Venice and the surrounding areas together.

"Is nobody going to talk to me about getting out of this mess?" she asked. "And I told you all to call me Alice!"

Robbie and Price exchanged a look. Price's eyebrows went higher. The team leader had a weathered and scarred but handsome face, his deep-brown eyes a standout with long lashes and a soulful look that said he'd been through hard things.

Robbie stepped toward her, that determined look in his blue eyes that used to mean she was his 'angel' and she was going to be kissed long and thoroughly to make sure she didn't 'get twinkled to heaven and leave him behind' .

She gasped and put a hand to her lips. His eyes darkened with a flare of desire that thrilled and terrified her.

"Robbie Perrine, you stay away from me." She held up a hand as if warding off evil spirits. He wasn't evil. Robbie was good clear through, but his kisses could make her

forget her responsibilities and focus in life.

The fire in his eyes died and he stopped in his tracks, looking uncertain and like a lost little boy.

Little boy? That was ridiculous. When the word 'man' was created, the cavemen probably scratched out a drawing of Robbie Perrine as their example.

The virile man taking up too much space, even in this open concept floor plan, was the farthest thing from a boy.

"Miss Marshall ... Alice," Price said. "You can choose to leave and stay away from Lieutenant Perrine, but you will have to forfeit the hundred thousand dollars and the trip."

"Hundred thousand dollars?" Robbie asked.

"It had the appearance of a gift." Alice glared at him. "Until I saw the strings attached."

He flinched as if she'd slapped him.

Alice felt decidedly out of sorts. She was usually called an 'angel' or 'the nicest person'.

Especially from anyone who had insight to how she diligently visited and tried to uplift her cranky mother.

Her mother's house staff and caregivers always raved about what a sweetheart Alice was.

The staff turnover was astronomical. Only ever-patient, dear Emeline had stuck with her mother for the past twenty years.

The rest of the staff was fired or quit within months or sometimes weeks, even though the pay was off-the-charts generous.

Her mother either belittled them, teasing in her opinion, or they couldn't handle her constant ailments.

Alice was always after her mother to treat them more kindly.

Alice wasn't being angelic or nice to Robbie. She was a mess inside, and keeping her distance from him would at least ensure he didn't get murdered.

"What is your Squadron 7 leader Brandon paying you?" she hurled at him.

She should've known Brandon Richards was pulling something on her.

A jokester like Brandon would never give gifts without strings attached.

How had she not seen this coming? Brandon and Robbie's friend Rockwell had taken her cell phone to make certain the killer didn't follow her to Italy.

She'd been appreciative, but now she felt naked and without support.

"A million," he murmured, his blue eyes searching hers. "But only if you fall in love with me."

Her eyes popped and her mouth fell open. She had overheard Brandon saying something about love on the phone when she had walked in the door. How dare Robbie repeat that far-fetched, long-buried dream? Did he not know how he'd hurt

her leaving her behind?

Did he not know about the murders? If they fell in love again, Big Buddha would find a way to kill him on a holiday just like he had Natalie, Ruby, Jack, and Odie.

The Fourth of July was a few weeks away.

She could only imagine Big Buddha would love the symbolism of coming full circle and murdering her boyfriend Jack and her long-lost love Robbie on the same date, a year apart.

Especially as America and patriotism meant so much to Robbie.

Panic filled her and her heart raced out of control. How could she protect Robbie? Not letting down her guard around him and making certain nobody thought she cared for him was the obvious answer.

“Well!” She hated her tone of voice. It sounded just like her mother when she was harping on someone or something. “That is never happening!”

Nobody said anything. The silence in the room was thick and awkward.

The four bodyguards stared out the windows.

Robbie stared at her. She felt like a bully, like her mother.

That was ridiculous. Alice wasn’t anything like her mother, and Robbie was the one who had ditched her and never looked back.

“Fine,” she said, shaking her head and trying to calm down.

“Fine. I need that money.” She could finally pay off the credit card bills she’d run up starting her own firm.

She would never ask her mother for money, no matter how much her mother had or how many times she offered.

Being able to be an independent contractor, choose which design projects she worked on, and succeed on her own meant a lot to her.

Her mother thought it was ridiculous she worked and had her own apartment.

If her mother had her way, Alice would live with her and be dependent on her financially.

That was never happening, and this money was a boon to making certain she would succeed with her passion of architecture and design.

Even with her respected master’s in architecture and design from Georgia Tech, rising in a competitive field and city had been grueling, and the money had never been what was promised.

Any time she thought she would get ahead with the three different firms she’d worked for since college, her pay and bonuses would be ‘restructured’.

Striking out on her own made it harder to build a name and land large contracts, but she could see the potential.

The hundred grand was crucial to keeping her in the black until her company, Angel Architecture, gained solid footing.

She drew in a breath and blew it out. “I’ll stay for the two weeks,” she conceded.

She narrowed her eyes at Robbie. He looked enticing, even with all that bushy hair.

Robbie Perrine was tough and well-trained enough he might be the only man who could love her and stay safe from Big Buddha.

She didn't know that anyone could stay safe from Big Buddha, a versatile wraith who had the police and even the FBI stumped.

It wasn't a chance she was willing to take.

She forced herself to snip at him, "But don't think for a moment that I'll fall in love with you. You are losing your million dollars."

Robbie smiled at her. At least it looked like his lips turned up in the midst of his beard. "You know I always loved a challenge."

Alice gasped. She did know that about him. He was driven and focused, and when he put his mind to something, he always accomplished it.

He'd said those exact words when he asked her to the homecoming dance their senior year and she'd informed him she already had a date.

He'd teased her a few weeks later when she could hardly remember who the date was with.

Robbie had won her heart far too quick, and the joy he'd brought into her life used to shove every worry from her mind.

Was he referring to winning the money or winning her heart again? She wasn't certain, but apparently the two were entwined. She wasn't falling for him again and the million dollars would taint anything he said or did .

This new Robbie was puzzling and enthralling. He felt out of her league—even bigger than she remembered and too experienced and mighty for a woman who'd spent her years studying and working long hours and visiting her mother.

Yet the way he was looking at her made her feel like she was the most desirable woman he'd ever seen.

She couldn't let her guard down. She'd take in the glorious architectural beauty of Venice and the surrounding areas and have a hundred thousand dollars to get out of debt when she got home and back to building the business of her dreams and being there for her mother.

She gave Robbie one more searing glare, hoping that would keep him in his place. If any of these bodyguards were by some twisted nightmare loyal to the elusive Big Buddha, they could report back that Alice was not falling for the enticing Robbie Perrine.

Turning, she hurried for the stairs. She'd find her bedroom in this gorgeous apartment and then she'd say lots of prayers for help. Not that prayer had saved anybody she cared about. But she wasn't ready to give up on heaven.

Only on any chance of love.

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Chapter

Three

Robbie watched Alice storm up the stairs.

He had no idea what to say to his buddies after they witnessed the former love of his life reject him yet again.

At least it wasn't as bad as their battle fifteen years ago.

He was hardened enough the hurt simmered below the surface rather than gouging him and flaying him open like a gutted fish.

Thankfully the familiar guards were militant dudes, and they focused on setting up security and getting bags to rooms. He only heard the smart-aleck River mutter under his breath, "Poor sucker."

With nothing to do but unpack his duffel bag, he pulled up the itinerary from Madelyne. Today she had nothing extra planned for them. 'Settle in and start falling in love,' were her instructions.

What a laugh. Love wasn't going to happen. Though a million dollars was nothing to sneeze at, Robbie wouldn't try to schmooze and trick Alice into loving him again for money.

He was here to protect Alice. Period. Seeing her again had brought all the old feelings

to the surface. If only they could recreate what they'd had as naïve eighteen-year-olds.

As a too-wise thirty-three-year-old, Alice had easily found a chink in his metal parts. He would've shed his battle armor and let her in, if she'd had even an inkling of interest in reconnecting or wanted to get through to him.

Robbie shook his head. Even if he could change his path, Alice didn't appear willing to give him a chance. Far from it. He seemed to infuriate the former angel. The beautiful woman he'd just seen had the appearance of his long-lost love, but his Alice and their love were a fable of the past.

The afternoon and evening were long. He unpacked his duffel, shaking his head at all the expensive clothes and products Madelyne had waiting in the closet and bathroom for him.

He spent a lot of time on his suite's patio, pacing, looking at the intricate architecture and wishing he could hear what Alice had to say about it, praying, and trying to distract himself by reading a John Grisham novel on his phone.

Finally, it was time for dinner. He descended the stairs, smelling the delicious scents of the takeout meal that had been delivered, ignoring Price's questioning gaze, and wondering if he dared knock on her door.

He paced and waited. When she appeared, it was all worth the wait. She looked enticing in a long, pale blue dress that outlined her incredible shape and was the perfect complement to her tanned skin and dark hair and eyes.

She wasn't smiling, didn't greet him, and didn't seem anything like the happy sweetheart he'd known and loved.

Could he blame her? Did he even know what Alice's normal self was any longer?

Fifteen years was a long time, and he was the one who'd walked away and never returned.

Yet how could they have had a relationship?

Her mom loathed him, and Alice had defended her mom and was committed to 'helping' her manipulative, judgmental mom.

Price and Curtis, who were in the main room, each refused to eat with them, insisting that Madelyne had given them strict instructions that Robbie and Alice were to 'dine alone'. Oh, boy.

They dished up plates in silence and carried the food and sparkling water out onto the patio. At least Robbie could try to distract himself with a gondola sliding by on the quiet canal below or the tinkling laughter of a couple walking hand in hand over one of the main canal bridges.

He couldn't let himself study Alice's face like he longed to.

That yearning wasn't a sign of weakness.

It had simply been too many years since his eyes had feasted on her, and her face was majestic.

Similar to his first steak dinner after being deployed to Cuba.

Delectable and every bite savored. Alice was delectable, and he'd savor her mouth meeting his.

It was too warm outside, and he started to sweat. Being alone with Alice and his errant thoughts weren't doing him any favors.

The food was incredible—zesty caprese salad with an oozing buffalo mozzarella he'd never found in the states, rich and creamy pasta carbonara with just enough bacon to not overpower the cream, and Margherita pizzas with chewy cheese and a thin crust as savory as he'd ever tried.

The takeout containers had kept the food at an ideal temperature.

The company was ... awkwardly quiet. He racked his brain for something to say. Anything.

“Are you excited to see Venice?” he asked.

He remembered her obsession with the architecture of Venice, along with Rome, Prague, Budapest, Paris, and London.

She'd loved that movie *While You Were Sleeping* and sweetly asked if they could honeymoon in Venice like Sandra Bullock's character in the movie.

Of course he'd agreed as an infatuated eighteen-year-old.

He would've spent every cent in his savings account and gone anywhere in the world to be on a honeymoon with Alice.

It was bittersweet to think now they'd see all the sights of Alice's dream place, but Alice didn't care for him any longer and they definitely weren't on the honeymoon he'd dreamed about.

A honeymoon. With Alice. All the passion and sweet love they'd shared. All the

hopes and dreams. He could easily remember how exhilarating it had felt when Alice teased him, kissed him, cuddled into his chest and clung to him.

Suddenly, it was sweltering hot on this patio.

Maybe he should shave his beard and cut his hair like his mama kept suggesting.

He'd have to grow it out again for the next undercover job.

The persona he relied on to infiltrate and all his fake IDs had long hair and a beard.

He couldn't be waiting for hair to grow so he could track down drug lords and human traffickers.

"I am," she said softly, in the voice that sounded much more like the Alice he remembered, not the irate Alice of a couple hours ago. "Did you tell Brandon that Venice was where we wanted to honeymoon together?"

Robbie leaned back as she smacked him with that one. All the desire to marry Alice felt so real, as if it were a living thing between them and he could reach out and grasp it. He couldn't.

"No." He shook his head. "That was our special secret."

He flushed at the words. Special secret. They would've seemed juvenile with anyone besides Alice.

"I'm glad." Her dark eyes lit with a warmth that used to be special for them as well. All the memories were right at the surface, and he was dreaming of Alice in his heart and his arms.

Just as quick as the connection had flared to life, she broke it, looking down at the canal.

“I wish Madelyne would’ve shared the itinerary with me. She wanted it to be a surprise.” Alice forked a bite of caprese salad—buffalo mozzarella, tomato, and basil dripping with some of the best balsamic vinegar dressing he’d ever tasted.

“You hate surprises.”

Alice stopped the bite inches from her mouth. “You remembered.”

Robbie stared at her. “I remember everything about you,” he said in a rough voice. How could she think he’d forget any detail? The time spent with Alice was the best memories of his life.

She studied him as if searching his soul, but then she looked out at the view, put the bite in her mouth, chewed and swallowed, and forked a bite of pasta and chicken.

“The architecture of Venice is incredible, eh?” he said.

She turned to him with a radiant smile. An Alice smile.

His stomach hopped and his heart slammed against his chest. The memory of that smile had gotten him through many a rough night, horrifying assignment, or terrifying mission.

He’d never forgotten the effects of that smile, but he’d had no clue how desperately he missed it until this moment .

“So incredible,” she gushed. “Can you even believe the roots to history? A crossroads of culture from the Byzantine and Islamic heritage and the heavy Gothic influence

because Venice was a hub of trading with its strategic waterways.” She spoke like a hyped-up professor, then sighed and looked out over the city skyline interspersed with a latticework of waterways.

“The colorful marbles and intricate stonework, vaults, and arches astound me. The fact that it’s a manmade marvel built on millions of wooden piles driven into the soft mud and clay of the lagoon is mind-blowing.

I can hardly wait to get out there and see it all, though this view is an ideal way to get an overview. ”

Alice was naturally smart, and she had feasted on knowledge of architecture and design like he had on military strategy, weaponry, and infiltration techniques.

They were very different in their pursuits but both passionate.

He appreciated her enthusiasm and diligent study.

It made her even more appealing, and she didn’t need any help to be appealing to him.

“I’m excited to see it with you,” he admitted before he could stop himself.

Alice’s eyes widened, and she looked half-scared that he’d haul her in and kiss her and half-hopeful that he would.

“Because you have such impressive insight on the architecture and history of the city,” he added, covering his slip.

She nodded, but her smile and the warmth in her dark eyes disappeared.

“Tomorrow we start exploring Venice’s streets.

I can share the itinerary with you.” He was happy to do anything to get her to not look at him like he’d just stepped on her dog’s tail.

He gulped thinking of that. Odie. The cute little Bernedoodle had been a puppy when they’d dated.

To think the dog had been stabbed to death by the psychopath who had killed her friends and boyfriend.

Her heart was probably broken, losing so many she’d loved.

Maybe she was traumatized and it wasn’t completely his fault she was so out of sorts. Maybe.

He pulled out his phone. “Is your phone number still the same?”

She stared at him, the bite on her fork suspended in the air. “Yes, but I blocked you, and Rockwell had me inform clients I’d be out of town and leave my phone with him in case someone was tracking me on it.”

That stung that she’d blocked him, but from a security standpoint he was grateful she didn’t have her phone turned on. “Oh.” He could ask her to unblock him, but as she stared at him, he could see fire burning in her dark gaze. What had he done now? He slowly slid his phone back into his pocket.

“You didn’t even know I’d blocked you?” Her fork clattered to the plate.

Robbie’s gaze fastened on her face. Her dark eyes were wounded and her mouth pinched. He’d done something else wrong, and he wasn’t even certain what. “How

would I know you'd blocked me?"

"If you tried to call or text, you would've figured it out." She glared at him.

"After our last ... conversation." He moistened his lips and tried to think how to phrase his next words. "You wanted me to call or text you?"

"No," she snapped. "That's why I blocked your number, because I didn't want to hear from you ever again."

Robbie had no words. She'd blocked him and didn't want to hear from him, but she was angry that he hadn't tried to call or text?

It made no sense to him, but he nodded his understanding anyway and forked some more pasta.

The rich bacon flavor was the perfect hint to the creamy pasta.

He would've preferred a side of chicken or steak to get his protein in, but he couldn't complain about authentic Italian food.

Except it wasn't settling well in his upset by Alice's anger stomach.

He had no idea how to respond to Angry Alice.

The only time he'd seen her mad was that last awful fight they had.

Fifteen years of anger at him? Was she as bitter as her mom at this point?

Alice's chair scratched back, and she stood.

Robbie stood as well. Was she done eating? Her plate was more than half full, and there was a lot of extra food inside.

“You’re just going to sit and eat at a time like this?” she asked.

“Um ...” He splayed his hands. “What would you like me to do, Alice?”

“Nothing,” she hurled at him. “Exactly what you’ve done the past fifteen years regarding me. Nothing. You stormed off and never even tried to call or reach out, never attempted to fix things between us.”

Robbie rubbed at his neck. What was he supposed to do or say?

He had stormed off and never tried to reach out.

He’d thought she was furious with him. He’d asked her to come with him and all she could say was he’d never been supportive of her mom’s supposed illness, she had a scholarship, and Georgia Tech was a better school than the universities in Fort Moore.

In his eighteen-year-old mind, her mom’s manipulation of Alice had been strangling their relationship, and they’d been at an impasse. She had wanted to stay in Atlanta and pursue her architect dreams, as well as be there for her mom. He had wanted to become an Army Ranger and save the world.

Had Alice’s mom ever released her iron grip?

Probably not. And even though he was retired, he was committed to doing undercover jobs for Aiden that weren’t a good fit for a married man.

The impasse was still as large as it had been fifteen years ago.

He had no clue how to leap over it, or if Alice would even want him to.

“Argh!” she cried out when he said nothing. She threw her hands in the air and then spun. “I’ll storm away this time.”

With that, she rushed through the patio doors. He watched her through the glass. She stalked across the main area and disappeared up the stairs.

Robbie sank into the chair, staring despondently out at the canals and buildings.

What was he doing here? Keeping Alice safe was the standard answer he’d given himself, but any of the four capable men in the penthouse could keep her safe.

All he had done was anger her. What had happened to the sweet, fun, and angelic girl he’d left behind?

She’d become an angry and scarred woman.

All the people close to her had been murdered by a madman, and she was left with her mom, who was a bitter, controlling grump in his opinion.

If only he could help Alice heal emotionally, be there for her like he used to. But he was nowhere close to that eighteen-year-old boy any longer, and he had no idea what Alice wanted or needed to heal.

Robbie had tried to convince himself that he didn’t want any kind of relationship with Alice and he was only coming to help protect her. He knew now he’d lied to himself. He wanted every part of Alice—emotionally, physically, spiritually, intellectually—just as he had fifteen years ago.

And she wanted nothing to do with him.

He scrubbed at his beard and then rubbed at the back of his neck.

What was he doing?

Chapter

Four

Alice hated the way she felt as she stormed to her room and slammed herself inside.

She'd felt lonely for Robbie over the past fifteen years.

She'd felt fear and horror as those she loved were murdered over the last year.

But she hadn't felt angry like this since the day Robbie left her.

She didn't like it. Her mother would say it was proof that Robbie was all wrong for her, just as she'd always said. That made her even more angry.

Alice loved her mother. She tried to be there for her.

But she refused to let her mother control her life or who she associated with.

Her mother had always wanted her to marry their closest family friend, Preston Lavity.

Preston was polished, wealthy, and handsome.

He was warm and patient with Alice, but she'd seen him be as mean as her mother to his staff and employees, and he was far too pretentious for her.

Her mother had barely tolerated Jack, Natalie, and Ruby, and Alice had kept those relationships strong.

She gulped. Until her friends and boyfriend had been killed.

She'd been so lonely without Natalie and Ruby's friendship.

Jack had been a positive person and a successful lawyer.

He was courteous to her and a good conversationalist. She'd enjoyed dating him and they'd been progressing toward a serious relationship, but she couldn't say she'd loved him.

She'd never loved anyone like she'd loved Robbie.

She ignored the part of her that had been ecstatic to see and connect with Robbie again.

But Robbie ...

How could he never have tried to reach out to her?

Not a text, an email, a phone call? Yet she'd done the same.

It was hypocritical of her to be so furious with him.

Robbie had pursued her diligently when they first fell in love and maybe she had assumed he always would.

Even though his line about loving a challenge had frustrated her earlier, she'd also secretly loved him using that same line again.

Robbie knew what he wanted, and he went for it.

She'd loved when she had been what he wanted.

Alice paced the room, then went out on the patio and studied the variety of architecture on the buildings nearby.

She watched people go by on tiny sidewalks between buildings, or row or power by on small boats in the canal.

The water was a grayish-blue; she'd heard it was dirty.

She felt yucky inside. Should she apologize to Robbie, try to start fresh for these two weeks?

No. She was right there, where he'd left her, and he could have made a change at any point.

He was the one who'd never come for her, and their last conversation—or rather fight—had been awful.

He'd accused her mother of manipulating and controlling her and Alice of not having a backbone to stand up for herself and get away from the 'toxic relationship'.

Get away from her own ailing and difficult mother. What kind of monster did that? Her mother would have no one besides their housekeeper Emeline and Priscilla Lavity, Preston's mother and her lifelong friend. Priscilla was loyal and pleasant, but she was often away traveling with her husband.

Alice had been right to fight with Robbie and to feel all the anger, abandonment, and heartbreak.

Finally, she went inside and said an insincere prayer for help and to try to enjoy the experience of Venice and for Big Buddha to be captured and not kill anyone else.

Then she lay down and thought she was asleep, but suddenly she could feel him.

The huge, grotesque-looking buddha man closing in on her.

How such a monstrosity could move so quick never ceased to amaze her.

“Help,” she croaked, too quiet for anyone to hear. Then, louder, “Help.”

Finally, she shrieked, “Help! Please help!”

The door to her room banged open and Alice shot up in bed. The light from the hallway silhouetted Robbie, wearing only a pair of shorts.

“Help,” she whispered, putting a hand to her throat, instantly needing a different kind of help. How could she stay safe emotionally from the man she’d always loved looking like Adonis—large and fit and manly?

Robbie rushed to her side, settling onto the mattress, which squeaked under his weight, and wrapping his warm palms around her shoulders. “Alice. Are you all right?”

“A nightmare,” she admitted. “Just a nightmare.”

River appeared in the doorframe.

“She had a nightmare,” Robbie told the bodyguard, his bright blue eyes steady on her face.

His warm palms grounded her in reality and distracted her completely from the fear of moments before.

His crisp mint, bergamot, and ginger scent wafted over her.

“River, would you sweep the room and patio just in case? All these windows and patios are a security nightmare.”

“Of course, bro.” River turned the lights on in her suite and then hurried around, checking everywhere.

Alice almost contradicted that the windows and patios were a designer’s joy.

But she didn’t want to say anything, and she didn’t dare move and displace Robbie’s hands from her shoulders.

She craved his touch. She’d had little comfort or warm touches recently.

At Natalie’s funeral, Natalie’s family members and Alice’s church and work friends had given her hugs, which she had appreciated.

She hadn’t realized how starved for human touch she’d been since then.

Even more significant that it was Robbie’s touch.

She let her gaze trail over his upper body instead of watching River check nooks and crannies for an intruder they all knew wasn’t there. Only in her mind. She’d never seen the man, only imagined him .

Big Buddha had taken everything from her, including her joy in life and her peace of mind.

Nobody had any idea what he looked like.

The few glimpses from security cameras close to the scenes of death didn't correlate—different heights, builds, hair color, etc.

Some of the FBI agents wondered if there was more than one killer using the Big Buddha moniker or if Big Buddha only orchestrated the murders.

Robbie was big. The man was built like a tank, but he wasn't scary like Big Buddha.

With his muscles bulging, he represented a safety she'd longed for.

She noticed tattoos she'd never seen on his chest and bicep.

The bicep one looked like the Army Ranger symbol.

Engraved on his right pec muscle were entwined dog tags.

"All clear, sir," River stated.

"Appreciate it," Robbie said.

River nodded to them and walked out the door, closing it gently behind him but leaving the lights on.

Alice felt Robbie's gaze on her face. She met his blue eyes, drawn in by their brightness and intensity.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his warm palms still on her shoulders. It should have been awkward, but no touch was ever awkward with Robbie. Quite the opposite. Every touch was thrilling, and she never wanted it to end.

“The nightmares began after he killed Natalie.”

“I’m so sorry, Alice. I always liked Natalie. And Ruby.”

He didn’t offer any reassurances that he’d hunt the guy down and rip him apart or he’d never leave her side until he was caught, and she really could’ve used that.

But that wouldn’t be Robbie. He was good and honest to the core, but he’d never offer empty comfort.

If the police and FBI couldn’t find the murderer, she doubted even the relentless Robbie Perrine and his illustrious boss Aiden Porter could crack the case.

His large palms ran across her shoulders and down her back. She trembled from his touch. Every part of her wanted to sink into the muscles of his chest, cling to the muscles of his back, and never let him go.

But she was angry with him. And she wouldn’t put him at risk. The strong emotions of fear and anger helped her stay strong and not lean in.

“Tattoos and scars,” she murmured, touching the symbol on his left bicep.

He smiled at that, looking a little sheepish, which didn’t fit his tough security operative image. “Everybody says I look like Jason Momoa.”

“Hmm.” She could see the resemblance, but her Robbie was much more handsome. At least to her.

Her Robbie?

She was letting her defenses down, and she wasn’t ready to do that. She doubted

she'd ever be ready. It was terrifying to risk her heart again and horrifying to think of this strong man laid out in a casket.

Alice yanked away from his touch and scuttled off the bed, standing. Robbie gazed up at her, his blue eyes stunned by her sudden movement and possibly hurt that she'd moved away from his touch.

But he said nothing. He simply stood and let her appreciate all his manly glory. Even with that bush on his face and his too long curly hair, he looked enticing. "You'll be able to sleep now?"

"Yes, thank you," she lied. She rarely fell back asleep after the nightmare. She'd be exhausted tomorrow between that and the jet lag.

He nodded to her. "Goodnight."

Then he turned and strode out of the room, shutting the door behind him. He had a tattoo on his right shoulder blade as well. A flag with some words written on it she couldn't decipher.

Alice wanted to run after him, beg him to hold her close. She could sleep in Robbie's strong arms, after she kissed him thoroughly, examined each tattoo, and learned the significance of each one.

"Ugh." She groaned and shut off the lights.

A matter of hours in and already Robbie was making her long for him.

She'd longed for him for fifteen years, but with him right here, the emotions were bubbling to the surface. She had to pray and stay stronger than ever.

Robbie couldn't be Big Buddha's next victim, and her heart couldn't be Robbie's.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:26 am

Chapter

Five

The next morning, Robbie was already chafing at the lack of activity.

He'd had trouble falling asleep after seeing Alice vulnerable and beautiful in silky pajamas with her dark hair tumbling over her shoulders.

Worse, he'd touched her warm shoulders, been infused with her berries and cream scent, and she'd almost let her guard down for him.

He'd seen longing in her gaze before she'd scrambled off the bed and put her walls back up.

He'd awoken early and done the best workout he could with no weights or equipment. At least they'd be walking a lot today.

He met Alice down in the kitchen. Price was there but only said hello to them, grabbed a protein shake from the fridge, and eased back to wait for them to have breakfast. Price had been married when he was younger, and his wife had ditched him while he was deployed.

If there was anyone worse than Robbie at long-term romantic relationships, it was probably Price.

The angst hanging in the air between Robbie and Alice obviously made him

uncomfortable.

“What’s the plan today?” she asked brightly. She didn’t look as angry, but he didn’t love the forced cheerfulness either. His Alice was naturally cheerful.

His Alice? He wasn’t certain his Alice existed any longer .

“We get lost exploring the charm of Venice.” He smirked. “We’ll have lunch on the waterfront and there are a couple different boat tours set up for the afternoon.”

“Venice is definitely going to be charming to explore, but we both know getting lost isn’t possible. Your sense of direction is still uncanny, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am. We’ll walk the restlessness in our legs out trying to get lost, though.”

“Mm. I don’t know how I’ll keep up with those long legs or your fitness level.”

She looked him over, and he felt hot clear through. Was Alice flirting with him? His heart took flight.

“I can carry you when you get tired,” he offered.

Her eyes widened, and the air was suddenly charged between them. Far too often he’d swept her off her feet, carried her, and she’d always teased that no one made her soar like he did. Then she’d kiss him and he’d be soaring as well.

“Well then. What are our breakfast options?” She went prim and sounded more like her mom than his Alice.

His Alice. He needed to stop referring to her as that in his mind. What if the term slipped out? This new Alice might rip him a new one.

He helped her pull out breakfast options. There were a variety of delicious cheeses, sliced meats, and breads with Nutella and cheese spreads. There were fruits, muesli, nuts, sliced tomatoes, olives, boiled eggs, and a quiche that he heated up.

Robbie ate a lot as he was always hungry, liking the variety of unique foods.

He also didn't know what subject to broach with her, and it was easier to keep eating than to open his mouth.

He wanted to know everything she'd been doing for the past fifteen years.

He wanted to know her perspective on the murders and how she was dealing with the loss.

He wanted to know how close she'd been to this 'boyfriend', if they'd been progressing toward marriage or only casually dating.

He wanted to know if she ever thought about him.

None of those subjects were casual breakfast conversation, so he shoveled more food in.

Within half an hour, they were down on the street with Price and Merrick tailing them.

They'd agreed to take it slow and not lose their guards.

Would this Big Buddha follow her across the ocean?

The man had never threatened her, only killing those closest to her, except her mom, and claiming she'd only have him to love.

Robbie had seen the police reports. The only suspect they'd ever come up with was Preston Lavity, a close family friend who'd admitted he had a romantic interest in Alice, but they'd never dated.

Robbie would like to interview the pompous punk himself.

He'd met him several times with Alice and never thought highly of him.

He also darkly wondered if her mom could be the one killing off her friends and boyfriend.

As much as she'd despised Robbie, she might have been capable of murder if Robbie hadn't left.

He smirked to himself. A sickly older lady likely wasn't killing anyone. Still, he made a note in his mind to text Aiden's research team and see if Marianne Marshall paid out unexplainable amounts of money close to the timetable of the deaths or had any questionable associations.

They started walking slowly through narrow alleyways between brick and stone buildings, coming out on ribbons of bluish-gray water and bridges every so often.

The sky above them was a bright blue, but they were shaded from the sun's heat by the buildings.

He was surprised how much garbage he saw on the narrow streets of such a well-known tourist spot and no garbage cans available to clean it up.

The scenery and walk were intriguing. He didn't feel as claustrophobic as he feared he would. For the most part, they were alone on these back alleyways. No security issues that he could see, besides how easily a sniper could lean out of a window or

glide by on a boat.

Occasionally they ran into other people, found a strip of stores, saw a gondola being slowly pushed through the water with the typical long pole or a small speed boat puttering past.

Many windows were open and flower boxes were plentiful. Every time they reached a canal and bridge crossing, Alice delicately wrinkled her nose. The rotten fish, garbage, and mold scents were strong.

At first she didn't say much, but as they progressed through street after street she started commenting on an arch, a trellis, a vault, the building design, stonework, the colorful marble, or even an intriguing flower arrangement.

He liked hearing her descriptions and gaining insight into the design and some of the history of different arches or 'vaults'.

He finally asked what a vault was, and she shared insight about the architectural feature of a 'ribbed vault', which was a skeleton of arched ribs to support a vaulted ceiling or roof.

The ribs, typically formed from stone, created a framework over which the vaulting surface was then built.

"It's typical of Gothic architecture," she explained.

"And you're a fan of Gothic architecture."

"You remembered."

He wanted to tell her once again that he'd forgotten nothing about her, but it hadn't

gone so well last night.

They kept walking through the fascinating streets and over canals and came upon the busier Grand Canal, which progressed to the Rialto Bridge.

It was crowded but impressive. Minutes later, they approached Piazza San Marco or what he would call the city square, a huge area circled with fancy and ancient buildings except on the ocean side.

He moved closer to Alice and checked for dangers.

Price and Merrick were within his line of sight, and each nodded, reassuring him that all was well.

“I can’t wait to tour Doge’s Palace and St. Mark’s Basilica.

” Alice shaded her eyes with her hand as she gazed up at the iconic church with its gold domes and too many statues to count.

He liked the massive bronze horses and imagined they had military significance.

“The basilica is an architecture marvel,” she told him. “Often called the church of gold.”

“We do both of those tours tomorrow.”

She clapped her hands together, looking delighted.

Robbie rubbed at the sudden stitch in his chest. She used to clap her hands together like that all the time.

They wandered the square for a while. He watched children playing in the fountain and adults staring up at the wonder of the church and the palace.

They walked out to the ocean and the docks and watched the busy water traffic heading in every direction on the ocean, around the island, or into the Grand Canal .

Turning, they walked back through the plaza and then wandered down a wide side street. The women's clothing inside the shop windows looked nice, classy, and probably high dollar. The men's clothing looked far too preppy for him.

"There's plenty of time to shop if you'd like," he said.

"I thought you remembered everything about me," she shot at him, but there was a smile on her lips.

He laughed, and she joined him. It was nice to laugh instead of worry she was going to cuss him again.

"That's right. Your mom buys you more clothing and jewelry than you'd ever wear and you hate to waste time shopping."

The laughter disappeared at him mentioning her mom, the thorn that had become a wedge and then a brick wall. She rubbed at a diamond necklace around her throat, the expensive-looking ruby on her finger glinting in the sunlight.

"We both know that you don't want to shop," she said, thankfully still keeping up the tease.

He gestured to a store window. "Can you even imagine me wearing that?" It was a pale yellow suit with tight pants, a fitted jacket, a blue dress shirt, and a pink and yellow swirled tie. "I'd look like the Beast when he tries to dress up to impress

Belle.”

She started laughing again. They’d watched the cartoon Beauty and the Beast together. He’d tried to claim he was the Beast, but she’d said he was too sweet to be beastly.

Robbie was the furthest thing from ‘sweet’.

Except with her. That had made them laugh years ago.

He was laughing now, but he wished they could somehow get back to the comfort and love they once knew.

But that was a pipe dream. He had to focus on her safety.

He looked around. Nothing was amiss, and Price and Merrick weren’t far off in the crowd.

“Lunch?” she asked. “I’m starving from all this walking.”

Robbie smiled at that. It wasn’t nearly enough activity for him, but he could always eat. “Sounds great.”

They found an open table at one of the dozens of quaint Italian cafés right on the Grand Canal with views of the famed Rialto Bridge. Their outdoor table was shaded by a trellis with flowers growing out of it.

“Oh, this is delightful,” she exclaimed, clapping her hands together and gifting him with her beautiful and genuine smile.

Robbie missed her. It hit him in that moment how much he’d been missing out on.

For fifteen years. He had six close friends from middle school on up, the Squadron 7, and he had his Army Ranger unit buddies. Chase Tenley was the common denominator from both groups and his closest friend.

He and Chase had been forced into early retirement from the Rangers because of an op gone very wrong.

As in a U.S. Senator dying because they made the choice to save three Syrian mothers and their seven children kind of wrong.

He and Chase were bonded in a lot of ways, but nobody could make him smile or touch his heart like Alice did.

He hadn't wanted to leave the Rangers. Even though he'd been busy and fulfilled in his work with Aiden Porter's teams and his family was loving and welcoming any time he went home, he still felt displaced at times.

At this moment, he felt at home, comfortable and excited about the future like he hadn't been in years. From Alice smiling genuinely at him and saying the restaurant was 'delightful'.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. He couldn't be letting down his guard that easily. Too much pain would be in store when he had to leave her again. If only he could step up to the 'challenge' of winning Alice's heart, but it was a pipe dream to think he and Alice had a chance.

It wasn't just the smile, the 'delightful' restaurant comment, and the sparkle in her dark eyes.

It was being near Alice again. It was listening to her share about architecture and design all morning.

It was touching her shoulders last night, smelling berries and cream, and seeing her vulnerable and scared, knowing deep inside he was the man built to protect her, to make her laugh, to hold her close.

It was Alice's tender nature that peeked through the walls she'd put up to shelter her heart from him.

It was all things Alice.

Robbie escorted her to a table with his hand on her lower back. A thrill went through him at the simple touch of his palm and fingers covering the curve of her lower back and her hip. Alice was what some would call 'curvy'. He called it mesmerizing and mind-clouding.

She smiled up at him as he helped her settle into her chair. Her dark eyes were warm, her lips soft.

What if half a day spent together had softened her to him? Robbie's heart beat faster at the prospect. By tonight, he could be holding her close and kissing her. He'd keep her safe, but they'd have a two-week romantic vacation together.

Robbie settled into his chair and thanked the ma'tre d' as he handed them menus.

His heart settled as well. He wasn't going to have some romantic getaway with Alice, then ditch her again.

That wasn't fair to her, no matter how he longed for the bond they once shared and for her in his heart and his arms.

Studying the menu, he vowed to be more immune to her charms.

He'd fought in ops throughout the world that most people thought were only happening on movie screens. He'd survived, thrived, and been proclaimed one of the 'toughest and most versatile soldiers' by teammates and superiors.

But he didn't know if he was strong enough to stay away from Alice.

Chapter

Six

Alice savored her caprese salad for lunch.

The creamy buffalo mozzarella and tangy balsamic vinegar were a step above any variation of the salad she'd eaten in the states.

She had a bite of Robbie's wood-fired pizza, a specialty Napoletana loaded with meat, which the waiter explained wasn't typical of their pizzas.

Thankfully, the waiter spoke English and the food was as iconic as the view.

Robbie was happy to find the meat pizza on the menu. He ordered a side of Romano chicken to 'get full and get enough protein'.

Their guards sat at a table close by, eating their own lunch. The two had been working to be inconspicuous all day, blending in with the crowd in T-shirts and slacks and sunglasses as well as two large men could. They were a reminder that danger and Big Buddha might not be far away.

"You have some cheese ..." She gestured to the side of his mouth where a bit of cheese was trapped in his beard. Though his beard and hair were thick, he kept them clean and presentable.

"Thanks." He grabbed at his napkin and wiped at it. "Better?"

“No.” She hid a smile. Reaching over, she plucked the cheese from his beard with two fingers. The side of her thumb brushed his mouth. She startled and yanked in a breath as his blue gaze intensified on her face. One simple touch and she longed to touch him more.

“Thank you,” he said in a husky tone. Was he thanking her for getting the food out of his beard or for touching his mouth? She wanted to touch his mouth with a lot more than the side of her thumb.

“You and Chase and your ‘brotein’,” she teased to lighten the moment, pulling her hand back and wiping the cheese on her napkin.

He flashed her a grin amidst that thick beard, his blue eyes lighting up. “A burly man needs his brotein.”

Alice laughed along with him. She felt light and airy in this fabulous city teeming with architecture and history. She loved the uniqueness of the canals, bridges, and narrow alleys shooting off every which direction. Without Robbie, she would’ve been hopelessly lost.

Without Robbie. She sneaked a peek at him.

He’d almost devoured his large pizza, and the chicken was long gone.

He had decent manners, didn’t chomp with his mouth open, but he was a large man who consumed a lot of food.

It didn’t bother her. She liked how massive he was and that he was a hundred percent man.

That yellow suit in the boutique’s window would’ve been hilarious on Robbie but

also enticing.

They'd laughed so hard because they both knew he wouldn't be caught dead in something like that.

Preston would not only wear a suit like that, but he'd buy it without a glance at the price tag.

He was 'preppy'. Preston was handsome and suave, but Robbie was the most appealing man she'd ever known.

Her mother had called Robbie 'an uncouth ogre' and worse.

Alice could only imagine what her mother would say about the beard and long hair.

She had always believed Robbie was Alice's way to 'rebel'.

Alice hated that. She wasn't rebellious, and Robbie was a catch, not some scuzzy guy who would ruin her life.

If he had stayed with her, they could've built an incredible life together. Yet she would've felt guilty for forcing him to stay, and guilty for going with him. It was a conundrum she'd never been able to solve. Even now.

Those memories pulled her lips into a frown. She picked at the rest of her salad, no longer hungry, though the combination of buffalo mozzarella, capellini tomatoes, fresh basil, olive oil, and balsamic vinegar dressing was delicious.

"Are you going to eat that?" Robbie asked as she twirled her fork through the balsamic covering her plate.

“No.” She smiled and pushed it toward him. “The mozzarella has to have some protein in it.”

“I think about fifteen grams.”

She smiled that he knew that. He’d always been into fitness and nutrition.

She tried to eat in moderation and be active, but counting carbs or hitting the gym had never been her style.

Robbie had always told her that her curvy body was ‘the best shape of any woman around’.

She was confident and didn’t let it bother her that she wasn’t thin, but she missed Robbie looking at her and telling her that she was perfect in his eyes.

He polished off her caprese salad and the rest of the focaccia bread.

They waited and waited for the bill. She could tell Robbie was chafing, but she feasted on the latticework and arches of the connected and colorful homes across the waterway.

She also liked watching people walk by on the wide sidewalk or boats cruise by on the Grand Canal.

It was sweet to see couples snuggling as a gondolier rowed them slowly past and intriguing when a police boat went by with the unique European whir-whir sound.

The police boat and a larger tour boat rocked a gondola with their waves and the couple almost tipped into the water.

Their surprise and then laughter made her smile.

She looked to Robbie, but he was frowning at the crowd on the nearby Rialto Bridge.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

His blue eyes darted to her. “All seems well.” He tilted his chin to their protectors.

“I didn’t realize you were focused on security.” She shivered, almost forgetting the danger and death. She felt a world away in this idyllic spot with the sun sparkling off the water, surrounded by architecture and history, with Robbie by her side.

“Apologies.” He gave her a chagrined smile and rubbed at the back of his neck like he used to always do. “The crowds are a concern, and I don’t like to sit for too long.”

“I remember,” she murmured.

Their gazes caught and held. His blue eyes held a longing that made her stomach give a happy leap.

There were many memories, and all of them but their last fight and the way her mother had loathed him were good. Could the pain of fifteen years be overridden? The memories of being alone and yearning for him weren’t good.

At that moment, the waiter came and presented the bill, thanking them and asking if they wanted wine or coffee to linger with the view. They declined.

As soon as Robbie paid, he stood and hurried to get her chair.

“Thank you,” she murmured. Interesting that her mother could call this man uncouth when he was as gentlemanly as any man she’d dated. He always treated Alice with

respect and kindness.

“I know you declined wine or coffee, but ... gelato?” He pumped his thick brows as they passed a refrigerator case containing a spread of frozen flavors a couple doors down from the restaurant.

“Yes, please.” She clapped her hands together, and that brought a twinkle to his blue eyes.

They sauntered over to the counter, a variety of colors displayed. She chose a scoop of limoncello on a sugar cone. Robbie asked for three scoops of Biscoff, Kinder, and Nutella in a waffle cone.

“Your flavor choices are like a teenage boy,” she teased as the girl handed over their ice cream and Robbie paid.

He grinned, obvious even through his beard. “I still love all the same flavors I loved at eighteen.” He gave her a meaningful look.

Her cheeks flared red, and she focused on licking her tart lemon flavored treat. It was refreshing and creamier than ice cream at home.

They waited for their guards to grab their own gelato, then walked slowly over the crowded and famed Ponte de Rialto or Rialto Bridge and along the wider streets to the main square, Piazza San Marco.

“I think we should have gelato after every meal,” he declared. “You have to admit it’s infinitely better than at home.”

“I’ll admit this is the best gelato I’ve ever tasted, but we can’t have it after every meal.”

“Why not? ”

“If we do, I’ll gain twenty pounds in two weeks.”

“Nah.” He shook his head and glanced at her. “We’ll be moving a lot.”

“Spoken like a man who could gain twenty pounds and no one would notice.”

He shrugged. “You could gain fifty pounds and everyone would notice because you’d still have the best shape of any woman around.”

Alice’s eyes widened at him repeating the phrase he used to say. “You like my shape?” She shouldn’t have continued to ‘fish for a compliment’ as Natalie used to tease about, but she wanted to hear from Robbie that he was attracted to her.

“I love your shape,” Robbie corrected. He looked her over, and heat filled her chest and cheeks. “I always have.”

A large tourist group pressed against them and broke the moment. They had to weave through people in the busy square. Robbie shifted his gelato to his left hand and wrapped his right hand around hers, guiding her. The contact felt significant and thrilling, especially after his comments.

They made it to the southern end of the island and the docks.

She finished her gelato as Robbie followed directions to a ramp that had a large white boat tied off.

It looked to be able to accommodate fifty tourists, but they and their guards were the only ones on the tour today.

A smiling young man named Geraldo was their tour guide.

Their guards took up stations in the front and the back of the boat.

They started the tour circling the west end of the island, then coming around to the north and entering the Grand Canal.

They weaved through the interior of the island, passing many boats, most bursting with tourists snapping photos on their phones.

Alice wished she had her own phone to take photos.

Geraldo pointed out all manner of buildings, points of interests, history of Venice, and hotels or houses famous people had stayed in or been spotted near.

He was delightful, and Alice was almost distracted from being so near Robbie.

Almost, but not quite, as Robbie's arm or hand brushed hers or his huge form overshadowed her.

She'd always been confident in her own skin, but she wasn't used to feeling small at five-ten.

Robbie made her feel feminine and attractive, and she knew he did love her shape.

Rialto Bridge was teeming with tourists as they glided under it. The boat slowed and idled close to the bridge and Geraldo asked, "Photos of my lovely couple?" He made a camera gesture with his fingers up by his eye, clicking as if they were taking a photo on an old school camera.

"Oh. I have no phone," she said. It was weird to not have a phone and not have any

work responsibilities, but she hadn't thought much about it today.

Robbie pulled his phone out, opened the screen, and handed it over to Geraldo. The man gestured to them. "Get closer, beautiful lovebirds."

Robbie wrapped his arm around her and pulled her in to his side.

Alice's mouth went dry, her body heated up, and her heart thumped harder.

It was natural to wrap her arms around his lower back and waist and cuddle into him.

He was huge, firm, warm, smelled delicious, and was the most enticing man to touch and be touched by.

She'd always felt like Robbie was a warrior of olden days and like she was more important than a queen to him.

Geraldo snapped multiple angles and then handed the phone back.

Robbie released her to take the phone and slide it into his pocket.

She felt the loss of his touch clear through.

She grasped the railing and focused on the gorgeous stonework and arches of the bridge so she wouldn't inadvertently reach out for him.

They motored back to their starting position. Robbie tipped Geraldo and they both thanked him.

"What next?" she asked.

“I think you’ll like it.” He smiled and walked her over to another dock that was teeming with the swan-like gondolas.

She clapped her hands together. “Oh, yes please.”

Merrick conferred with three men she assumed were their gondoliers, and then she and Robbie slid into one gondola and Merrick and Price each got in their own gondola.

Merrick’s gondolier led the way. She and Robbie sat side by side in the middle of the long, thin boat while their gondolier was in the back, preparing to maneuver them through the water with a thick wooden pole.

She could hardly wait for their gondola ride; it looked romantic and perfectly Venice.

They pushed away from the dock. At the same time, three tour boats motored out of the docks, quickly gaining speed as they headed for the exterior of the island.

The waves rocked their small craft. Alice gasped and leaned into Robbie.

He wrapped her up tight and secured her against his side. “It’s all right. It’s safe,” he murmured into her forehead.

Alice cuddled into him, appreciative of his strength and reassurance. His unique mint, bergamot, and ginger scent flooded her senses.

The ride didn’t get less hazardous. The guide pushed their way into the Grand Canal with his long pole, explaining the water wasn’t deep so he could reach.

The Grand Canal was busy, full of large boats similar to their recent boat tour and what they’d seen on the canal during lunch.

The gondola rocked violently as they maneuvered through traffic.

Their guide was confident and kept them moving forward and not capsizing like Alice feared.

Finally they turned into a smaller canal, a side street.

“Now i meie amici , you relax,” the gondolier advised in a heavy accent. “Quiet waters.”

“Oh, thank heavens,” Alice said.

He was right. They went through narrow canals, under bridges, and past nearly deserted side streets, some of them likely the streets they’d traversed this morning.

She couldn’t be certain, as many of the buildings had similar architecture, colors, and geraniums and petunias flowing out of window boxes.

The view and the ride were intriguing. She enjoyed the experience. Especially being pressed close to Robbie, feeling the brush of his soft beard or warm breath against the side of her face or neck, the strength in his arms and chest as he held her close.

Could she get used to that beard? Could she get used to this unfamiliar and thrilling Robbie? Could they have a second chance?

A second chance wasn’t smart for her heart and could mean mortal peril to Robbie. She needed to straighten away from him so Big Buddha wouldn’t somehow find out she was falling for him again .

No. She wasn’t falling for him again, even though Robbie was nearly impossible to resist. She’d be strong.

After the gondola ride.

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Chapter

Seven

Robbie enjoyed the gondola ride. With Alice in his arms, and not angry at him, he could enjoy anything. He savored the sweet smell of raspberries and cream and her silky hair brushing his cheek and nose.

He searched the alleys, bridges, and walkways but saw nothing out of place besides some tourists noticing them and staring, probably wondering if they were celebrities with their obvious bodyguards in front of and behind them. Price and Merrick diligently kept watch.

The ride was over an hour, and every moment was filled with all things Alice—laughing when he said anything even half funny, cuddling into him, looking up at him with those big dark eyes he could get lost in.

The experience finished far too quickly. Their guide pushed through the busy Grand Canal and to the docks, and Robbie helped Alice back onto the wooden-planked dock.

“We made it,” she said, smiling sweetly at him.

He palmed the gondolier some money. “Our guide was an expert.”

“Ciao .” The man grasped his hand and then blew Alice a kiss.

They waited for Price and Merrick, then made their way back through the tangle of the main square. Robbie reached for Alice's hand, but she twisted and pointed, pulling her hand away.

"Do you see that line of people? I think we can ride up the tower and get a bird's-eye view of the city."

Robbie frowned. Why would she snuggle into him for the gondola ride but avoid his hand now? "The tower's on the schedule for tomorrow."

"Oh, good." She gave him a smile that lacked the power of her earlier ones, and she didn't clap her hands in delight as she often did. What had happened?

She walked off, and he kept pace with her. They made it through the busier tourist spots and onto a quieter side street.

"You'd better point out the way now," she said. "I'd get us hopelessly lost."

The sun was close to setting. From a security standpoint, he didn't want to be out past dark.

From a man longing for the love of his life to cuddle in close to him, he wouldn't mind getting lost on these side paths and walking slowly arm in arm through the streets lit only by streetlamps.

This was where she'd always dreamed of going on a honeymoon.

If only he could make those dreams come true.

"All right," was all he said.

“Anything else on the schedule today?”

“Madelyne has us scheduled for a fancy dinner at Il Rodetto. It’s close to our place. Do you want to change into a fancy dress? Or we can walk straight there and be a little early.” The Alice he remembered would want to put on a beautiful dress.

She clapped her hands together and beamed. “We definitely need to get all dressed up.”

Robbie would wear whatever she asked if she continued to beam at him like that. “Should we buy me the yellow suit on the way back?” he asked as they sauntered over a bridge.

“Oh, yes please.” She laughed. “Honestly, no. I don’t have my phone, so I can’t take pictures and send them to Chase.”

He laughed, but then it hit him. “Wait a minute. Do you and Chase keep in touch? ”

“No. I was teasing.” She looked askance at him. “You think any of your friends would reach out to me without us being together?”

He mulled that over and knew they wouldn’t.

When Brandon had set up this crazy two-week adventure, Robbie had been terrified of being set up with Alice and then furious when he found out that she was in danger and no one had told him about it.

Brandon had teased that he’d set Alice up with Emmett if Robbie didn’t want to partner with her.

He’d threatened to remove Emmett’s pointer fingers.

Emmett had promised he'd only looked twice at Alice, never a third time, out of respect for Robbie.

Everybody else in the room had smiled at that, but he knew his friends were loyal to him and he needed them in his corner.

If only he could call Chase and tell him about all the conflicting feelings Alice was stirring in him.

All of his friends were doing similar adventures simultaneously.

How were they doing? What were their counterparts like?

He'd promised Brandon and Madelyne not to reach out to any of Squadron 7 except Brandon or Rockwell these two weeks.

Even with his closest friend Chase, he didn't get into emotional stuff and doubted he'd tell his friend more than that he was a mess.

"Robbie?"

"Apologies," he said. "I know they wouldn't keep in touch with you. They're loyal to me."

She nodded, but then she looked crestfallen.

They walked quietly for a few moments and finally he got brave enough to ask, "Are you all right?"

She shrugged. "My best friends are dead. It's rough."

He reached for her hand then, and she didn't resist as he threaded their fingers together and hoped his touch brought some comfort.

"I lost a friend on a mission. Trace Edgely." He smiled thinking of the jokester Trace.

He'd reminded Robbie and Chase of their friend Parker, who was always messing around.

He lost his smile, thinking of the sniper's fire and the bullet that had gone straight through Trace's neck.

"I understand how rough it is. I'm sorry for your loss. "

"Thank you." She peered up at him as they plodded along, their steps slowing even further. "I'm sorry for yours."

"Appreciate it. "

Neither of them said anything else, but there was a camaraderie between them. They made it back to the condo half an hour later and separated to change and get ready for dinner.

Robbie quickly dressed in a button-down pale blue shirt and black slacks. He tried to tame his hair and beard with some water. It didn't really help. He considered tying the hair back out of his face but feared it would look cheesy. Should he shave the beard and find a way to cut his hair?

He studied himself in the mirror and then shook his head.

There was no reason to do either. Alice's reservations with him didn't seem to have anything to do with his long hair or the beard.

They were deeply buried and festering resentments from years of pain and no contact.

She'd acted like she wished he would've reached out, but then she'd blocked his number.

Their relationship now was a riddle he had no answer for.

He hurried out of his suite, down the stairs, and into the main area. Curtis was in the kitchen, fixing himself something to eat.

"How was the day?" the guard asked.

"Great. Beautiful city, and the waterways were unique. Alice loved the architecture. Have you been here before?"

"No. River and I walked around for a bit. We'll be with you tomorrow for all the tours."

"Sounds good."

Curtis lifted a hand and turned back to the microwave.

Robbie paced, looking out at the lights of Venice as he waited for Alice. Curtis finished eating and headed back up the stairs.

A few minutes later, he heard movement on the stairs and his stomach flipped over. He hurried to the bottom of the stairs, anxious to see ...

Price strode down.

"Oh." Robbie backed away.

“Waiting for someone?” Price’s dark eyes twinkled at him.

“Not you, that’s for sure.”

Price chuckled.

A door opened and closed, and they both turned. Alice appeared at the top of the stairs and paused, as if she knew Robbie needed to appreciate this view.

The breath was walloped out of him as he stared with wide eyes and a slackened jaw. Alice’s dress was V-neck, had short sleeves, and fell to the floor. It was white with little flowers on it, a soft material that clung to her curves in the most alluring way and set off her dark coloring.

“Breathe, man,” Price murmured, slapping him on the back.

Robbie gasped in a breath and straightened to his full height, extending his hand to her as if he were some prince waiting for his princess.

Price chuckled and turned, striding into the kitchen to give them some space.

Alice glided down the stairs, her steps slow and measured, her gaze focused on him. She placed her hand in his and all was right in the world. Robbie knew he should say something, but he was still having trouble breathing.

“You’re exquisite,” he murmured in a gravelly voice.

“Thank you.” She beamed at him. “You ... your clothes fit your build nicely.”

Robbie heard a low chuckle from the kitchen.

He didn't waste the time to shoot Price a dirty look.

He stroked his beard with his free hand.

"You don't like the hairy wildebeest look?

" He acted injured, but he recognized he looked wild with all the hair.

It was intimidating to many people, but it helped him fit in with some of the scuzziest men on the planet, which was the purpose.

"No, I don't. The Aquaman look isn't my favorite," she admitted, still smiling. "I can't even imagine how I'd kiss you with all that hair ..." Her voice trailed off, and she looked shocked at her own words.

"Kiss me?" he managed, his imagination spinning back to all the kisses they'd shared in years past. Was she willing to kiss him? That would change everything. He'd go shave this very moment.

"Oh, look at the time. We'd better get to our appointment ... dinner."

Robbie studied her, waiting for her to admit she would kiss him. She was the one who'd brought it up .

"Price?" she called, stepping around Robbie. "Are you accompanying us to dinner?" Her voice was high and tight, and she sounded too formal for his Alice.

"Yes, ma'am. Let me just grab Merrick."

Price pumped past them and up the stairs.

Robbie was left staring at Alice, but she wouldn't look at him. She wasn't his Alice anymore, and there wasn't the easy familiarity and trust between them any longer.

It would be impossible to get back there.

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Chapter

Eight

Alice had marveled at their first day in Venice wandering the streets and bridges, their boat rides, and the elaborate dinner that unfortunately wasn't as comfortable and carefree as lunch with Robbie had been.

She was trying to remind herself to keep her distance.

Robbie seemed to be struggling with something as well.

What if Robbie was hoping to make her fall in love with him so he could earn a million dollars from Brandon?

Dang Brandon. That money tainted the memory of Robbie staring at her as if he couldn't catch a breath when she'd appeared at the top of the stairs in that gorgeous dress, one of a dozen Madelyne had left for her.

In that moment, he'd looked at her like he used to, as if she was the most breathtaking woman in the world.

Could the loyal, full of integrity Robbie that she'd once known be tricking her to fall in love for a million dollars and then bail at the first speed bump in the road?

She didn't think Robbie would be here for money, but she didn't trust him to stay.

She wasn't ready to delve into their past, their breakup, and the fifteen years apart.

Robbie didn't seem to be pushing any of those subjects either.

On their second day, they were joined by a professional tour guide, Alejandra.

They started with an insider's tour through Doge's Palace.

The palace was absolutely splendid, a masterpiece of Gothic architecture.

Alejandra explained the layers of building elements and ornamentation.

The palace was originally built in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

There had been significant Renaissance and Mannerist additions throughout the years.

The interior and all the artwork were splendid.

Every detail Alice viewed and insight shared by Alejandra fascinated her.

She'd studied the palace, but being here made it come alive. She didn't want to leave.

After another delicious Italian lunch on the Grand Canal, Alejandra was waiting to take them to St. Mark's Basilica and St. Mark's Terrace.

The basilica was an architectural marvel.

Alejandra explained the Catholic church's design was a captivating mix of Byzantine, Gothic, and Renaissance elements, showcasing Venice's historical connections to both the East and West. The layout, resembling a Greek cross, was topped by five

grand domes, adding to its grandeur and symbolic significance.

The interior features were intricate mosaics, marble floors, and lavish décor.

It was all an incredible and visually stunning experience.

Alice could've spent several days there, checking out each domed ceiling and the story behind each mosaic tile arrangement.

Robbie's favorite part was the massive bronze horses.

Alejandra explained the horses were taken from Constantinople by the Venetians when they sacked the city.

They symbolized Venetian dominance and victory.

Alice appreciated the bronze sculptures, but they were far from her favorite part.

The tour unfortunately came to an end. They thanked and tipped Alejandra and walked out onto the square. They walked over to the St. Mark's Bell Tower, paid for tickets, and waited in line to ride to the top.

Robbie had been friendly and relaxed all day, but there was definitely a wall between them.

She'd erected the barrier to protect her heart again.

She wasn't certain why Robbie seemed cautious around her.

Maybe he simply didn't know how to act with their history and current circumstances.

They hadn't talked about Big Buddha or the risk to Robbie if the man found them.

She knew Robbie was tougher than anyone, but even muscle and skill couldn't stop a bullet.

Finally, it was their turn to tour the tower.

They squished into the crowded elevator and rode to the top.

Walking out onto the promenade, Alice sighed at the picturesque view.

She wandered from one spot to the next, exclaiming over the different buildings and waterways and even the boats.

The Grand Canal looked almost as chaotic from up here as it had down in the midst of those waves.

Robbie stayed close to her side and their guards weren't far off.

After they'd walked around the tower several times, they rode back down and walked to a nearby gelato stand.

They meandered back through the square as she licked her mango gelato, wondering how the Italians made their gelato creamy, sweet, and tart at the same time.

Robbie made short work of a three-scoop chocolate waffle cone.

Robbie eased in close to her and murmured, "There's a guy at our six o'clock. I saw him outside the basilica before our tour, and he was in our group at the tower."

She glanced around but couldn't see anyone who stood out. She looked back at

Robbie. He was smirking at her.

“What? Oh. Am I not supposed to look and make it obvious?”

“Something like that. I’m going to text Curtis and Price to fall back and give us some space. Let’s get off onto one of the side streets. If he follows, I’ll confront him and they’ll box him in.”

Her heart beat high and fast. “But what if he shoots you before Curtis and Price can get there?”

He grinned at her. “I’m too tough for a bullet to hurt me.”

She scowled. “Please don’t tease like that. Big Buddha shot Jack.”

The mirth disappeared. “I’m sorry.”

She nodded, clasping her hand to her neck and trying to calm down.

“I’ll keep you safe,” he said.

“It’s not me I’m worried about.”

His blue eyes were understanding. “Can we chat about this tonight?”

“There’s nothing to chat about,” she said. She didn’t want to share her feelings about everyone close to her being murdered. The way he’d said ‘chat about’ felt more like they were going to talk about their relationship, or lack thereof .

“I think there is.” He squeezed her hand before releasing it. “You’re worried about me.”

She gasped. “It doesn’t mean ... Oh my goodness, just do your security spy thing and don’t die, all right?”

“All right.” He gave her a meaningful look, then pulled out his phone. Her stomach couldn’t handle any more ice cream, but she couldn’t see a garbage can, so she held it as it dripped over her hand in the warm evening air.

They turned down a side street and her pulse took off. The buildings’ walls and balconies rose on each side of them. If the man followed them, he’d be trapped in here with them. Which would be fine, as long as he wasn’t carrying a gun.

She looked over her shoulder and saw a solitary man walk into the alley behind them, maybe twenty feet away.

He wasn’t as tall as her five-ten, and he looked wiry and like a rat with longish dark hair and piercing dark eyes.

His gaze caught hers, and he smirked. Then he yanked out a gun and pointed it at Robbie’s back.

Before she could even gasp a warning, Robbie pivoted and tugged her behind him. He sheltered her completely with his larger frame as he faced the man. She felt safe, protected by the wall of his huge stature, and at the same time terrified of him getting shot.

“He has a g-gun,” she whispered. Had he been sent by Big Buddha, or was he Big Buddha and the name was ironic, not truthful?

“Hand over your money and la donna’s jewelry,” the man said, his voice pitching up and down as if he were nervous. His accent was slight. “No reason to hurt anyone.”

“You can’t carry a firearm in Italy, unless you’re active police or military,” Robbie said calmly.

“Don’t tell me what I can do. Hand over the money.”

Alice tried to peek around, but Robbie held her fast. How was he going to stay safe against a bullet?

They should hand everything over. She was wearing a diamond necklace, earrings, and two expensive rings her mother had gifted her.

She liked to wear them, but they could be replaced. Robbie couldn’t.

Please, Lord , she begged. Please don’t let him die too.

“Big Buddha?” Robbie asked .

“What?”

“Are you Big Buddha?”

“Do I look like a Big Buddha to you?”

Suddenly, the man yelped in surprise. Alice was finally able to look around Robbie’s side. Price and Merrick were closing in behind the man.

He tucked the gun into a pocket and ran at Robbie and Alice.

“Stop,” Price commanded from behind him, his own pistol out as he approached.

The man leaped and grabbed a balcony. He easily flung himself up over the railing,

then ran several steps and vaulted to the next balcony. It was an impressive athletic feat.

Robbie spun and ushered her back toward their bodyguards, who were rushing toward them. “Price. Merrick. Call the police. Get Alice back to the condo.”

Then he took off at a sprint.

Alice watched him disappear, following the man who was springing from balcony to balcony.

Price and Merrick closed in on her. Tears sprang to her eyes. Robbie should let that man go. If he caught him and the man shot Robbie...

How would she live with herself for putting him in danger?

Chapter

Nine

Robbie followed the assailant on ground level as the wiry man leaped from balcony to balcony. The dude was quick, but Robbie could easily keep up. What was the guy's plan? Why hadn't he shot at him earlier? Because of Price and Merrick closing in?

Price was one of the most impressive men he'd ever worked with. He and Merrick would get Alice to safety so Robbie could focus on capturing their would-be attacker. Could he have a connection to Big Buddha? He'd acted clueless and irritated by the question.

The man reached a waterway. He flipped over the balcony's edge, swung from the railing, and landed on the bridge, taking off at a sprint. Robbie pushed himself to keep up.

A couple of policemen appeared behind Robbie and hollered, " Fermati !" He didn't halt and neither did the assailant. Robbie refused to lose him.

They scrambled down one narrow street after another, flying over bridges and dodging around couples out for an evening stroll. The policemen fell off. No backup. Robbie ran faster. He couldn't let the man escape.

The back streets were fairly quiet, and the man didn't pull out his gun again or try to confront Robbie. He just ran and ran and ran .

Robbie thought he was in great shape. Not quite the level he'd been at as a Ranger, but he worked out hard every day—lifting weights, running, biking, and he even forced himself to do yoga to help his flexibility and injury prevention.

This small dude was giving him a run for his fitness level.

Robbie's legs were tiring, and his breath came in fast pants.

They burst out onto a busier street. The assailant paused and then scurried around a group of tourists. Robbie saw a police officer. The man was searching the crowd, possibly searching for them.

“Pistola ,” Robbie yelled, pointing at the assailant. “Pistola. Penale !”

The policeman swung their way. The runner dodged away from the officer. Several in the crowd cried out in surprise.

Robbie took advantage and tackled him onto the stone pavers. The man screeched and tried to scrabble away. Robbie kept him pinned. Women screamed and people backed away.

“Polizia ,” the officer said as he closed in on the two of them, Berretta 9mm drawn.

Robbie sprang to his feet, grasping the man's arm tightly and yanking him up.

“This man tried to rob my girlfriend and me.” Robbie didn't know enough Italian to explain in their language.

He knew Spanish, Portuguese, and French.

Some words were similar, but not near enough. “He has a pistola in his pocket.”

“Mani in alto ,” the policeman commanded. “Raise hands.”

Robbie didn't want to release the assailant, but he obeyed and raised both of his hands. The man looked as if he'd scamper away, but he also obeyed.

They stood there uneasily for half a minute before more policeman joined in. Luckily, one of them spoke English and Robbie could explain.

They confirmed they'd had a call from 'American retired military' and had been looking for Robbie and the assailant, but with so many alleys and narrow streets they had no way of knowing where the chase would go and hadn't been able to catch up.

They took them both to a police station. Robbie told his side of the story, and he also asked them to question the man about Big Buddha and the murders. After far too long waiting in a sterile room, Sergente Panera returned. “You are free to go, Signore Perrine .”

“Did you get any information out of him?”

“I do not believe he is the man you seek. He is ... what you say in English ... pickpocket. Thief. He illegally carry the pistola, and he had all manner of wallets and jewelry stuffed in his backpack. He followed you two because your woman looked wealthy and had real diamonds and didn't see your bodyguards until too late.

He knows nothing of American murders and Big Buddha. ”

Robbie wasn't certain the last part was true, but he wasn't in a position to argue with the sergeant. “You'll detain him and make certain?”

The man smiled briefly. “Of course. He's broken many laws. He won't be seeing the sun for many days.”

“ Grazie .” Robbie shook his hand and a few minutes later walked out of the police station. He hurried through the darkened streets, anxious to get to Alice.

He called Price as he walked. His friend assured him Alice was safe in the condo’s living area and all was well.

Robbie shared his side of the story, frustrated that the attempt seemed to have nothing to do with Big Buddha.

He was only a few streets away from the condo when another call came in.

One of Aiden Porter’s research and tech guys, Oliver.

“Hey, Ollie. What’s up?”

“Just touching base with you on the research on Marianne Marshall. She looks squeaky clean—ultra-wealthy because of her husband’s family trusts, huge life insurance payouts when the husband died twenty years ago, and a solid investment team taking care of her money.

She donates to charities and spends a lot of money on her own health care, her house and staff, jewelry, and clothing. Not much else going out, man.”

“Seriously?” Robbie groaned. It was downright awful of him to wish Alice’s mom was the villain. Still, it was disappointing that his hunch hadn’t panned out.

“Sorry, man.”

“Appreciate the help. Take care. ”

“You too.”

Robbie slid the phone into his pocket. He took the stairs instead of the elevator up the twelve levels to the penthouse. His legs felt tired again. At least the pickpocket had been good for something; he had given Robbie an intense cardio workout.

Arriving at the door, he rapped on it. He knew the codes, but they'd have the deadbolts and extra locks engaged.

Merrick opened the door and gestured him through. Alice was pacing in the living area, Curtis standing nearby.

"Hey." He raised a hand.

"Robbie," she cried out as if he were her long-lost lover.

Robbie's eyes widened and his pulse spiked as she rushed across the space and flung herself against his chest. He had no problem wrapping her up tight and lifting her slightly off her feet.

"You're safe," she gushed. "Price said the police captured the guy, but I was so worried."

"I'm fine," he assured her, a touch annoyed that she didn't think he could take care of himself and that Price hadn't kept to the bro code and bragged to her that Robbie ran the guy down, for miles and miles, and was the one who'd tackled him.

That scrawny guy hadn't stood a chance against him.

Only of out-running him, which Robbie hadn't let happen.

Price was great, for a Navy guy, but unfortunately not one to brag about himself or anyone else.

Alice drew back from his embrace.

He set her on her feet, released her, and took her hand. “Have you eaten?”

She stared at him as if he’d grown another head. “Eaten? No. I really couldn’t think of food at a time like this.”

Robbie smiled and tugged her toward the kitchen area. “I’m starving, and we need to chat.”

Curtis and Merrick nodded to them and gave them space. Alice let him lead her into the kitchen. He started pulling out pre-made meals. She refused to eat any, so he only warmed up three. As he ate, he told her what had happened and how the guy claimed to have no affiliation with Big Buddha .

“That’s good, right?” she said. “At least we know Big Buddha hasn’t followed us over here and isn’t targeting you.”

“I guess. I want to catch the guy.”

“So do I.” She looked despondent.

He polished off another chicken breast and noticed her watching him. “What?”

“I’m amazed at how much food you can consume.”

“Thank you. I think.” He drained a glass carafe of water. He had to get brave and ask her. “I’ve read all the police reports, but they don’t point to any suspect. They’ve looked into Preston Lavity, but nothing.”

“There’s no way Preston would kill anyone.”

He thought about the pretty boy Preston. The guy didn't seem capable of murdering three people and a beloved pet. He would be too concerned about getting his next facial or going shopping. But why was Alice defending him? Had she dated Preston or developed feelings for him?

"Are your moms still close?" he asked.

She glanced away. "Preston's mom is pretty much my mother's only friend."

"Do you think ... Could your mom have anything to do with the murders?"

"Pardon me?" She whirled on him with fire in her dark eyes.

He shrugged. "I'm just checking every angle."

"You think ... that my mother ... could ever hurt me or those closest to me?"

He arched an eyebrow. His opinion probably wouldn't be helpful at the moment. "She would've gladly run a spear through me."

Alice looked as prim and uppity as he'd ever seen her.

She gestured to the polished clean plates that had contained three meals.

"She thought you were an uncouth ogre. Do you think she wanted a military man with no manners to marry her only daughter, inherit her fortune, and cart me off around the world?"

"No ... manners?" Heat filled Robbie's face. He rubbed at the back of his neck. "My mama taught me decent manners. Did I chew with my mouth open or belch while I ate?" He'd had buddies in the Army who did much worse .

“No,” she admitted. She looked away. “Look. It’s a moot point what my mother thought of you. She hasn’t killed anyone.”

Robbie nodded, though his body felt tight. “I’m afraid you’re right. Aiden Porter’s researcher said the same. No money trail.” He started stacking the plates. Standing, he glanced at Alice and froze at the fury in her dark eyes.

“You had Aiden’s people check into my mother?”

“Yeah,” he said, setting the plates down and spreading his hands. “We’re trying to cover every angle.”

“I know you and my mother didn’t like each other, but you have to believe she would never do anything to hurt me.”

Both of his brows shot up this time. “Alice, please forgive me, but I’d be willing to bet no one but you, and possibly Priscilla Lavity, thinks your mom is anything but a selfish, too-wealthy harpy with nothing to do but make up medical conditions and control you.”

“How dare you!”

He shrugged. “If nobody else is willing to tell you the truth...”

“My mother has horrible health and no one around but me, Priscilla, and her housekeeper Emeline. And you dare to make fun of her and claim she’s still controlling me?” Alice stood, seething and glorious in her anger.

“Did your mom like your boyfriend or either of your best friends, or did she try to get you to dump them just like she always wanted you to do with me?”

She gasped, but then her eyes narrowed. “She didn’t like them or think I should be spending so much time with them. But that doesn’t mean she’d have them murdered.”

Robbie felt he’d made his point. She was probably right that her mom wouldn’t have someone murdered, but the grumpy, sickly lady made everyone around her miserable.

Robbie understood loyalty to family, God, country, and his ‘brothers’, but the way Alice’s mother controlled and manipulated seemed grounds to create some distance. In his mind. Obviously not in Alice’s.

“I know you and my mother hated each other, but I don’t appreciate you accusing her of having anything to do with the murders.”

“Noted,” he grunted .

Alice spun and rushed through the living area and up the stairs. Her door opened and closed.

Robbie picked up the dishes. He was tired, emotionally and physically. He’d made a mess of that. Half an hour ago, Alice had been hugging him fiercely and now she was furious at him.

Her mom had come between them fifteen years ago. Why would he expect it to be any different now?

Chapter

Ten

Alice awoke as upset at Robbie as she'd felt going to bed. At least she'd been able to sleep and hadn't had the nightmare.

She hated the way she felt right now. Robbie used to make her happy. Not currently.

Her mother had been unfair about Robbie back then, and it was true she was a hard woman and hadn't liked Natalie, Ruby, Jack, or even sweet little Odie.

But she was still Alice's mother and the only remaining family member she had.

Not everybody had the perfect and loving June Beaver-type mother like Robbie's Mama Quincy.

Just thinking of Mama Quincy made her long for a huge welcoming hug complete with a beaming smile, chocolate chip cookies, and the line, 'Our beautiful girl is here!'. Robbie's mama had always made her feel like she was the most important person on earth.

Alice showered and put on a comfortable blue summer romper that she'd brought with her, bought by her mother as most of her clothing and jewelry was, and walked down to breakfast. Robbie was waiting for her, shoveling food in as usual.

He was right that he didn't chew with his mouth open or burp.

The way he ate had always fascinated her.

That he could eat so quickly and get the quantity of food in that he did without making slurping noises or being ‘uncouth’ like her mother accused him of was a marvel. Right now, it annoyed her.

She’d skipped dinner last night, too stirred up by their attacker and then by Robbie’s attack on her mother. Now she was hungry, but she didn’t want to eat with Robbie. How would she spend the entire day with him? Not to mention the next two weeks.

He set his fork down, straightened in his chair, and studied her.

Alice flushed with heat from the simple look.

She stepped forward, planning to brush past him and grab something out of the fridge, but Robbie stood, blocking her path.

A thrill shot through her as she arched her head back to look at him.

He was large, manly, and appealing. Even if she was irritated with him and he had a bush growing out of his face.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“About?” She folded her arms across her chest. No reason to make this easy on him.

“I shouldn’t have said those things about your mom.”

“But you believe them?”

His mouth twisted. Robbie was never one to lie.

“Your mom ...” He licked his lips, rubbed at his neck, and started over.

“As a teenager, I always made an effort to be respectful and speak to adults. It was rare that an adult didn’t like me.

I made countless attempts to get on your mom’s good side, more than any other parent, because I loved you and wanted a great relationship with her.

Everything I tried backfired. I never understood why she hated me. ”

Alice studied him. He was right. He’d been nothing but respectful, even sweet, to her mother, but she had never even given him a chance.

She’d treated him worse than her staff, and her excuses were always that he was an ‘uncouth ogre’ or a ‘beastly loser’.

Neither of which was true. Her mother had always asserted Preston Lavity was the right one for her.

Before she had to admit Robbie was right, or make an excuse for her mother’s behavior, he continued.

“But she’s your family, and it’s not my right to judge her.”

Alice swallowed and nodded, not sure what to say. She couldn’t defend her mother. She was hard, extremely so, and she’d loathed Robbie with a deep passion. It was kind of him to try not to judge her.

“I also was thinking ...” He looked her over, and her pulse spiked despite her desire to stay aloof from him.

Mostly for his own protection from a killer, but also because they had no future.

“Your mom raised you, and you’re the most incredible lady I’ve ever known, so there must be a lot of good in her that she passed on to you. ”

Alice was surprised by his comment. It looked to be a hard concession. “The most incredible lady? What about your mama?”

He smiled at that. The lips she used to love to tangle with were revealed in the mass of his beard. “You’re right on level with my amazing mama, Alice Marshall.”

Alice had to back away. What was he doing making comments like that? “Um ... thank you,” she managed. “Let me grab some food. What’s the plan today?”

“Beaches. A whole list of beaches. We go back to the dock and a boat will take us to explore all the nearby beaches and beach towns.”

“Sounds great.”

Robbie had diffused her anger, but her mother was still very much between them.

As was the fact that Big Buddha had killed everyone she loved.

Except her mother. She could see why Robbie might suspect her mother, but no matter how miserable her mother was, Alice was the only happiness in her life.

She could never believe that her mother would physically hurt anyone and as a result make Alice miserable too.

Alice lay back on a beach chair perched on the sand at Lido di Jesolo as Robbie swam in the ocean.

The day had turned out to be fun. They'd been to Lido di Venezia, Murano, Burano, and Torcello Islands, Pellstrina, and Punta Sabbioni.

Their boat driver and guide had been great.

Curtis and Merrick had stayed back and watched for danger while Alice and Robbie had lunch on the beach.

Madelyne had apparently set everything up .

Alice was no stranger to money—her mother was a multi-millionaire—but Brandon's level of wealth still blew her mind.

She was grateful to relax for a few minutes.

They'd walked a lot of beaches and beach towns today.

Robbie had been itching to get into the ocean and the guide had promised Lido di Jesolo was a fabulous swimming beach and a great way to end the day.

The sun was sinking toward the west. It had to be after five.

It was odd not to have her phone to check.

Robbie swam sure strokes parallel to where she reclined.

She watched him slice through the ocean.

He moved well, especially for such a large man.

Interesting that he'd been a Ranger and not a Navy SEAL with how much he loved

the ocean, swimming, and scuba diving.

She'd asked him about his choice years ago and he'd told her he wasn't a 'squid'.

Some kind of slang against the Navy. He'd been teasing and admitted it was more about his grandfather being in the Army, and though his best friend Chase liked to swim, he hadn't had the swim lessons and opportunities to swim in the ocean like Robbie had and probably wouldn't make it through the intense training SEALs had in the water.

She suspected the entwined dog tags on his chest were his grandfather's and his own, but they might have been his and Chase's.

After about half an hour, he turned and angled into shore.

The waves were mellow, lapping against the beach.

The spot the guide had brought them to was quiet.

There was currently only another couple walking down the beach and a young family playing in the sand at least a football field length away.

It was nice to have quiet and peace after the stress of the man pulling a gun on them yesterday and Robbie chasing after him.

Robbie reached the shallow water and stood.

She gaped at him as he pushed through the soft waves.

He did look like Jason Momoa coming out of the water.

She thought Robbie was more handsome than the movie star.

Sun glistened off his muscular chest, shoulders, and arms. His hair and beard were plastered to his head, and he looked more like the Robbie she remembered.

He noticed her staring and grinned, his blue eyes twinkling. That radiant smile was the sun coming out from behind the dark clouds of the past fifteen years.

Alice sucked in a quick breath. How could she stay immune to him?

He reached the beach and strode confidently to her.

“H-how was the swim?”

“Fabulous.” He pushed his hand through his hair, engaging his arm and shoulder muscles.

Her mouth went dry. She swallowed and had to look away.

“You all right?”

“Dry mouth,” she muttered, grabbing a nearby water bottle and taking a drink.

When she looked back at him, he was smirking. “You are looking entirely too dry.”

“Excuse me?” She blinked at him, not sure what that meant.

“Dry mouth, dry hair, dry swimsuit.” Robbie grinned, bent low, and scooped her off the lounge chair.

“Robbie,” she cried out in surprise, wrapping her arms tight around his neck. Robbie

held her against his chest, and every part of Alice soared. “What are you doing?”

“Sweeping you off your feet.” He winked, and she was reminded of the many times he had swept her off her feet. What had followed was heaven on earth.

Would he kiss her? She had no idea how she’d respond if he tried. She yearned to kiss him again, but that was no way to keep him safe from Big Buddha and keep her heart safe when he left her again.

“And remedying your too-dry problem,” he said.

He turned and strode through the sand and into the shallow water with her clinging to him.

“Robbie, no,” she cried out, but she tellingly didn’t fight him. She held tight to him and savored the feel of his muscular body surrounding her and soaring through the air.

He threw back his head and laughed. Alice couldn’t help but join him. She was young, carefree, desirable, and happy in Robbie’s arms. None of the past fifteen years of loneliness mattered.

He pushed through the water until he was chest deep. Then he dipped down underwater, holding her close. Alice closed her eyes and mouth. The water was lukewarm and felt great after sunbathing.

They surfaced, and she blinked water out of her eyes.

“Did we fix your too-dry problem?” he asked, laughter in his voice and crinkling the skin around his eyes.

“Definitely.” Alice loved being close to him and messing around like this.

“Do you have any other problems I can help you fix?”

She stared at him. She wanted to tell him his kiss could solve her every problem. Her gaze dropped to his mouth, then lifted to his eyes. His startling blue eyes lit a fire within her.

“Yes, ma’am,” he murmured.

“I didn’t ask for anything,” she shot back even as her stomach hopped with anticipation.

He grinned confidently. “You didn’t have to.”

“Oh, you,” she protested, even as she arched up and he leaned down.

“Ellos se besan ,” a child cried out, giggling.

“Not yet, mi amigo ,” Robbie whispered, his breath against her lips warm and enticing. “We’d better continue this later. Little ones looking on.”

Alice looked around to see two children pointing and laughing from the beach. Their parents were rushing to them and scolding them in rapid Spanish. They must be tourists, likely from nearby Spain.

The moment was ruined—or maybe saved—by the children. She shouldn’t allow herself to lose her heart to Robbie again.

She pushed away from his chest. “Let’s swim.”

“All right.” He looked disappointed.

She felt terribly disappointed too, but it was for the best.

Chapter

Eleven

Robbie and Alice had a nice sunset dinner on the beach and then their boat driver took them back to the closest dock on the Grand Canal in proximity to their condo.

It was only a five-minute walk, but it was after ten when they got back to the condo.

He was disappointed when Alice went to shower and never came back out.

He'd showered, brushed his teeth, put on his favorite Swiss Army Cologne, and waited and waited.

He should've just kissed her in the ocean when they'd been flirting and laughing. Now she was shutting him out again.

Ignoring the compassionate glances from Price and River, and the fact that Curtis and Merrick couldn't even meet his gaze, he finally went to his room. He left the door cracked in case she walked out of hers. Finally, he said his prayers and slid into bed.

He'd barely drifted off when he heard Alice's voice.

"Help ... help ... help!"

Robbie darted out of the sheets and rushed out of his room and into hers. Price was right there in the hallway. Robbie held up a hand. "Last time it was a nightmare."

Price nodded. "I'll wait out here."

Robbie hurried through the door and into her room. She was tangled in the sheets and tossing her head back and forth. "Help! "

He glanced around, but there was no sign of anyone. Rushing to the bed, he dropped next to Alice and lifted her off the pillow and against his chest.

"Alice." He gently shook her. "Wake up, Alice. It's me."

Her eyes fluttered open. "Robbie?"

"I've got you. Bad dream?"

"Yes." She shuddered and buried her head in his chest, her silky hair brushing his skin. His heart took off at a gallop as her berries and cream scent infused his senses. "I hate that dream. This grotesque buddha man keeps coming after me."

"Sorry. I'm here."

"You are." She glanced up and their gazes entangled. "Thank you for being here for me."

He nodded, and then the moment went slow as her dark eyes filled with warmth. This was his moment. Finally. He bent his head to hers, heart racing. Anticipation swirled through his veins.

A soft rap came on the door, pulling him away from Alice's lips. Again.

"Yeah?" he called.

“Pardon me.” Price opened the door a crack. “Is all well?”

“Yeah. We’re good.” Robbie couldn’t even get the words out to tell Price he appreciated him as he usually would.

Alice pulled back and slid away from him. She focused on the door.

“All right. Take care.” The door shut softly.

He stared at Alice and willed her to look at him. “Alice?”

“Yes.” She moistened her lips and looked at him.

He smiled, hoping she would melt into his arms as she had in the ocean earlier today.

“Thank you for waking me up from the dream,” she said, her voice stiff and her dark eyes closed off.

Robbie was being dismissed, but he didn’t want to walk away.

He stood and glanced down at her.

“What?” she asked.

“I ... thought you might need, or want, a goodnight kiss. For comfort or distraction from the nightmare?” It was not a smooth or confident line by any means, but Alice had never cared if he was smooth and polished.

She’d always claimed she loved that he was genuine and trustworthy.

She probably didn’t know how to trust him after fifteen years of separation.

Alice looked him over. Her cheeks darkened and hope blossomed in his chest.

She resolutely shook her head. “I’m not kissing you with that bush growing on your face.”

Robbie’s eyes widened. Did that mean she’d kiss him if he shaved? Did he dare ask?

“Goodnight, Robbie.”

Robbie nodded, turned, and strode to the door, pushing through it. If only he could shave and get his hair trimmed.

He shook his head. He couldn’t shave or get a haircut. For the undercover jobs he excelled at, it was important that his hair obscured his face. His wild, unkempt look helped him fit in with the rough traffickers and foul drug runners.

Aiden probably had other ops Robbie could do that didn’t require a hairy bush on his face, like when he’d helped Tess Gem in Jade Valley, Arizona, find a counterfeit smuggler using her bike shop as a delivery spot.

Yet he felt like he made a bigger difference fighting against human trafficking or taking down drug rings or crime lords from the inside out. That was why he hadn’t shaved or trimmed his hair.

Yet if Alice would kiss him ... his insides warmed, and he selfishly wanted to shave right this moment.

Chapter

Twelve

Alice was grateful Robbie had been there for her last night after she had the nightmare.

She'd longed to get lost in a mind-numbing kiss with him.

When Price interrupted their almost-kiss, the fact that Robbie hadn't been there for fifteen years hit her.

She appreciated him being here now, but their relationship was far from the trust and love they'd once shared.

She wouldn't let down her guard and kiss him. The beard had been an excuse. She still missed the way her Robbie looked, but she couldn't deny the manly appeal of this new Robbie. With all his experiences and growth, he was still enticing, even if a trip to the barbershop wouldn't be out of line.

The next morning, she slept in. When she woke, she showered and dressed in a sundress, wishing she'd remembered to ask Robbie what they were doing today. She doubted they'd have another beach day. Hopefully she hadn't missed out on anything by sleeping in.

Only Curtis was downstairs, lounging on the couch and studying his phone. He stood and gave her a nod and a smile. "Morning."

“Good morning. Is Robbie ...?” She looked around. His bedroom door had been open.

“He went out early for an errand. Should be back shortly. ”

At that moment, there was a rap on the door. Alice turned.

“Please.” Curtis held up a hand, gesturing her back. He strode to the door and looked through the peephole. Then he punched in something on the alarm and pulled the door open.

Alice tried to peer past the bodyguard’s thick shoulders, but she couldn’t see who was there. It had to be Robbie or one of the other security guards, or Curtis would not have opened the door without some sort of interrogation.

“Nice,” Curtis said.

“Appreciate it.”

Robbie’s voice.

Curtis stepped to the side, and Alice had a clear view of the man in the doorway.

Her heart slammed against her rib cage. Old Robbie and New Robbie had collided, and the result was mind-blowing.

His dark hair was short on the sides, wavy and thick and trimmed on the top.

He was clean shaven, his handsome face on fine display.

His face wasn’t one bit boyish any longer, the manliness obvious in the chiseled lines

of his cheeks and jaw.

His nicely sculpted lips gave his bright blue eyes a run for their money.

Those lips tilted into a smile as she stared at him.

Alice's stomach dropped out and she couldn't swallow past her dry throat. "You shaved?" she whispered.

"For you."

Her stomach did a happy dance. How could she possibly resist him? She was an instant away from rushing across the space and throwing herself into his arms.

"I'm not letting a beard or my career get between us this time."

Alice's eyes widened. Did he mean that? How could she trust that he wouldn't leave her again? How could she keep him safe if Big Buddha targeted him?

"Please..." She held up a hand defensively. "I'm not ready."

Robbie nodded his understanding, though the light in his blue eyes dimmed. She wanted to keep that light burning bright, but she truly wasn't ready for him to declare he wouldn't let his career come between them. "Do you like it?" he asked, rubbing at his jaw and ducking his head slightly .

"Like it?" she repeated. She absolutely loved the way he looked. That he'd shaved and cut his hair for her made her warm clear through.

Curtis stepped farther away from the door, obviously uncomfortable being caught in their moment. "Excuse me," he murmured.

“No, excuse us,” Alice said. “What’s the plan for today?”

Robbie’s expression reflected a keen disappointment and a longing. She’d told him last night she wouldn’t kiss him with the beard. What was her excuse now? Especially if he truly wouldn’t let his career come between them.

“I think you’re going to love it,” he said.

She imagined he meant the plan for today, but he could be referring to her loving his clean shaven and hair trimmed glory.

“All right,” she said in a trembly voice. “Surprise me.”

“You don’t like surprises.”

She looked him over again. “I like some surprises.”

He smiled.

Alice liked him. She probably even still loved him.

But she couldn’t tell him that and endanger him.

They drove an hour north to Breda di Fregona, a beautiful natural park reserve known for the Caglieron Caverns.

Robbie read to her that the caves were a unique natural and artificial landscape.

A gorge carved by the Caglieron stream had been expanded by caves where sandstone was extracted in the past.

They walked along a wooden walkway, over bridges, and were mesmerized by the gorges, caves, waterfalls, and rock formations.

Sunlight filtered through the openings, creating magical patterns.

Alice was obsessed with design and architecture, but even she could admit that nothing manmade could best God's creations.

Nature's architect never ceased to thrill and impress her.

There was an ancient water mill and restaurant at the end of the path. It was quiet; they only encountered a few other tourists. Price and Merrick gave them some space but stayed close enough to keep a visual on them and scope out in front of and behind them.

Neither she nor Robbie said much, but the tension between them was high.

He kept giving her meaningful glances, touching her hand or the small of her back to direct her.

She flushed with warmth at each look or touch.

She couldn't get used to this new but old Robbie.

He looked like the love of her youth, but his face had matured in all the right ways.

The best word she could think of was mouthwatering.

She'd never seen a man who was his equal.

It was obvious by each glance and soft touch that Robbie was interested in her. He'd

shaved and gotten his hair cut for her. He'd claimed he wouldn't let his career come between them. Could she trust that declaration? Was he only hoping for a kiss, or did his feelings run as deep as hers?

His comments had sent her reeling. What was she supposed to do with these re-surfing feelings?

Would he be killed by Big Buddha if she fell for him again?

Would he leave her for his important work with Aiden Porter and she'd be devastated and lonely?

Could he and her mother ever have a good relationship?

What if she had to choose? At the moment, she wanted to choose him over her mother, but could she trust him not to leave her behind again?

Her mind went round and round. Robbie had all but admitted he wanted a relationship.

It was hard to make rational decisions when he looked incredible and everything he said or did reminded her of the Robbie she'd fallen in love with who was now a mature and impressive operative for one of the top security gurus in the world.

Robbie Perrine was irresistible.

After the grotto walk, they rented bikes and rode along trails through the lush and green nature park.

For lunch, they found an outdoor restaurant in the piazza or town square.

They chatted about his friends from high school, each of which she'd felt were her friends too.

It was good to catch up. She even shared some stories about Ruby and Natalie.

Doing so was healing, and she appreciated him drawing her out about them.

They shared a cannoli for dessert. She'd never liked cannoli at home, but this one was flaky and light on the outside with a rich pistachio cream swirled with chocolate shavings. Delicious.

Robbie looked at her with his lashes lowered, an almost shy look that made her heart flip flop. "You haven't said anything about Jack. Were you ..." He swallowed. "Close to marrying him?"

"No," she admitted.

Robbie straightened in his seat, and his gaze became piercing.

"He was a great guy, but we only dated a few months before he was killed."

"I'm sorry," Robbie said. The words were sincere, but there was also an underlying ... relief. Robbie had obviously not wanted her falling in love with anyone else. She felt the same.

"Thank you."

She finished the dessert and moved to stand.

Robbie put a hand on her arm, heat searing her skin from his touch. "Have you been close to marrying anyone over the years?"

Alice sucked in a breath. He hadn't asked these direct questions right away. Had he been giving her time to adjust to him?

"No," she admitted.

His blue eyes grew impossibly warm and tender. "Waiting for me?" he asked in a husky whisper.

Alice's own eyes widened as pain stabbed at her heart. "Absolutely not," she shot at him, angry he'd say such a thing. As if she should've waited around for him when he'd ditched her and broken her trust. She stood and ignored the pain in his eyes. "What's the plan this afternoon?"

Robbie stood slowly, as if to allow her to appreciate his glorious presence. "A castle and church and town tour."

"Perfect."

There was a forced pleasantry between them as they toured the elaborate church—sculptures and paintings and decorative trim crowding the space.

The charming town square, complete with clock tower, was intriguing.

It blew her mind to think of these structures being close to a thousand years old.

They toured the castle ruins of Castello del Piaì.

It was in a beautiful location close to the grottos they'd explored this morning .

It was early evening when they headed back to Venice and their condo.

There was a spread of Vietnamese food waiting for them in the kitchen.

The Italian food was delicious but heavy; she was ready for a change and excited about the multitude of green, purple, and red vegetables she glimpsed in the dish.

They assembled plates and went out onto the patio. As they ate, the sun set and a quiet hush settled over the city. It was beautiful. She glanced at Robbie. He was beautiful too.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, rubbing at his jaw and drawing her attention to his clean-shaven face and those lips. Dang his lips.

“No thoughts,” she lied. “It was a great day. I loved the grottos and waterfalls.”

“I knew you would. I guess you do like some surprises.” His gaze focused on her lips before lifting to hers. Those blue eyes held her captive.

“Some,” she admitted through a dry throat. “What’s the plan tomorrow?”

He didn’t appear to like her redirection, but he pulled out his phone. “Padua. It’s a historic city with roots back to the tenth century, built on a river. I’m sure the architecture will be impressive.”

“Sounds amazing.”

He studied her and simply nodded.

They finished their dinner and cleaned up their garbage, putting the food away in the fridge.

The food always seemed to magically appear and disappear.

She didn't know if their guards were polishing it off or a maid was coming by.

Her room was also refreshed each morning, so it might be a combination of the two.

Robbie walked her up the stairs and to her room. She whirled to face him, her heart thumping, as he rested his hand on the doorframe and leaned in.

Alice didn't know how to defend herself from new and old Robbie crashing together. This was the man she'd longed for and dreamed of reuniting with for the past fifteen years. The only woman on earth who wouldn't agree that he was the most enticing man on the planet was her mother .

She frowned, thinking of her mother and how she'd loathed Robbie.

"Alice?" his voice was husky and full of yearning. "Everything okay?"

"I ... I'm tired."

He nodded, but he didn't ease away. "Last night you said you wouldn't kiss me with the bush growing on my face."

Her eyes widened. He'd gone there. She wanted to slide her fingertips along his firm jaw, then thread them into his thick hair and kiss him for a very long time.

"I never said I would kiss you if you did shave," she whispered, trying to maintain some sense of rationality.

"It was implied." He gave her a slight smile, but his eyes were too serious, too invested in her.

Her stomach lurched. She wanted him and she loved him.

“Robbie ... I can’t,” she murmured, even as her hands itched to reach for him and give in to her desire for him.

“Why not?” he asked, still not moving toward her or away. If only he’d take away all the confusion, decimate her resistance, and simply lean down and kiss her.

“Fifteen years of reasons.”

His gaze cooled at that, and he straightened. “I understand. Goodnight.”

Turning, he strode to his room, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Alice wilted against her own doorframe. She was proud of herself for resisting and knew her mother would be proud.

At the same time, it was devastating not to kiss and hold the man she’d always loved.

She stared at his door, willing him to stride back out and claim her mouth like the impressive man he was.

Several long moments ticked by.

Finally, she turned and pushed into her room, almost as devastated as the day he’d left her fifteen years ago.

Chapter

Thirteen

Robbie wished he could've broken through Alice's walls. In his mind, cutting his hair and shaving his beard was a very generous peace offering. Regrettably, it wasn't enough. He'd even told her that he wouldn't let his career come between them. And her response?

Fifteen years of reasons.

How was he supposed to overcome that? Was it right for him to even try?

After this time together, he'd go back to working for Aiden and putting his life on the line and she'd go back to her architecture work and her needy mom.

He would be willing to give up or change his career for her, but he didn't know that Marietta was a healthy place for them to start a relationship.

Was it wrong to beg her to move far away from her mom?

Where would they even settle? He couldn't take her on dangerous jobs, and she had a business she was building and a grouchy mom to take care of.

The next few days were a blur as they toured cities in the surrounding areas.

Padua with its elliptical square and a water feature surrounded by statues, one of the

oldest universities in the world, and the Scrovegni Chapel with a fresco by Giotto, a masterpiece of Renaissance art.

Vicenza with its 'elegant Renaissance architecture, especially the works of Andrea Palladio, a fifteenth century architect', according to their tour guide.

Ferrara with its unique urban layout, imposing castle walls, and strong cycling culture.

Treviso or 'Little Venice' with its medieval walls, canals, cobblestone streets, elegant palaces, and the Sile River running through it.

Bologna, which truly was the origin of bologna. The food was delicious everywhere but particularly there, the meat rich and savory.

Bassano del Grappa with its iconic wooden bridge, historic center, and the Ezzelini Castle.

Verona, the two-thousand-year-old city of love, was a mix of medieval and Roman influences where Romeo and Juliet was set. They even went to Juliet's house. Robbie wished the city of love would bring him Alice's love, but she remained sweet, fun, and somehow aloof.

In Sirmione, on the beautiful Lake Garda, they toured the fort and town situated on the lake's southern bank.

They returned to Venice late Saturday night from Sirmione and Robbie felt morose.

An entire week was gone, and he was no closer to Alice or finding the murderer than he'd been a week ago.

He scrubbed at the stubble on his jawline as they walked from where they'd parked the cars to the building their penthouse was located in.

The lights of the city reflected off a nearby canal.

Everything was peaceful, except inside him.

He wanted Alice to forgive him and love him again, but he feared it was only for selfish reasons.

Maybe they could never carve out a future together.

Didn't him saying he wouldn't let his career come between them mean anything to her? She must not trust him any longer.

He glanced up at the balconies with their flower baskets. The city was 'delightful', as Alice would say.

The barrel of an M1 Carbine rifle poked out of the open door of a balcony. Robbie moved instinctively, wrapping Alice up and taking her to the concrete walkway as he yelled to Curtis and River, "Down!"

A spray of bullets whizzed above his back and head, slamming into the wall and spraying them with bits of stone and dust. The muffled sound of the muzzle blasts revealed the shooter was using a silencer.

Curtis and River didn't hit the ground like he'd instructed. They both dodged to the side, away from the bullets, but yanked out their sidearms and returned fire.

A woman shrieked and a window banged closed.

Alice's soft form cradled in his arms reminded him how much was at risk. He had to protect her, and that meant catching the shooter.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Y-yes."

He dragged his focus away from her and watched as the shooter withdrew behind the curtains to avoid the return fire.

Releasing her, he murmured, "Stay down."

"Robbie..."

He almost stopped and stayed close to her.

He wanted to comfort and love her, but the guy could be escaping even as he paused.

This was his chance to catch Big Buddha and put an end to Alice's suffering.

Thankfully, Big Buddha had shown no indications of hurting her. She'd be safe with River and Curtis.

Leaping to his feet, he said to River, "Keep Alice safe. Call the police. Cover me."

River and Curtis held their pistols ready, nodded to him, and eased back to stand in front of Alice.

Robbie ran for the balcony. He leaped, grasping the bottom of it, and flung his legs up and over like a pole vaulter.

“Robbie,” Alice cried out.

He wanted to reassure her, but there was no time. He landed on the balcony and dodged to the side, tensing for a bullet.

No movement. He slid around the open balcony door and took stock. The apartment was bare, the only light from the streets below. He listened, his heartbeat too loud in his ears. He was unarmed, and the shooter could spring out of a closed door and fill him with bullets at any moment.

He hurried through the open area, not letting himself second-guess his imminent death.

Had the shooter escaped out the apartment door?

A door to his right creaked open. The rifle and a man’s arm appeared.

He should’ve dodged to safety, but he leaped at the door and slammed it hard on the man’s arm.

The man cursed and the gun fired as it dropped to the ground.

The bullet lodged into the opposite wall.

Robbie yanked the door back open and tackled the assailant.

They slammed hard into the ground, the man’s head cracking on the hardwood floor.

He threw jabs into Robbie’s side, but Robbie had the advantage.

He eased back enough to put some power behind the fists he rained onto the man’s

face.

The man tried to buck underneath and knee him but only got his thigh.

Robbie grabbed the attacker's head and slammed it into the floor again.

The man went limp under him. It was disappointing to not have a better fight, but Alice was safe and Robbie hadn't died. That was all that mattered.

He stood and ripped the man to his feet, pinning his arms behind him. The guy stirred and tried to struggle, but Robbie held him fast, yanking his arms tighter, eliciting a wince. He dragged him to the front door, yanking it open.

"Please," the man begged, flailing but making no progress in ripping free of Robbie's grip. "I'll tell you what I know. No police."

He spoke English with no discernable accent. He was an average-sized guy, bald, dressed in a T-shirt and joggers.

Robbie paused. It was an offer that he wanted to accept, but he was in the business of ridding the world of crime. He wasn't going to agree and let a hitman wander free.

A curious neighbor poked their head outside of their apartment door.

"Stay inside," Robbie ordered.

The man looked at him, obviously not understanding the English. He rattled off some words, including la polizia .

Robbie gestured with his head, not willing to release his grip on the shooter.

“ Chiama la polizia ,” the man in the doorway yelled at him.

“ Si ,” Robbie agreed. “ Chiama la polizia. Per favore .” Luckily, some words translated from Spanish to Italian.

The man glared at him and banged the door shut.

“You’re an American,” Robbie guessed, focusing on the shooter.

“A murderer who goes by the moniker of Big Buddha. You’ve killed everyone close to Alice Marshall, and that’s why you’re targeting me.

” It gave him an odd thrill to realize Big Buddha would go after him because he thought Alice loved him. If only that were true.

“No.” The man stiffened. “You’ve got it wrong. I was going to leave a card that claimed it was Big Buddha. I’m just a hired gun. Innocent, really.”

Robbie grunted at that.

“I responded to a request on the dark web. All the information they had was your description and that you’re currently in Venice, but the hit had to be done anytime today. By midnight, or the offer is no good.”

“Why today?”

“Don’t call the police and I’ll tell you. Trust me, I have info you’re going to want to hear.”

“Like what?”

The man shook his head, clamping his jaw shut.

Robbie wondered what else the man could tell him as he yanked him down the stairs. The police would interrogate him, but would they get the information?

The man protested and squirmed but was no match for him.

Robbie stopped as they reached the main level and spun the man, pinning him against the wall. “What else do you know?”

The man said nothing.

“Who’s Big Buddha?”

The man shrugged. “The dark web doesn’t introduce me to my employers.”

“So you know nothing?”

“I know you’re going to die before midnight.”

A chill ran through Robbie. He searched the man’s gaze. If there was a hit out for him on the dark web with a midnight deadline ... getting somewhere safe was critical. The police would have to question this hitman further.

He yanked the man around and they banged through the front door. River and Curtis aimed their pistols at them. Several onlookers scurried farther away down the street. He couldn’t see Alice but knew she was behind the two bodyguards.

River aimed his gun at the shooter and advanced toward them while Curtis stayed back with Alice. Robbie glanced at Alice. She looked disheveled from him tackling her to protect her but otherwise unharmed.

“I’ve got him,” River said when he reached them. “Police will be here soon.”

“Appreciate it.”

“Kneel down and put your hands behind your head,” River instructed the man.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:26 am

Robbie assisted the man to his knees and then released him.

The man obediently put his hands behind his head, staring up at him.

“You should all get somewhere safe, not worry about the police coming for me. There are others searching Venice for you. The deadline for the hit is midnight. Half a mil for a confirmed kill. They’ll be getting desperate to find you.

” He locked eyes with Robbie. “Don’t pass go.

Don’t cuff me. Just take your bodyguards and your girl and run. ”

Robbie didn’t allow nerves to affect him, but those words made his stomach flip over and his palms sweat. The man could simply be trying to escape before the police came, but he felt the truth behind the words.

He looked at River. “There’s a hit out for me on the dark web. The job had to be done today and all they know is I’m in Venice. He has a card naming Big Buddha as the murderer.”

River’s eyes flitted around.

“This threat is legit,” Robbie said in a low voice. “You good staying with him? I’ll take Alice and have Curtis watch my back.”

“Get to the condo,” River agreed. “I’ll get Merrick and Price coming your way. They’ll have Curtis’s location.”

He and River both knew he wasn't supposed to leave a crime scene, but they could give their statements later or over the phone.

He wouldn't risk Alice's safety by staying out in the open.

If the guy was to be trusted, multiple hit men were searching these convoluted streets on their way to take him out.

The only reason he hadn't been targeted all day was because they'd been an hour and a half away in Sirmione .

He nodded to River, then rushed to Curtis and Alice. Wrapping his arm around her, he said to Curtis, "Give us a few paces and keep watch. There are others."

"Got it." Curtis waited for them to precede him.

Robbie ushered Alice forward. She trembled against his side. He understood her fear.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"You were almost killed. Of course I'm not all right." She glanced back at the man before they turned a corner. A shudder went through her. "Is that Big Buddha?"

"I don't think so. He claimed he was a hit man hired to kill me."

"Robbie," she whimpered, wrapping her arm around him.

Robbie felt the significance of her clinging to him. She didn't want him to die. He concurred.

All those years in the military, most of them as a Ranger, he'd survived in extreme

danger. He'd had his trusted unit as backup and been armed, prepared, and had the proper gear on.

He wanted to survive now more than ever. With Alice close, he could see a future dream opening up that he'd long since buried. It would be difficult with his career and her mother loathing him, but he wanted to fight for Alice and their love.

Right now, though, he had to fight for life. Unfortunately, running was the only option. He was unarmed, had no idea where the next threat would come, and Alice's safety took priority.

He upped their pace, his gaze darting around as the night deepened around them. Curtis at his back was reassuring, but a sniper could pop out of any of these windows, be hiding under a bridge, or sliding by on the approaching gondola.

He imagined they did night gondola tours, but wouldn't it be atypical for one man to be alone with the gondolier?

"Curtis," he warned.

Robbie dodged, shoving Alice into a nearby alley and pinning her against the wall.

Shots rang out. A man yelled in surprise.

Probably the unsuspecting gondolier. More shots.

Robbie prayed Curtis was all right. They seemed to be gunning for him, but a hired hitman wouldn't hesitate to kill someone shooting at him .

Robbie had been shot at many times in his tours as a Ranger, but it was shocking to be the target of unknown hit men from the dark web, out on these foreign streets with

night falling, unarmed, and most importantly, with Alice to protect.

The shots stopped. He didn't move, keeping Alice pinned in, his eyes searching above, in front, and behind.

Alice's breath came in fast pants. He wanted to reassure her, to be holding her for something other than a life-threatening situation.

If he lived through this, he would put his heart on the line and beg her to give him a chance to earn her trust and love again.

"It'll be all right," was all he could manage right now.

Footsteps. He whirled to face the threat, keeping Alice behind him. He hated being unarmed worse than he hated the fifteen years of pain between him and the woman he loved.

Curtis. With his gun drawn. Robbie let himself breathe again.

"I took out the shooter," Curtis said. "Sent River a pin of his location to share with police. Let's move."

"Can you double time?" he asked Alice, taking her hand.

"If that means run fast, I'll do my best."

He gave her a slight smile. She was brave. Her face was pale and her eyes hollow, but she wasn't quivering and crying.

Curtis glanced out of the alley, took stock, and then nodded to him.

Robbie dodged out of the alley and ran toward their condo.

It was only a few streets over and across one bridge.

Alice kept pace, holding tightly to his hand, her breathing ragged.

There wasn't time to check for more shooters.

Did the hitmen know their condo location, or had they scouted him out before the assigned hit day?

Maybe these two had simply gotten lucky and there were dozens of shooters searching for him.

Two large shapes with guns drawn appeared around the corner. Robbie swept Alice off her feet and spun, knowing their luck wouldn't hold a third time. There was nowhere to hide. He dropped down, sheltering her with his larger frame. Could Curtis take out two threats? If only Robbie was armed!

No shots.

"It's Price and Merrick," Curtis said .

"Oh." Robbie didn't have a great response besides relief. The good guys had arrived. Three guards was much preferable to one.

He stood with Alice in his arms.

She clung to his neck, staring up at him. "You don't have to carry me."

"I want to," he said. He wanted her close. Wanted to know she was safe.

Her breathing didn't settle, but she cuddled into his neck and chest.

He strode forward. Price and Merrick nodded to him and took up positions surrounding them.

They all rushed down the final street and to the front door of the building the penthouse was located in.

Price typed in the code and Merrick swung the door open.

The relief Robbie felt as they climbed into the old school elevator was immense.

Unless someone knew their building and had gotten inside, they were safe. He cradled Alice close.

"What happened?" Price asked as they rose far too slowly.

"Multiple shooters," Robbie explained. "A hit out for me on the dark web."

Price's eyes widened.

"But only if they got me by midnight." That didn't make sense. A hit was usually a hit. What was the significance of today?

"It's not even a holiday," Alice murmured.

He glanced down at her. Her face was wet with tears. Fear or relief? Probably both. Even with all his training and battle experience, the past twenty minutes had been intense.

"It is," Merrick said. "It's Flag Day back home."

“Everyone else was killed on a holiday,” Robbie said, remembering the file he’d read on the flight over.

She nodded and clung tighter to him.

They reached the twelfth floor and hurried to their penthouse door. Merrick typed in the code, and they all went inside. They hurried up the stairs and into the closest suite, staying away from the windows and balcony in case a high-tech shooter using thermal imaging knew their location.

He rushed to tell River and Merrick the details, setting Alice on her feet and wishing he could keep holding her .

She paced in front of them. As Robbie finished, she spun on him. Her dark eyes were distraught. “I can’t. I can’t watch you die.”

Robbie’s eyes widened. She cared deeply for him. The horror of tonight had convinced her to resurrect their love, just as it had him. If he could be with Alice again, being targeted and almost killed was more than worth it.

He strode up to her and framed her beautiful face with his palms, savoring the feel of her warm skin against his hands. He wanted to pledge his love and beg her to forgive him for ever walking away, but the guards were watching and he felt it was wise to proceed slowly.

“We’re safe, Alice,” he said, his eyes searching hers. “We’re inside and away from windows. The hit was only for today. It’ll be all right.”

Price, Curtis, and Merrick eased away, taking up defensive positions in case anyone got through the door or patio.

“It’s not about us being safe, Robbie. It’s about you. The killer only wants to take those who are close to me.”

He nodded and tried to smile. “If the pattern holds, we’re safe until the Fourth of July.”

The words fell flat.

“You’re forgetting Juneteenth, and this isn’t a joke,” Alice hurled at him, yanking away from his touch.

“I know that.”

They stared each other down. He wanted to tell her so many things, most of all that he loved her, that he would earn her trust and keep her safe. Was she ready to hear his proclamations? Should he wait until they were alone and she’d calmed down?

Curtis stepped forward. “River just texted. He’s at the police station with the assailant. They want you both to come in, but he’s refusing to give away your location.”

“Tell them we’ll come at midnight,” Robbie said, still holding Alice’s gaze.

“All right.” Price smirked. “Actually, I’ll call Aiden. He’ll get them to hold off until morning.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“Curtis. Merrick. Sweep their rooms and stand guard.” Price looked to them. “Keep your shades drawn and lights dim. Stay away from the windows.”

“Got it.” Robbie knew all of this, but Price had been a captain in the Navy and was well-respected by all of Aiden’s operatives.

Robbie waited for Curtis and Merrick to declare their rooms clear and then escorted Alice to her door.

Curtis stayed back but was still in the hallway and could hear everything he said.

Robbie didn’t care. He had to talk to her.

His heart beat high in his throat. He was more nervous now than he’d been running from bullets or possible assailants.

Then, it had been all reaction. Alice’s response right now could determine his future.

“Alice.” His voice was gravelly with emotion.

He could’ve died many times over, during his years in the Army and especially as a Ranger, but almost getting taken out by a hitman with Alice by his side was making him reevaluate everything.

He had to take his shot. “It’s obvious you care about me.

Can you ... let down your guard and let me in again? ”

Her eyes widened as she stared up at him.

“It’s more obvious to me than ever that I need to keep my distance.

I haven’t even kissed you and the killer has a bullseye painted on your head.

” The fire died and her shoulders sagged.

“I can’t endanger you like this. I should go home and stay far away from you. Then you’ll be safe.”

“No,” Robbie protested. Talk about his plan backfiring. He’d been convinced tonight they should be together, and she seemed to be convinced that being together would endanger him. “Please don’t leave.”

Staying together was the only way he could hope to gain her trust and prove they were right together.

It was all so clear to him, but she saw it differently.

He needed time and lots of help from the angels above.

“Brandon will have Aiden or Sutton Smith send in more bodyguards if we need. We’ll be safe. Please stay. With me.”

She studied him, and he prayed she’d agree.

“I’ll pray about it,” she finally murmured. Then she slipped through the door and closed it behind her.

It slammed into him again that their views of tonight were vastly different. He thought the threat would bring them together, but it had done the opposite for Alice.

The worries of the past hour threatened to overwhelm him. Alice in danger. Almost being killed by two hit men. A hit out for him on the dark web. Alice not admitting she cared or wanted to be together, wanting to go home instead.

Robbie strode toward his room, yanking out his phone. Ollie would get to the bottom of the request on the dark web. If Robbie could convince Alice the danger was over, maybe she would stay with him.

He feared he'd lost his chance with her and irrevocably damaged her trust fifteen years ago when he walked away.

Knowing he could've easily died tonight had changed his perspective.

Having Alice in his life was now his top priority.

He'd always teased that he loved a challenge, but this was one he had to win.

Alice was the love of his life. How could he resurrect the love she once had for him and keep her safe at the same time?

Chapter

Fourteen

Alice paced her room, unable to settle down as she replayed the horrifying moments of bullets whacking into buildings, pinned beneath Robbie and unable to catch a breath as she prayed he hadn't been hit, then running for their lives, him carrying her.

The reassurance in his arms had been distinctive, but nothing could take away the fear.

Five thousand miles from home, Robbie was being targeted by Big Buddha.

He would be killed just like Jack, Ruby, Natalie, and Odie.

She could see each of their bodies splayed out in coffins and Odie in a grave she'd dug as she'd sobbed at the back of her mother's property.

It was too easy to imagine Robbie, strong and mesmerizing Robbie, lifeless, gone, those piercing blue eyes staring vacantly up at her.

Alice let out a cry of despair, dropped to her knees, and prayed desperately. After long minutes begging for help, she was finally able to slide into bed and fall asleep.

She and Robbie ran through the narrow streets of Venice.

Big Buddha pursued them, and he was closing in.

Her heart raced out of control. Her hand was ripped from Robbie's grasp, and she was tossed into a canal.

The stinky, dirty water closed over her head, encasing her in a sludge that she couldn't escape.

She screamed, but only a gurgle came out.

Fighting her way through the sludge, she surfaced to see the grotesque Big Buddha swing a sword at Robbie, who was defenseless and unarmed. Robbie focused in on her, and his bright blue eyes pierced her soul in a silent goodbye. He knew it was over.

"No!" she screamed.

The sword sliced through him.

"No! Please, no! Help!"

"Alice?"

Robbie's voice came from far away.

"Alice." The voice was sharper now. Robbie's warm palms were on her shoulders, then slid to her lower back, lifting her up and against his broad chest. His clean mint, bergamot, and ginger scent wafted over her.

"Alice. Wake up."

Her eyelids fluttered open.

Robbie was right there. He was whole and healthy and holding her.

“You’re alive?” she whispered. “You’re all right? It was a dream?”

“Yes. Just a bad dream.” He gave her a reassuring smile. “I’m here, Alice. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

It was instinct, sheer muscle memory, to slide her arms around his neck, arch up, and press her lips to his.

Robbie cradled her close, and their mouths fused together like they were made to mesh as one. All the fear and anxiety disappeared like a puff of smoke. Positivity and light replaced the bad, and Alice was whole and unafraid in the strength of Robbie’s embrace and the happiness of his kiss.

Warmth and thrills shot through her. Her stomach gave a happy lurch as her body was infused with a joy that only Robbie could bring into her life. She’d missed this, missed him, every part of him.

Finally, they were together. Finally, they were one.

The kiss became more intense and fulfilling.

Their mouths moved together, and Robbie’s strong body surrounded her.

He was here for her. Of course she could trust him.

Only Robbie would be strong enough to stay safe from Big Buddha and bring the monster to justice.

Robbie was all she’d ever want, all she’d ever need.

The most epic reconnection kiss of the century could've continued all night except there was a soft rap on the door.

They pulled apart, both out of breath, grinning at each other like lovesick fools. Alice touched her lips. She was a fool ... for him.

"Nightmare?" River asked from the open doorway.

"Yes," Robbie said, his gaze not leaving her face.

"Forgive me. I had to check."

"We understand. Appreciate it."

River pulled the door almost closed.

Robbie's gaze was hungry on her. He eased down close to her lips again.

"Alice." His whisper was rough, husky. "I've longed for you with every heartbeat.

I told you when I shaved that I don't want a beard or my career or ...

" He didn't say her mother, but she knew he was thinking it.

"... anything to come between us. The near misses tonight made it crystal clear to me. All I want is you in my life."

Alice's heart took flight at his words. She loved him and wanted to trust him with her heart, her life, and his own safety. Longed to shout it to the world and stand up to her mother and beg Robbie to never leave her again.

He longed for her. He wanted her in his life.

Yet ... the attack tonight. The ‘near misses’.

They’d been too close, and Big Buddha would not give up.

Now he was hiring professional hit men to help him.

Juneteenth was in four days. Then July Fourth.

She’d be terrified of every holiday until Robbie was killed.

All her joy and naivety during the kiss smacked her like an iron beam.

Even Robbie and the mighty Aiden Porter couldn’t prevail against Big Buddha.

The mental image of Robbie in a casket haunted her.

The true love of her life would be killed, and it would be all her fault.

Against every instinct telling her to forget tomorrow’s terrors and kiss him again, she pulled back.

“Robbie, I can’t.” Her own voice was full of all the misery she felt. Everyone had died because of her. Not Robbie. She couldn’t lose him.

“Because of the hits on my life?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “I can’t watch you die. ”

“I won’t die.”

He looked brave and confident, but she knew Big Buddha would kill him. Because of her. “I have to stay away from you and keep you safe from Big Buddha.”

Robbie shook his head and started to protest, but she cut him off.

“Even if Big Buddha somehow didn’t kill you, you’ll keep working for Aiden Porter, leaving me behind and most likely dying in some drug battle.

” Alice stared at him, daring him to disagree.

Daring him to say he’d move to Atlanta. That he would find a nice job as a security officer at the mall and find a way to show her mother he was the perfect man for her.

“Working for Aiden is what I do,” he said simply.

Alice nodded. She didn’t really want him in a safe, easy job that wouldn’t fit his take-charge, kick-butt personality and skill set.

But all his reassurances that he didn’t want a beard or a job to come between them were hard to believe.

She didn’t want to change him or ruin his life’s work, but she did want him alive.

“Can we work through your fears of me dying?” he asked.

“I don’t know how,” she said miserably. She should’ve just held him close, but she kept going. “There are other reasons we’ll never work. We don’t even live in the same state anymore.”

“And your mom hates me?”

“It’s on the list.”

Robbie drew in a breath then pushed it out. His blue eyes were intense. She thought he’d push her harder, but he released her and stood. “You’re all right then?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Goodnight.” He turned and walked out the door, shutting it behind him.

Alice was left alone, without his strong arms around her.

It was for the best. Robbie would live. Not being together was devastating, but the tragedy of him dying would be far harder to face.

The next morning, Alice felt groggy as she awoke. Instantly the fear returned—bullets whizzing, Robbie almost being hit, running for their lives.

She prayed and prayed, but nothing settled her.

After a quiet breakfast, they had to go give statements at the police station.

The police would only tell Robbie that both attackers were professional hit men.

It was horrifying, but Robbie had Aiden’s people check and the hit on the dark web was now gone.

Aiden’s guy, Ollie, apologized for not seeing the hit earlier. It hadn’t been on his radar.

Would Big Buddha stick with his mode of operation and take another hit out on Juneteenth or the Fourth of July, or would he try to kill Robbie in a different way?

Would he change his plan and come after Robbie every day of the week?

Who was Big Buddha? Had her friends, boyfriend, and dog been killed by hired hit men or by Big Buddha himself?

Maybe the murderer realized he needed professional help to kill someone as tough as Robbie.

After the police station, they ate lunch in a quiet restaurant and then went to a late afternoon Sunday service.

Everyone was quiet as they returned to the condo.

Alice went to her room and lay down, but she couldn't settle enough to take a nap.

Dinner was solemn, and they ate inside, not on the patio.

Robbie kept giving her searching looks, but he didn't say much.

Finally, after dinner, he asked, "Are you going to stay?"

"What difference does it make?" she asked, drained from the long night and all the stress.

"I could never complain about more time with you," he said softly.

"To what end, Robbie? It's blaringly obvious that we'll never be together." It was even harder to say the words after that off-the-charts kiss last night. Alice longed for him, and she would love for him to tell her he'd move heaven and earth to be together.

He shrugged. Obviously he had no solutions either, but his blue eyes said he wouldn't stop trying.

Alice stood from the table. "I'm sorry our situation can't be different."

Robbie said nothing, but as she turned to walk away, he caught her around the waist and plucked her off her feet and onto his lap .

"Robbie," she breathed out.

He bent and captured her mouth with his.

Their lips moved hungrily together, longing for the peace and committed relationship they could never have.

Instantly she was transported to a world of peace and happiness that she hadn't felt since the murders started a year ago, truly since Robbie had walked away fifteen years ago.

Horrifically, she knew it couldn't last. She broke away, out of breath and wishing for more.

The only time she felt no fear of him dying was during their kisses.

"I'm sorry as well," he murmured.

"Sorry that we can't be together, or sorry for manhandling me?"

He smiled slightly. "Not the latter, that's for sure."

Then Robbie kissed her again. He wasn't physically lifting her as only he could so

easily do, but his kiss swept her off her feet and lifted her to great heights. She was soaring and happier than she'd been in fifteen years.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. She realized Curtis was in the living area, probably trying not to watch them kiss or interrupt. She broke from the kiss and saw Price descend the stairs. He beamed at them as if he was happy they were together. Sadly, they weren't.

Scrambling off Robbie's lap, she murmured, "Goodnight."

She fled for her room. Today had been rough, and she still wasn't certain she should stay. Robbie's kisses only made her long for him in her life. If he kept kissing her, she'd beg him to find a way for them to be together.

But she couldn't make him give up his career.

Could she work and take care of her mother and wait for any break he had in security jobs to spend a few days or a week with her now and then?

It didn't sound like near enough, and until Big Buddha was found, she couldn't live each day wondering if it would be the day Robbie would be killed because of her.

Chapter

Fifteen

Robbie was irritated on Monday morning. Everything he'd lost and wanted to find was still out of reach.

He'd thought his near-death experience would bring them together, but it had only given Alice more reasons to keep her distance emotionally.

How could he convince her he might have to leave on jobs, but he'd be there for her and not die?

He'd somehow find a way to get on her mother's good side.

He grimaced. If she had a good side. Aiden's people would find this elusive Big Buddha, and she'd have peace on that end.

Alice in his arms, their lips tangled together, was more binding than he'd remembered and fantasied about in his many long nights away from her. It was heaven on earth for him, the connection he knew was lasting, and he found a happiness he only knew with Alice.

Robbie had rarely dated, too wrapped up in his military or security assignments, but nobody could equal Alice.

Not for him. He wanted to hold her and kiss her for hours, commit her to a

relationship that he worried would be miserable for her.

She'd have to put up with her mom harping on her for dating Robbie and wait for a crumb of his time as he spent weeks or months undercover, had a short break, and then left her behind to start all over again on another dangerous op.

It wasn't fair to her, and yet he still longed to make it work.

How could he show her she came first and his career wouldn't come between them when it would definitely come between them?

Alice would never ask him to give it up.

She never had. The solution was out of his reach.

He was also chafing with inactivity. He'd hardly moved Sunday, and this morning Price was driving them in a rented SUV with Curtis in shotgun while River and Merrick trailed them.

They were headed to the famed Dolomites, the southeast Italian Alps, for the last five days of their trip.

The scenic mountains were two and half hours away and he chafed impatiently sitting in the car.

It was even worse because he couldn't really talk to Alice with their bodyguards in the vehicle. At least she hadn't gone home.

Driving through the lush, soaring, and sometimes jagged mountains, he realized they'd at least have a chance to be active.

Could he get Alice alone or would there always be a bodyguard or a risk?

They should be safe for a few days—there were no holidays until Juneteenth and no hits on the dark web for him.

Aiden's people would keep checking and were working hard to find Big Buddha.

Ollie had apologized for not seeing the hit ahead of time.

They'd all assumed Big Buddha was a serial killer and serial killers typically made their own kills.

Robbie suspected they knew nothing about Big Buddha and how he operated.

The holidays and targets close to Alice were the only common denominators.

They drove into the village of Brixen or Bressanone, Italy, a small city surrounded by the gorgeous Dolomites, an extension of the Austrian Alps. Cows with bells wandered the grass-covered hills. The church tower was distinctive, the town quaint and welcoming.

Price drove past the historic old town and toward the towering mountains. Twenty minutes later, they pulled up to a three-story home with loads of windows.

"It's beautiful," Alice said, clapping her hands together.

It was, and she was.

Robbie wanted to rush around and get her door, but he waited for their security guards to sweep the house and set up their security cameras and sensors. He could tell Alice was chafing to get out as well.

Finally, Price pushed out of the car and got Alice's door.

Robbie hurried around to be by her side as they explored the house.

Of course Madelyne had found them a gorgeous place to stay.

He'd hardly thought of Brandon, Madelyne, Chase, or any of his friends.

He wondered how his other buddies' adventures were going and prayed they were all safe and maybe discovering the love of their lives like Brandon had hoped for.

At least they weren't being targeted by a serial killer with hits out for them on the dark web.

That was crazy stuff, even with all his battle experience.

They wandered up to the front porch and through the spacious main area that boasted an open kitchen, dining, and living area. Wood accents were everywhere, and all the windows gave views of the epic and verdant mountain scenery and the quaint town below.

This looked exactly like he'd always envisioned a house and setting in the Italian Alps would be like.

The four bedroom suites on the third level were nice, extremely so.

They each had knotty wooden walls and light and dark strains of wood, bright white bedding, free standing bathtubs, massive showers, gorgeous views, and their own balconies, the railings teeming with colorful flowers.

Robbie briefly wondered how the security guys felt about sharing bedrooms, but he'd

shared tiny tents during his military service. It was part of the assignment.

Robbie looked around at the storybook view. He felt a world removed from Venice here. The house and surrounding valley and mountainside gave the impression of safety and comfort with the opportunity for adventure.

He could breathe easier here. Venice and all the cities they'd toured had been intriguing with all the history and architecture but too crowded and enclosed for him.

Though Venice did have the added bonus of being the spot Alice wanted to honeymoon, he felt relieved to be here.

To him, this was a picture-perfect escape from reality.

A true vacation. Especially with Alice close by.

Could he have the chance he was praying for to reconnect and love her in this epic setting? Even if it would be difficult to navigate a relationship, they had both matured and could navigate their situation. They were meant for each other.

Alice exclaimed over everything, clapping her hands and being absolutely delightful .

They eased back down the stairs and all the way to the walk-out basement.

They both stopped to survey an indoor pool that glistened blue.

A glass wall was open, and the patio extended from it, offering epic views of the valley.

A roughhewn gray stone wall was on the opposite side of the glass wall.

Comfortable chaise lounges were scattered around the poolside and outdoor patio.

Walking around the other side of the thick stone wall, it looked as if it belonged in a cave, not a home.

They viewed eight comfortable loungers with a theater-style movie screen directly in front of them and a wall-sized fireplace on the opposite wall. This room was darker, with no windows.

“Oh, my,” Alice cried out. “I love everything about this home.”

“This is one of the most incredible houses I’ve ever seen,” Robbie agreed.

“Nicer than Brandon’s homes?”

“His homes are larger, probably more high-end, but this is unique and beautiful, and the setting is out of this world.”

“I agree.” She smiled and rubbed her hands together. It was interesting that she didn’t seem sad about leaving Venice either. Had the attacks there dampened her enthusiasm for the place, or was it something Robbie had done?

“So what do we do first?” she asked.

“Of course Madelyne has everything lined up.”

“Ah, Madelyne. I can’t decide if she’s our genie or our taskmaster.”

Robbie smiled. “Has it been a chore so far?”

Alice looked him over, and he feared she’d say yes. Her mouth turned down, and the

fears grew. “No,” she admitted. “Everything but Big Buddha coming after you has been amazing.”

That was a relief. He wanted to ask if his kiss was amazing but decided against it. “There are a few different hikes we can choose from this afternoon, then we get to relax in the pool tonight. Dinner will be delivered.”

Her cheeks grew darker as she looked at the pool, then back to him. He was already imagining kissing her in this swimming pool. Would she push him away again, or was he being gifted a second chance to reconnect with Alice in this unreal setting?

“Tell me about the hikes,” she requested .

Robbie read her the descriptions and reviews. They decided together on a more difficult hike to Radlsee Lake. The trail map said it was nine-point-three kilometers, so not quite six miles.

They drove with Merrick and Price to the starting point. Robbie kept an eye out, as he knew their guards would. All seemed quiet and peaceful.

The hike wove steadily uphill through pine tree forests. They talked about her work as an architect and her dreams of her own company taking off. Even though Merrick and Price were in front of and behind them, Robbie felt like they were virtually alone.

Alice grew tired and needed a break when they were about a mile from the lake.

Robbie talked her into climbing on his back and hiked the last mile with her clinging to him.

It gave his legs a better workout, which he appreciated, and even better he had her beautiful body close to his.

He would've liked it even more holding her against his chest, but it wasn't very practical for the steep climb.

They finally reached the lake and Alice slid off his back.

"Thank you."

"Anytime."

He held her gaze. She looked away first, pulling a water bottle out of the backpack she'd been wearing while he carried her. They each drank from their water bottles, taking in the views of the fabled lake.

"Fish and witches?" Alice said, referring to the hike's description.

"And a hut with food." Robbie pointed.

There was a wooden structure right on the bank that had outdoor chairs and food.

They sauntered over and were greeted warmly by the host. They ordered dumplings and sparkling water, enjoying the epic view and the chance to get off their feet.

Robbie finally felt like his legs weren't restless and as if he and Alice were themselves again.

There was far too much between them still, but at least they had this escape from reality together.

Maybe that was his gift and he shouldn't look too far into the future.

It was hard not to at least hope for a future with her.

Chapter

Sixteen

The walk back down was much easier and unfortunately Alice didn't need a ride on Robbie's back.

They talked about high school memories and Alice felt like she and Robbie were 'them' again.

As he'd carried her on his back up that steep mountain climb, she'd soared physically and emotionally as only Robbie could make her do.

The connection to him was deep and abiding.

She realized she trusted him to carry her, to protect her, maybe even to love her, but she still didn't know if she could trust him not to walk away and not to be killed.

The latter was out of his control, and she didn't know how to solve the former.

It was peaceful in this mountain sanctuary; all the fears of Big Buddha were back in Venice or America.

No matter how she'd loved Venice and all the surrounding cities and epic architecture, it had been tainted by Robbie almost being killed.

Alice was savoring the slow pace and tranquility of this home and valley.

She could almost push all the pain and fear away and simply enjoy Robbie.

They made it back to the house and ate a delicious local dinner of meat, cheeses, dumplings, and barley soup with apple strudel for dessert. The food was flavorful and good but heavy, more Austrian than Italian and exactly what she'd expect from a beautiful high valley in the Alps.

Alice finally declared she was stuffed. Her stomach hurt, and she wasn't keen to put a swimsuit on, but she wanted to be alone with Robbie and explore the way he made her feel. In this retreat, safe from all her worries and fears, she wanted to focus on Robbie and Robbie alone.

"You know what the cure is for feeling too full after dinner?" he asked.

"No."

His blue eyes sparkled at her.

"What's the cure?"

"Swimming."

"You would say that. You're a fish. That pool downstairs isn't big enough for you to do laps in. You'd do two strokes and have to do a flip turn."

"I'm not concerned with getting laps in." He gave her a significant look.

"I'll go change into my swimsuit," she said, though she might live to regret it. Robbie was melting through her resistance with a blow torch, and she trusted he'd take care of her heart, body, and soul. In this moment, she had no desire to keep her distance or worry about the future.

Robbie's grin made her feel like sparklers were waving around in her chest and abdomen. They walked together upstairs and changed into swimsuits in their respective suites. She liked the white one-piece Nani swimsuit with pink flowers on it that Madelyne had left for her.

Robbie was waiting outside her suite. He wore blue swim trunks and a smile. Her stomach flip-flopped.

"Even though I gave you a hard time, the Aquaman look was appealing," she admitted. "But this is even better."

"You like me clean shaven?"

"Yes, sir."

He'd said he wouldn't let a beard or his work come between them. There were also the fears of his imminent death and her mother, not to mention their different lives, but none of that seemed like sheer cliffs right now—more steep climbs they could make together.

Robbie eased in close. Alice appreciated each step, taking in the striated muscles of his chest, shoulders, arms, and abdomen. She loved how big and manly he was, but it was his irresistible smile and those bright blue eyes that she'd never get enough of.

Alice reached up and ran her hands along his jawline as she'd been longing to do since he shaved. He quivered in response to her touch.

"Did you just quiver?" she tried to tease, but her own voice wavered.

"Tough guys don't quiver," he said, his own voice low and husky.

She slid her hands along his jawline, behind his neck, and then threaded them through his thick hair. “I’ll make my tough guy quiver,” she said, smiling at the cheesiness of her own words and appreciating his mind-clouding and luscious mint, bergamot, and ginger scent.

“Will you now?”

Robbie bent closer as she arched up, her stomach tumbling with happy anticipation. Their lips met and an explosion of emotion, warmth, and depth infused the kiss. Alice was giving her heart to Robbie Perrine again, after a fifteen-year absence of his love and delight in her life.

It was risky, as she knew neither of them had any solutions for how to be together after their time in this beautiful sanctuary. Was the risk worth the reward? At the moment, it was more than worth it. She pushed all the worries and the future pain far away and kissed him more fervently.

Robbie swept her off her feet and against his chest, and she soared in his arms.

She never wanted to come back to reality.

Chapter

Seventeen

The next three days were filled with adventure, delight, and all things Robbie. Alice loved the mountain bike rides and hikes, delving into the scenery and being part of it. They also paraglided, soaring down the lush mountainside, which wasn't quite as inspiring as soaring in Robbie's arms.

They visited botanical gardens, churches, and castles, soaked in thermal baths, toured medieval old towns, and sauntered along promenades. The manmade architecture, history, and God's landscape were epic, memories she'd carry with her forever.

She felt safe in this oasis, but especially with Robbie. This time was a world removed from the pain and fear of what her normal life had become since Big Buddha had begun his attacks.

The standouts were the stunning alpine Lake Braies with its gorgeous emerald green water, Bolzano with its vineyards, and Alpe di Siusi with the largest high-altitude alpine meadow in Europe. They were all storybook perfect.

The gorgeous house they were staying in and the nearby town of Brixen were Alice's absolute favorite spots.

She didn't think anything could be better than her dreams of Venice, but this was.

If she could shirk her responsibilities back at home, she'd relocate here and never

look back.

She treasured each evening with Robbie as they swam in the pool, kissed, and teased.

She wasn't certain what was happening to her or if she should let it happen, but she couldn't stop her heart from opening to Robbie and letting him dive right in.

Just like he dove into the pool and swept her into his arms and against his chest while she laughed in delight.

Thursday was Juneteenth, and all the fears and worries crashed into her when she woke that morning. Robbie showed her his friend Ollie's research. Big Buddha had put another hit out on Robbie, but they didn't know where they were. Last known location was listed as Venice.

Still, to ease her fears and stay safe, they decided to stay at the house all day with the guards on high alert. They played board games, read books, swam in the pool, and watched a movie in the theater. It was relaxing and fun because of Robbie.

Friday was their last full day. The next morning, Saturday, they would fly home.

Alice pushed that impending deadline away.

She'd been able to escape from Big Buddha, the death surrounding her, work and the stress of building up her own business and clientele, and even the worries over her mother's health and how her mother would hate hearing that Robbie was back in her life.

In this idyllic paradise and time warp, all that mattered was Robbie and the joy of being together.

After making sure the hit on Robbie had been removed with another holiday behind them, they toured Val Gardena and Corina d'Ampezzo, alpine towns known for their snow-skiing, but on this beautiful June day they were blossoming with flowers, fertile, green, and gorgeous.

After a delicious dinner of wood-fired pizza, every bit as good as the pizza in Venice, they relaxed in the warm swimming pool. They weren't swimming tonight, simply cuddled close and looking out at the view. Alice savored their closeness and wanted to push tomorrow away as long as they could.

"Alice." Robbie eased away from her and turned so they were facing each other, one hand on her hip. "How are we going to keep our relationship strong when we go back home?"

Alice's eyes widened. He'd gone there. Was it finally time to face tomorrow?

She loved Robbie's take-charge attitude. In his mind, they would keep their relationship strong. Yet they hadn't fifteen years ago. He'd walked away, and she'd let him go. She'd lost all trust in him.

Her shoulders sagged, and she bit at her lip. "I don't know."

"What are you worried about?"

"What am I not worried about?" She backed into the wall of the swimming pool.

They weren't touching any longer, and a wall of thicker rock than the unique cave-looking wall between the swimming pool and the theater room instantly sprung up between them.

Their reprieve from real life was over, and it was all crashing down on her head.

“I’m worried about your career, my career, my mother, Big Buddha murdering you, you walking away and not contacting me for fifteen years again, you being killed on an assignment.

” She drew in a sharp breath. “Tell me how I can’t worry about any of those things. ”

Robbie nodded. “They’re all legitimate concerns, but Alice ... I can’t lose you again. After almost being killed on Saturday night, I knew I had to fight for us. Thank you for letting us grow close this past week.” He swallowed. “I love you, Alice. I don’t want to be without you.”

Her heart took off at a gallop. She loved him too, but love and real life were at odds. She could only stare at him. “Robbie, you’re a grounded and tough and practical man. Surely you can see that we don’t stand a chance.”

“Please don’t say that.” He eased closer, pinning her next to the wall with his large body.

His firm body made her pulse spike, but she couldn’t let him distract her with kisses that would be heavenly and relieve her fears but wouldn’t solve any of their issues.

“My career is busy and demanding, but I will buy a condo near your place in Atlanta and come home every chance I get.”

She nodded, though she doubted it would be enough.

What if they married and had children? Would she raise them as a single mother with a husband and father who came home for ‘visits’?

After losing her father at an impressionable age, she’d always wanted a partner who would be there for her children .

She was speeding away with her thoughts.

“I’ll support you in your career,” he said. “With the hundred thousand you earn this week, the savings I’ve built up over the past fifteen years, and the million dollars I’ll earn when you tell Brandon and Madelyne how you fell in love with me...” He paused and smirked.

She smacked her palm against his warm chest. “Don’t be too confident about that one.”

He only smiled, wrapping his hand around hers and holding it against his chest. “You’ll have plenty of money to get your firm going, and we both know you’ll excel with your talent and work ethic.”

“Thank you,” Alice managed. She had all kinds of ideas and visions from these two weeks surrounded by beauty created by heaven and man.

If money for office space, employees, and advertising wasn’t a factor, she could soar with her business.

“But I don’t need your savings or that million dollars. The hundred thousand will be plenty.”

“I want you to have it.” His blue eyes seared into her. “It’s just another way for me to show that I’m supporting you and want to be united in every way.”

Her pulse spiked and her stomach gave a happy flip. Money wasn’t close to the top of her priority list, but she wanted to be united in every way as well.

“I’ll find a way to win your mom over too,” he said, though he looked uncertain for the first time.

Alice prayed that could happen, but she didn't hold out a lot of hope.

Her mother was stubborn. The only people she liked were Alice, Priscilla Lavity, her son Preston, and sometimes Emeline.

She'd reserved a special kind of loathing for Robbie, stronger even than her dislike for Jack, Natalie, Ruby, and Odie.

Alice hated to admit it, but Robbie had probable cause to suspect her mother for their deaths.

Though she knew her mother adored her and would never hurt her so deeply or murder anyone, she definitely had more motivation than anyone else.

"Big Buddha will make a mistake and we'll catch him," Robbie said. "I'll have Aiden's people surround me on July Fourth. His tech expert, Ollie, is using all his skills to track who put the hit out on the web. "

"Could he really find him?"

"I think so. If not that way, he's exploring other money trails."

She drew in a breath and pushed it out. "Robbie ... I want to be with you, every minute, but the safest path, at least until your friend finds a way to track Big Buddha or the police or FBI capture him, is to not let anyone know we're back together.

Can we meet in secret until I know you're safe?

" And it would give her time to get her mother used to the idea so she wouldn't be horrible to him when Alice brought him around.

“I couldn’t live with myself if he killed you too. ”

Robbie released her hand and stepped back.

He leaned slightly forward and flexed his chest and arm muscles.

“Alice.” His serious tone contradicted the smirk on his lips and the teasing flex.

“You have no idea how well-trained I am. I have no fear of some wraith who hides behind hired hit men. I’m stronger and better equipped to fight than most men on the earth.

We’ve stayed safe with me unarmed and unprepared here in Europe. I’ll easily protect you at home.”

“Robbie. Stop,” she begged. She fully appreciated how strong he was, but it was terrifying that he thought he could stay safe. “This isn’t about protecting me. The guy isn’t after me. He’s after anyone I love.”

Hope flared in his gaze. “You ... love me?”

“Robbie.” She shook her head, turning to climb out of the pool and run from the searching look in his bright blue eyes.

She didn’t move fast enough. It wasn’t a surprise with how quick Robbie could move. He swooped her against his chest, and she felt weightless in the pool water and being held by him.

“Alice, please say we have a chance. I told you I wouldn’t let the beard come between us. I won’t let a killer or my work come between us either. We’ll find a way. Please say you love me like I love you.”

“Robbie, I want to be with you, love you, build a future together. But you devastated me when you left fifteen years ago. Even if you can stay safe, how do we know that won’t happen again?”

“We won’t let it happen,” he promised. “We’re mature adults now, with experience and pain that has taught us lessons. I won’t walk away, and we won’t let anything come between us.”

Alice stared at him. Anything? Did he think her mother wouldn’t try to come between them?

How would she manage that sticky relationship?

Her mother would be furious to find out Robbie was back in her life.

What about his demanding and perilous career?

How could that not come between them when he flew to some dangerous third-world country to infiltrate traffickers, drug lords, and crime bosses?

What about Big Buddha wanting to kill him?

It would only take one bullet from a hit man or asphyxiation like poor Odie or some other awful method of death.

Robbie didn’t wait for her to agree. He bent his head and claimed her lips with his.

Alice arched up into the kiss, deepening it and clinging to this man she loved.

For this moment, all the worries and risks floated away. She savored his kiss in their sanctuary and hoped her response conveyed how deeply she loved him. She did love

him, but tomorrow all the pain, and the fears, and real life would rear its ugly head.

She kissed him more fiercely, pushing tomorrow away. For now.

Chapter

Eighteen

Robbie didn't want to let Alice go that night, but they both returned to their respective suites to shower and sleep.

The next morning, she was bright and happy.

He could tell she was pretending and pushing the worries away, but they were snarling and barking at them like a determined Pit Bull Terrier.

They drove to the Valerio Catullo Airport with their four bodyguards and boarded one of Brandon's planes.

Brandon called, apologizing that he and Madelyne couldn't come meet them and then cheering when Robbie told him he'd earned the million dollars.

Alice gave him a soft smile, but there was too much concern in her eyes.

His overconfidence on the phone wasn't translating to his heart.

Did she really love him if she wouldn't choose to fight for them?

The flight was long but comfortable. Robbie loved the chance to simply be with Alice, talk, rest, eat, watch *The Italian Job* with Mark Wahlberg, and reminisce about the places in Venice they'd seen.

He'd liked Venice, but it had been rough to be at their 'honeymoon destination' and not truly be together, not to mention how it had felt to be hunted.

He'd loved their time in the Dolomites. He and Alice had reconnected, and she'd admitted she loved him. He squeezed her hand .

Everything would work out. He'd make sure of it.

Robbie had never failed on an assignment. He wouldn't fail at loving Alice and being there for her.

As soon as he had that thought, it hit him.

He had failed at assignments. He and Chase had protected three Syrian mothers and their seven children and that choice had taken the life of the senator their unit was protecting.

He'd failed on a trafficking assignment last spring, and who knew how many innocent people had been trafficked because of his mistakes?

What if he failed with Alice too?

As they descended to the De-Kalb, Peachtree Atlanta Airport, his stomach was doing funny things and worry smacked him in the face. How would he make it all work? Panic made his chest tight.

He said a prayer. He'd have to have faith and trust in God above, just as he did on dangerous missions.

The good Lord had guided and strengthened him.

Even when things hadn't gone right, he could see the Lord's hand.

Robbie couldn't give up on Him now, and he couldn't give up on Alice.

What they had was special, a once-in-a-lifetime love.

Robbie was being given a second chance, and he refused to make the same mistakes.

His phone buzzed as they landed. He glanced at it.

Aiden Porter. The gut churning was back with full force.

Usually it was Nick Jacobs that Robbie worked through.

If Aiden was calling, something was wrong or the mission was of the utmost importance.

Aiden might have information on Big Buddha, but Robbie feared that wasn't the reason for the call.

"What is it?" Alice asked.

Robbie forced a smile. "My boss."

Her smile looked as fake as his felt. "You'd better get it. After two weeks of vacation, you might have to get back to work."

"Alice..." Robbie let the call go to voicemail. He'd never let Aiden's calls go to voice mail before. "You want me to go back to work?"

"What I want has nothing to do with it." Her dark eyes were earnest. "I'll support you

as you go back to work.”

The jet taxied off the runway and to an exclusive hangar.

Robbie licked his lips. She’d support him. Was the give and take already happening, or was she letting him go because she wasn’t ready for a relationship and this would extend the deadline of them both having to commit to put each other first?

“You know I’m coming back to you as soon as I can,” he said firmly.

She nodded. She looked stiff, uncomfortable, and as if she was forcing herself to stay positive. Ah, Alice. Even if she was afraid of him being killed or afraid of him not coming back, she’d try to love and support him.

“I love you, Robbie,” she whispered.

His heart swelled at those endearing words. She loved him, but was love enough? Did she trust him? How could he earn her trust and be there for her if he left for a work assignment?

Robbie kissed her softly, pushing the worries away once again.

His phone buzzed again. He forced himself to pull back and answer the call.

The plane taxied to a stop as Aiden’s upbeat and charming voice came on, telling him they had a unique, dangerous, and time-sensitive job where his language skills and battle experience were a must. Nick was busy tracking a lead on Big Buddha or he would’ve called.

Robbie listened, and he thought he responded correctly.

He remembered telling Aiden he'd cut his hair and shaved.

Aiden responded to stop shaving, but it was fine.

The job didn't require a 'hairy mammoth'.

Robbie sort-of chuckled. He couldn't take his gaze off of Alice as she stood and stretched from the long plane ride.

She was supporting him.

Still, he felt like he should say no and quit the career he'd been made for. He'd had no choice but to quit his Army Ranger unit to protect his teammates. Quitting Aiden was the last thing he wanted to do.

No. Losing Alice was the last thing he wanted to do.

Could he have both?

Right now, it felt like Alice was half-in, half-out. Was the miracle of being together even a possibility?

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Chapter

Nineteen

The end of June and the first few days of July were some of the longest days of Alice's life.

Robbie was on a no-contact op for Aiden Porter.

Being with him for those two weeks then having him yanked away again gouged at her.

Alice had been smart to be wary and only wade into rekindling things with him.

If she had gone in over her head, it would hurt so much worse right now.

She dreamed of being together but didn't know what that looked like long-term.

There had been nothing new discovered about Big Buddha or any hits on the dark web for Robbie.

Robbie's work associate, Nick Jacobs, had reached out to her and let her know that Robbie was safe.

Similar to Juneteenth, Big Buddha would have no way of knowing where Robbie was with him deep into a mission.

At least he was safe. Would they be destined to have every holiday be a horror show?

Her mother was livid that she'd gotten back with Robbie. She kept repeating, "The ogre is not worthy of your angelic beauty."

Alice still tried to visit her every day, but sometimes it was only for a few minutes.

When she'd first returned home, she'd painted word pictures of all the sites she'd visited, showing her photos and videos online since she sadly had none of her own.

Then she'd told her about reconnecting and falling back in love with Robbie.

Her mother had ranted and raved that the 'behemoth' was not the right man for her.

So Alice had focused almost exclusively on work.

At least that was going well. The infusion of a million and two hundred thousand dollars in her account astounded her.

Brandon revealed that Robbie had requested that his million be transferred into Alice's account since they were 'together', and he had transferred some of his savings to make up the extra hundred thousand.

It was too much money, over the top really, a gift she'd never thought to receive. She met with a financial advisor for tax purposes and put some money in investments, but her business was soaring with the cash infusion.

Robbie could help her soar, even if he wasn't here. But nothing was like soaring in Robbie's arms, his kisses where all worries fled, and the happiness of being together.

Finally, it was the Fourth of July. She'd dreaded this day, but Nick Jacobs let her

know that morning that there was no sign of a hit request on the dark web for Robbie.

That was a miracle and a relief. Had Big Buddha given up, or did the murderer know Robbie was out of reach?

He would be safe when he wasn't with her.

That hurt, but him being alive was more important than her selfish desires to have him close.

If she could only get through today, she'd be able to relax. Until Labor Day. Hopefully she would see Robbie before Labor Day. Being apart was worse than she'd feared, especially because they couldn't even talk.

Her mother was hosting James, Preston, and Priscilla Lavity for an evening barbecue and fireworks show for the holiday.

Alice had no excuse not to go. She'd been trying to make new friends at church and was really enjoying the new designer, Shelly, that she'd hired, but it took time to develop strong friendships like she'd had with Ruby and Natalie, and she was reluctant to do anything outside of work or church and give Big Buddha another target.

Alice made it through dinner on the back patio with only a few concerned looks from her mother. Preston was flirting nonstop with her, which grated on her nerves. His parents and her mother watched in delight, as if they were a match made in heaven.

Alice had always tried to gently discourage or shift the conversation when he flirted, but this was getting out of hand.

After dinner, she planned to leave. She couldn't stand the thought of waiting around

for fireworks.

Preston would try to sit close and brush against her in the dark, and just the thought made her stomach squirm.

The staff was clearing dessert when the doorbell sounded from inside the house. The patio doors were open, and Alice looked toward the main area but couldn't see the entryway.

"I'll get it," she said, pushing her chair back.

"No, dear." Her mother yanked on her hand. "Jeremy will take care of whoever it is. I haven't invited anyone else to my home."

Her mother gave her a significant look. What did that mean?

Alice wanted to run for the front door on the off chance it was Robbie coming for her.

She didn't know how it could be. If he came, he'd go to her condo where he'd dropped her off two and a half weeks ago.

Her stomach flipped over at the fear of him showing up on the holiday.

He knew better than to do that. Right? Big Buddha would somehow find out and hit men would descend on Robbie and kill him.

Yanking her hand from her mother's grip, Alice put a hand to her heart to calm it.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" Priscilla asked.

"Yes, thank you. Just a little tired. I've been working a lot of hours. I'm going to head

home and rest.”

“Preston can see you home,” her mother said, a gleam in her dark eyes.

Alice whirled on her. What was this—the dark ages?

Did her mother think she could matchmake her with the man she wanted?

Alice looked to Preston, who seemed hopeful.

His father looked expectant and his mother looked sweet and encouraging, nodding to her.

Her mother, on the other hand, looked downright demanding.

“No, thank you,” Alice said. “I have my own car.”

She stood, bent, and kissed her mother on the cheek.

“Don’t you miss out on Preston for that ogre,” her mother begged. “You’re stop-dead gorgeous and Preston is perfect for you. ”

Straightening, Alice glared down at her mother.

How awkward she’d say that with the Lavitys right here.

A commotion sounded from the front of the house, but she ignored it.

She had to be brave and get the words out, put an end to her mother and Priscilla’s meddling and Preston’s hopes of them ever dating.

She looked around the table. “In case my mother hasn’t told you, I am officially dating Robbie Perrine. I love Robbie, and I don’t appreciate any of you trying to matchmake Preston and me.”

Preston’s jaw dropped, obviously shocked she’d choose anyone over him. “Robbie Perrine? The guy you dated in high school? Surely you’re outgrown your silly obsession with a military man who doesn’t have any money.”

“That’s what I said,” her mother threw in.

James and Priscilla simply gave her beseeching looks. As if she’d change her mind and love Preston as they’d always schemed.

“It really doesn’t matter what any of you think,” Alice said, tempted to tell them Robbie had plenty of money, but that was hardly the point. “I love Robbie, and he is my choice.”

She turned to walk away as a large form hurtled over the privacy fence and landed in her mother’s hydrangeas.

The man straightened and turned to face them. His button-down shirt and slacks were disheveled, his dark hair shaggy on top, and he had a full beard coming in. He also looked like he’d been in a brawl.

No man had ever looked so good to her.

“Robbie!”

Alice dashed down the patio steps and across the lawn. Robbie grinned and ran to her. As he reached her, he swept her off her feet and swung her around, his grin widening.

“You came,” she whispered.

“Always.”

He lowered her enough to capture her mouth with his own, still holding her off her feet. The kiss was deep and powerful and binding. His beard was soft, and she liked kissing him with it. He was a man. All man. Her man. Robbie was here. Nothing could go wrong now.

Setting her on her feet, he looked her over. “You look absolutely gorgeous. I can’t even tell you how much I’ve missed you. ”

“I missed you too,” she exclaimed. “But you look horrible.”

He chuckled at that. “Sorry. I came straight from Panama. I tried to clean up on the airplane and put on nicer clothes, but I didn’t have a razor.

Then the butler and guards wouldn’t let me in, so I had to incapacitate a couple security guards and come through the back door.

” He gestured to the hydrangeas. “Not the best way to start winning over my future mother-in-law.”

Alice laughed. Her mother would be livid about her flower bed, but she’d be more upset about Robbie’s presence on her property.

All that mattered was Robbie was here. They were together. She didn’t know for how long, but he’d proven he’d come back for her. She loved him and trusted him.

Robbie framed her face with his hands. “I love you,” he whispered, then bent and kissed her again.

A throat clearing from far too close yanked her out of the bliss of Robbie's kiss.

Her mother. And the Lavitys. She groaned. They'd have to face them.

"How dare you break into my home?" her mother snarled at him.

Robbie lifted his eyebrows, but he was still smiling, his blue gaze confident and focused on her and her alone. "Please trust me, Alice. There's a plan, and it's going to work out."

She was confused. A plan to win her mother over?

"Good luck," she murmured.

It would be great if he could win her mother over, but Robbie was her choice. In the end, her mother would have to figure out how to deal with that.

Robbie released her from the hug, turning to face the foursome.

He took Alice's hand and gave it a squeeze.

It strengthened her. She knew her mom loved her, and it would be sticky to navigate their relationship, but Robbie staying by her side wasn't negotiable.

Not to her. Not anymore. He'd come for her, and she was almost giddy with happiness.

"Happy Fourth of July," he said. "I thought it imperative that I get to Alice on this most important of days."

The four people staring at them didn't move .

“No,” Alice cried out suddenly. Her stomach clenched and all the good feelings disappeared.

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How could she have forgotten?

She whirled on him and wrapped her free hand around his arm.

“Robbie! What are you thinking? You should’ve stayed in hiding.

Why would you come today of all days? The day the murders started.

Big Buddha would love to have it come full circle.

You need to leave. Hide. Now!” She pushed at his arm, terror ripping at her insides.

“Not even Alice wants you here,” Preston said, looking down his nose at Robbie.

“You need to leave.”

“That is not what I said.” She turned to Robbie, who was frowning at her. “I love you, Robbie, and you have to be safe. What if Big Buddha finds you?”

“That’s one of the reasons I wrapped up my job and took a redeye flight to get back to America. We’re going to finish this.”

Robbie was brave and strong and completely out of his mind.

“No! Please. Let’s go hide somewhere. Together. Please,” she begged, her stomach flipping and her nerves like taut strings. Her eyes darted around, waiting for a sniper to shoot him from one of the trees.

“Alice.” Robbie’s voice was patient, his blue eyes pleading with her to support him, but she couldn’t support him in being murdered. “Please trust me.”

Alice looked up. Four of her mother’s bodyguards were waiting for her command. To escort Robbie off the premises?

“Let’s go,” she whispered to Robbie. They had to hide and somehow get through this day. “Keeping you safe is all that matters today.”

“I’ll be safe. I promise you it’s all going to work out.”

Alice stared into his eyes. She wanted to trust him as much as she loved him. Finally, she whispered, “Okay.”

He nodded to her, then turned to face the group.

“Goodnight,” she muttered diplomatically to her mother and the Lavitys, then tugged on Robbie’s hand.

They made it past the four guards without any adverse effects. Her mother muttered something under her breath, but Alice didn’t catch much more than ‘ogre’ .

“Don’t ever call the love of my life an ogre again,” Alice hurled at her. “I told you Robbie is my choice. You’re going to have to figure out how to deal with that.”

Her mother’s eyes widened, and she fell back a step. Alice never snipped. At anyone.

Robbie squeezed her hand. They walked into the main living area with the guards trailing them.

Alice was fed up. She turned and glared at the guards. “We are leaving by choice.

You do not need to follow us. Back off.”

They stopped, but they had their orders from her mother, and they’d have to attempt to follow them.

Alice tugged Robbie forward again.

“I love my angelic Alice, but the sassy Alice is breathtaking too,” he said in a low rumble. “Especially when the sass isn’t directed at me.”

She laughed, but as they made it through the living area and into the hall leading to the front doors, she stiffened and stopped walking. “Robbie, I’m afraid to go outside. Big Buddha will know you’re here and come for you.”

“I’m counting on it.” He turned to her with a brave grin. “I put out a challenge on the dark web and told him to come find me on the Fourth of July in Atlanta.”

“Robbie. You didn’t.”

“We’ll catch this guy and then we’ll be free to be together.”

“Until you have to leave for the next mission.”

“There is that.” He bent and stole a quick kiss. “I ached for you every day, Alice. I talked to Aiden about shorter missions or local assignments. It won’t always work, but Aiden agreed and understood my desire to stay closer to home. I’ll try to make it work to be together more.”

“Oh, Robbie.” She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him.

The kiss quickly took on a life of its own. Maybe her mother’s bodyguards would

have to throw them out after all. She smiled against his lips and kissed him deeper.

“Ahem,” a sweet female voice said from much too close.

They pulled apart to face Priscilla.

“Don’t mind me.” Priscilla smiled. “If you can spare just a few minutes, I thought I could offer some advice for Robbie to get through to Marianne. She’s had a hard life, and she loves Alice more than anyone. I can help you win her over.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Robbie said.

Alice felt warmth for her pseudo aunt. Priscilla had always wanted her and Preston together, but she must’ve accepted that Alice loved Robbie and wanted to help.

“Thank you, Priscilla.”

Priscilla smiled. “Let’s slip into the study.” She tilted her head to the door. “Alice, will you be a dear and go get my asthma inhaler and my prednisone from my purse and a water bottle from the kitchen? I’m struggling with the heat today, and all this drama is pushing me over the edge.”

Alice didn’t want to leave Robbie’s side, but Priscilla’s breathing was short and she didn’t want her mother’s only friend to have an asthma attack. She looked at Robbie. He nodded to her. He’d be safe inside the house. Chatting with Priscilla would prolong facing the dangerous world outside.

“I’ll be all right with Priscilla.” Something unsettling glinted in his blue eyes as he opened the office door for Priscilla and smiled at Alice.

“I’ll be right back,” she said.

She walked away as the door closed. Something felt off, and her stomach churned.

It made sense, of course. It was the Fourth of July and Robbie was here. She was ecstatic he'd come for her, but Big Buddha would make a move. She absolutely knew it. Where would he attack and how was Robbie so certain he could stay safe?

Alice wanted nothing more than to go to her apartment and hide out there, kissing and hugging Robbie until the holiday was over.

Rushing back to her mother, James, and Preston, she told them, "Priscilla needs her prednisone, asthma inhaler, and a water bottle."

They all sprung to action, searching Priscilla's purse for the needed medications. They couldn't find them in the overflowing and large purse. James offered to go to the car and look for them while the rest of them kept looking.

Alice chafed to get back to Robbie and hoped Priscilla's asthma attack didn't flare into something dangerous .

At least her mother and Preston were focused on finding Priscilla's medications and not telling her she shouldn't be with Robbie.

There was one thing she was certain of ... she was meant to be with Robbie.

Chapter

Twenty

Robbie walked into the spacious office with Priscilla Lavity.

The lady appeared sweet. She was a small sixty-something lady wearing expensive clothing and jewelry.

If Ollie's research proved correct, this unassuming-looking lady might tell him much more than how to get along with his future mother-in-law.

Priscilla blinked up at him. "Marianne is a hard woman, but she cares deeply for Alice."

She was close by his side. Really close.

"So if I prove how much I love Alice and treat her right, I might win her approval?"

"Might." She smiled.

He smiled back. "Is there a chance I can convince her murderous best friend to not have me killed next?"

Her eyes widened. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"Aiden's people found the money trail, Priscilla.

It was cleverly hidden. James has been Marianne's financial consultant under an assumed name since her husband overdosed.

Does Marianne know you hired a killer to take out Jack, Ruby, Natalie, and Odie, or was it James or Preston's plan?

I assume the hope was Alice would turn to Preston and you'd get even more money out of Marianne. "

"I've put up with that witch for thirty years," Priscilla sneered, all pretense of sweetness disappearing. "I deserve much more than I've taken, and Preston deserves sweet Alice for a wife and to inherit Marianne's money."

Robbie lifted his eyebrows, folding his arms across his chest. "Sounds like you've got it all worked out."

"I do. Except for you."

"Sorry to mess up your plans."

"Don't worry. I won't let you."

Robbie chuckled at that.

Priscilla drew out a knife from her pocket and flipped it open. He was shocked she'd even attempt this. She was crazier than he'd imagined. She'd never get close to him with that knife.

Turning the knife, she sliced her arm, dropped the knife on the floor, and then screeched at the top of her lungs as she backed to the office door, flung it open, and screeched, "Big Buddha! Robbie is Big Buddha!"

Robbie had to hand it to her. He hadn't seen that one coming.

He followed her out of the office and into the hallway as the security guards converged around them. Alice, Preston, and Marianne ran their way. Marianne was at the back of the group, huffing and puffing.

James came in through the front door holding an asthma inhaler and a pill bottle. "What's happening?" he demanded.

"He's Big Buddha," Priscilla hollered. "He tried to kill me. I turned and he cut my arm instead of sticking a knife through my chest." She held up her arm as proof. "It makes so much sense. He's always wanted Alice. Of course he would kill those close to her."

Robbie's gut churned. He looked at Alice. She'd never believe this garbage. Would she?

"It does make sense," Marianne said in a high wheezy voice. "How could you?" she hurled at Robbie, then turned to Alice. "I knew I was right about him."

Preston and James looked as pompous as ever but also fearful. They both stepped back behind the security guards as if he'd come for them and kill them next .

"Call the police," Marianne yelled to her guards. "And keep us safe from him."

"Help, help," Priscilla screeched, holding her bleeding arm.

"Stop it, Mother," Alice called to be heard over the commotion. "Enough, Priscilla. Robbie is not Big Buddha and would never hurt anyone innocent. He especially would never hurt me." She focused her dark gaze on him. "I love you, Robbie, and I trust you. I'm sorry Priscilla is acting insane."

Robbie smiled, relief pouring through him. He had the proof, but Alice's trust meant everything. "Thank you, Alice."

"Shoot him, shoot him," Priscilla screamed to the guards.

The guards all pulled their guns and pointed them at him.

"Yes! Shoot him!" Priscilla cheered even as she backed toward the front door. She would probably try to make her escape during the bedlam. Her husband was already close to the front door, having come in with the medications. "James," she whispered, tilting her head.

The security guards turned their guns on James and Priscilla.

"What are you doing?" Marianne shrieked.

"He's the bad guy!" Priscilla hollered. "Keep your guns on him."

Robbie smiled at Price, River, Merrick, and Curtis. They'd taken out the other guards and Alice hadn't even noticed them.

"Price?" Alice whispered, leaning against a side table as if weak from all the stress. He wished he could hold her up, but they had to play this out first.

He unbuttoned the top few buttons of his shirt.

"What are you doing?" Alice asked, staring at his chest.

Chuckling, he revealed the listening device tucked into his shirt and then he pulled out the camera disguised as a pin in his shirt pocket.

“No!” Priscilla gasped.

“Priscilla Lavity, and probably James and Preston, have been scamming Marianne Marshall for almost twenty years. The investments through the Portsmouth Company started shortly after your father’s death, Alice.

When I asked if she’d murdered Jack, Ruby, Natalie, and Odie, Priscilla said she’d put up with the ‘witch’ for years and she and Preston deserved much more money than they’d taken and Preston deserved to be married to the angel Alice.

Isn’t that how you phrased it, Mrs. Lavity? ”

The lady’s face was turning an ugly purple. She flung herself at Robbie. Metal glinted in her hand. Dodging to the side, Robbie grasped her hand and twisted. She cried out in pain.

“You need a little help?” River asked, smirking.

“Nah. It’s all under control.”

“Looks like you’re struggling there, pal,” Price added. “I’ll take her so you can hold Alice. She’s looking a little pale.”

Robbie handed Priscilla off. The woman crumpled, sobbing, against Price. James and Preston looked as if they were going to bolt.

“Watch them,” Robbie cautioned River, Merrick, and Curtis.

The men nodded and approached the Lavitys as sirens sounded in the distance.

Marianne looked confused and paler than Alice.

Robbie swooped Alice off her feet and against his chest. She leaned into him and all was right with the world.

“You’re safe,” she whimpered.

“Thank you for believing in me.”

“Always.” The pledge was intense and the kiss she gave him even more so.

Robbie had to stay grounded so he wouldn’t fall over with Alice in his arms, but he was soaring from her kiss and her love.

Chapter

Twenty-One

It was late when a police officer drove Alice, Robbie, and her mother back to her mother's house.

Alice and Robbie had thanked River, Price, Curtis, and Merrick and said their goodbyes earlier at the station.

Alice was counting her blessings that Robbie had the bodyguards from their trip come to help him out.

She loved that he'd been so brave as to draw out Priscilla and end the Big Buddha, even though it had terrified her.

Aiden's guys hadn't told her the whole story, but Robbie and Aiden's tech guy, Ollie, had figured it out. She had been right to trust him.

Ollie and Robbie hadn't been sure if it was James or Priscilla that had instigated the murders. Priscilla insisted she'd acted alone all these years, talking Marianne into investing her fortune with James after Alice's dad died.

The police didn't believe her. James had to be involved, or he wouldn't have set up a different company name for Marianne's investments.

Priscilla had hired all the killers in Big Buddha's name to try to get Alice to turn to

Preston and assure her son's future.

The real kicker for Marianne was when James buckled and admitted he and Priscilla had orchestrated Alice's dad's death.

They knew how large his life insurance and trust funds were and that they could control Marianne if she was alone and vulnerable.

Preston was claiming innocence. So far, there was no proof he was involved. It shocked Alice deeply and made her ache for her mother. She'd been controlled and manipulated by Priscilla and James. To think they could resort to murder to keep living their high-dollar lifestyle.

Robbie and Alice walked her mother to the door, escorted by two guards.

She wasn't sure what her mother was thinking or feeling, but she looked morose.

She'd been betrayed by her lifelong friend and learned her husband hadn't committed suicide but had been murdered.

She'd been understandably quiet at the police station.

Alice was sick about all the deaths of those she loved and knew it would take some time before she could forgive and let it go, but she'd pray for her and her mother to someday find that peace.

Her mother turned to face them on the wide porch. "Well, that was a crap show."

Alice almost smiled. Her mother always turned to sarcasm.

"Are you all right?" Robbie asked, concern in his blue eyes.

Alice adored him. Her mother had been nothing but awful to him, and he was classy and concerned for her.

Her mother squinted up at him. “The behemoth is your choice, then?” she asked Alice. “Truly?”

“Robbie is my choice, Mother.” Alice squeezed his hand and noticed his smirk.

He wasn’t bothered by the insult. It amused him.

She thought her mother was trying to deflect from the pain of this night, but she still wouldn’t put up with her disparaging Robbie.

“I love him and you’re going to have to learn to love him too. ”

“Well, loving him is a stretch, but ...” She looked Robbie over, sniffed, and tilted her chin imperiously.

“You came through for us, found and took down a murderer and a thief. It rips me apart that Priscilla could betray me.” She paused and her voice quivered with emotion.

“I will be woman enough to admit that I may have judged you wrong, ogre.”

“Mother,” Alice said, exasperated.

Her mother smiled slightly. “Robbie Perrine ... My daughter is stop-dead gorgeous and an angel. You ... you don’t look quite as awful as I remember, so maybe your children won’t be sinfully ugly and I won’t cringe every time I look across the dinner table at your smirking face.”

“Mother!”

Robbie only chuckled.

“If you love my daughter and treat her right, I won’t ... hate you quite as much.”

“Mother. Seriously?” Alice shouldn’t have been shocked. It was her mother, after all.

“It’s a start,” Robbie said. He grinned at Alice, released her hand, and wrapped his arm around her waist. “We don’t want to push her too fast.” He winked at her mother.

“He is smarter than he looks,” her mother said.

“My goodness. Am I going to have to run interference with you two?”

“Nah,” Robbie said. “I can take the insults. You should’ve heard the way my Ranger unit talked to each other. You saw how Price and River let me have it. Nothing Marianne says could cut as deep as they did.”

“Challenge accepted,” her mother said, smiling for the first time that evening.

Robbie threw back his head and laughed. “You know I always loved a challenge.”

Her mother actually laughed too. Alice didn’t know what to make of their teasing, but it seemed to be what her mother needed to help her deal with the pain of Priscilla’s deception and betrayal. Robbie was amazing to deal with it all so well.

“Goodnight, beautiful princess,” her mother said to Alice, calling her a name she hadn’t used in years. “Goodnight, Beast.” Then she opened the door and stalked inside.

Alice actually smiled, thinking of how she and Robbie had teased about him being the Beast.

“Goodnight, future mother-in-law,” Robbie called after her.

“Ooh, that was a deep cut,” her mother threw back. “Give me at least a few years to get used to that one. ”

“Nope. A few weeks, if I have my way.” Robbie pumped his eyebrows at Alice.

“A few months,” Alice returned, her body heating up at the idea of marrying Robbie.

“You know I always loved a challenge.” He swooped her off her feet and kissed her deeply.

The door slammed behind them.

“I think you’ve already won this challenge,” she whispered against his lips.

“You’ll marry me in a few weeks?”

She laughed. “No. I meant the challenge of winning my trust, and my heart.”

Robbie kissed her. “That’s the most important challenge. I’ll work on talking you into a quicker wedding date and getting your mom to like me ... later.”

Then he kissed her, and she was soaring. If he kept kissing her like that, the wedding might be as quick as he wanted.

Thank you for reading Robbie and Alice’s story. I just adore them! I hope you love the European Romance Adventures!

European Romance Suspense

Chase: Austria

Robbie: Venice

Emmett: Lake Como

Parker: Switzerland

Nelson: Augustine

Rockwell: Rome

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Eliza ‘Lizzy’ Birmingham’s mouth gaped open and her eyes were bigger than silver dollars.

The charismatic bachelor billionaire of the year Brandon Richards and his model girlfriend Madelyne Presley were standing outside a shiny, white jet at the small Eudora Kansas airport.

Even more shocking, they were waiting for her.

Because of this illustrious couple, Lizzy was going on a dream vacation, to her dream spot.

Salzburg, Austria.

Salzburg ... Austria ... as in the very location of the filming of her favorite show of all time, The Sound of Music .

Maybe she’d get to see the Nonnberg Abbey, Hellbrunn Palace, Schloss Leopoldskron Palace, and the lake and the gazebo where the Captain and Maria kissed, ah ...

She could already imagine the lush green hills leading up to awe-inspiring and soaring mountains.

Were there really cows with bells and wildflowers?

Could she sing in the hills like Maria and meet a man as handsome and good as the

Captain?

Captain von Trapp had been stern and grumpy at first, then revealed what a fabulous man he was.

Her former boyfriends had been charming, and then the masks were peeled off and belittling monsters climbed out .

Pushing away the pain and worry and even her dreams of finding all the spots in Salzburg from The Sound of Music , she focused on Brandon and Madelyne.

They were picture-perfect. He was so debonair in his suit and had a radiant confidence and a fabulous, welcoming smile.

Madelyne was breathtakingly beautiful, but benevolence sparkled in her green eyes.

Lizzy concentrated and was able to not trip and fall walking up to them. It wouldn't do to reveal her disability within the first few seconds of meeting the glorious and celebrated couple.

They were surrounded by at least a dozen armed men in polos and golf pants. Their clothing looked too mild for their hulking muscles and intense expressions. They appeared as if they ate nails for breakfast.

Brandon's suit and aura looked more dapper than James Bond, while Madelyne wore a gorgeous pale pink fitted jacket and skirt that Lizzy suspected cost more than her car.

Somehow they didn't make Lizzy feel like less.

Her ex-boyfriend Darren's family had been wealthy—by Lawrence, Kansas

standards.

She'd won their hearts, but they'd looked down their noses at her initially.

Lizzy was grateful she wore the Anne Klein floral dress she'd found at Goodwill. It was a fraction the cost of one of Brandon's socks, but it was the nicest item of clothing she owned. Blessedly, it covered the knife wound on her chest and it only had a small red stain on the back.

Not a problem at all. As long as she made certain not to turn around.

"Miss Eliza Birmingham," the famed Brandon Richards said, extending his hand. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I'm Brandon Richards and this is Madelyne Presley."

"Neither of you need any introduction," Lizzy gushed. "Oh, my, goodness. I absolutely love the both of you." She grabbed each of their hands and squeezed rather than shook. "Can we be friends?"

Brandon and Madelyne both smiled at her exuberance.

"You and I will be lifelong friends," Brandon assured her.

That reassured Lizzy even more, but it seemed to upset Madelyne.

The beauty shot him an exasperated look, which only made him laugh louder.

So the rumors were true. Brandon cheated on Madelyne nonstop.

Maybe his lifelong friend comment had been a flirtation, though Lizzy hadn't taken it as such.

Him hurting Madelyne made Brandon's likeability drop.

The model rolled her eyes. Her sweet expression returned as she focused back on Lizzy. "Yes, we will be dear friends," she said, every bit as sunshine-y and beautiful as she was on social media. "We're so grateful to you and all you do to help children in your area."

The words were a bit flowery, and Lizzy blushed.

She wasn't certain how to respond, but she appreciated Madelyne's praise.

Apparently Madelyne had found her and her center on social media, and she and Brandon were giving similar trips and gifts to other women.

She was flattered and a bit apprehensive about what to expect.

She'd never left Kansas, and here she was meeting famous and wealthy people and flying to Austria. It was completely out of her sphere.

"You are a charitable angel," Brandon agreed. "And we're thrilled to gift you this two-week vacation to one of our favorite places in Europe and a hundred thousand dollars to reward someone who has given so much of herself."

Just like that, Lizzy forgot her frustrations with Brandon being a playboy and Madelyne putting up with it.

That hundred thousand dollars was going to make an outstanding difference for her center.

"I'm extremely grateful for you," she gushed.

“A million times more grateful than I can express. So much love! Please, please know I will only use that money for the children.”

“We know. We’ve researched you.” Brandon smiled.

She shifted uncomfortably at that. They knew she lived in a miniscule, unfurnished—except for a couple refurbished chairs and her bed—apartment above her center and rarely spent any of her salary on herself?

“We are so excited for you to have this adventure,” Madelyne continued, “and we are pairing you with the kindest man who can also protect you. He is one of Brandon’s closest friends. I pray we’ll all be friends for many years to come. ”

“Many years,” Brandon repeated.

Again Madelyne shot him a look. Was it something beyond his cheating that bothered her?

“Bless you,” Lizzy said, though she was uneasy about this ‘pairing’. “I guess you both know about my ... past.” She was always too profuse, but she didn’t like talking about her controlling and sometimes abusive exes or the man who’d almost killed her.

She glanced at the guard closest to Brandon.

He was huge and buff. He offered her a smile.

The sincerity and kindness in his dark eyes surprised her.

She returned the smile, hoping they all didn’t know about her rocky past and praying her face didn’t show how uncomfortable all these tough dudes made her.

She'd always been drawn to well-built and handsome men, and she had been burned every time.

Now, with the notes from her attacker getting more threatening, escaping to Europe for two weeks and being with a kind man who could still protect her sounded like the ticket.

Even still, she was hesitant about being alone with some bodyguard she'd never met.

"Yes," Madelyne said. "That's why we've matched you with the ultra-tough, retired Army Ranger Lieutenant Chase Tenley, now a police officer and one of the best men we know."

"That's right," Brandon said. "Chase is your perfect partner."

Lizzy's smile disappeared. She'd only broken up with Darren a month ago.

She wasn't ready for any kind of 'ultra-tough partner', perfect or otherwise.

She backed up a few steps, seconds away from spinning and bolting to her rusted out Ford Fiesta in the parking lot.

The only problem was she couldn't spin and run.

They'd see the stain on her dress and know instantly something was wrong with her legs.

"Um ... this might be a mistake," she whispered, her eyes darting around at all the tough guys.

"I'm grateful to military heroes like Army Rangers, but I'm not comfortable with buff

and attractive men.

They like to belittle and smack me around when they get to know me.

Too chatty.” She raised and lowered her shoulders, not telling them her disability was the prime motivator for her father’s and exes’ frustrations with her .

The large men somehow drew closer. Their faces looked intent on protecting her from anyone who would injure her. Her heart beat faster. She needed some space.

Could she back up all the way to the parking lot, or would she trip?

“Oh, Eliza,” Madelyne murmured.

“Lizzy,” she automatically corrected. “We’re friends, remember?”

Brandon nodded, as self-assured as ever.

“Best of friends,” he said, his blue eyes intense.

“Which means Madelyne and I would only pair you with someone who is kind to a fault and would rather cut off his own arm than hurt you. Chase is a ‘buff and attractive man’ and a military hero. He’s also one of the best men I know.

” He gestured around. “All of my lifelong friends are good to the core, but Chase is special. He’s more thoughtful and kind than any man out there. ”

Lizzy’s chest felt tight. Despite his reassuring words, the large men around them were forming a protective circle, as if one of her exes would drive up to the airport and attack. She appreciated them, but their proximity made her feel unsteady.

The huge dude who'd smiled at her murmured, "Give her some space."

Miraculously, the rest of the men fanned back toward the plane, and she was able to catch a full breath.

Madelyne and Brandon studied her with concern. Brandon rocked on the soles of his expensive cowboy boots.

"I'm sure none of your men would hurt anyone ..." That wasn't quite right. These men were bodyguards and most likely retired military. They had to 'hurt' people in their line of work. "I mean, they wouldn't hurt anyone innocent, and I pray you'll forgive me and not take offense. Just in my life ..."

How could she explain that starting with her own father to every boyfriend she'd ever had to the deranged man who'd almost killed her, she'd been hurt emotionally and physically.

She restrained herself from rubbing at the barely healed knife wound on her chest. Each of the men in her life had been body-builder types similar to these brawny men.

She hated to stereotype, but how did the saying go?

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twenty times, learn a lesson, girlie ?

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“I hate that I feel like this,” she squeaked out.

“I’ve always been happy and effusive, but after my boyfriend Darren knocked me to the ground when I broke up with him, and two days later Grady Worthen ripped me open with a knife ...

” she trailed off and put a hand over her scar.

The wound was healed, but it seemed to throb.

She was saying too much. “I’m so sorry that I’m a conflicted mess. ”

“Please.” Madelyne stepped forward and took her hand.

“I promise you that each of our friends”—she gestured around to the men—“are protectors, not abusers. And I promise you that Chase is so kind that you will feel comfortable around him. He will protect you, and this will be the best two weeks of your life.”

“Big claims,” Lizzy murmured.

“True claims,” Brandon said, stepping up to Madelyne’s side. “Please trust us, Lizzy.”

Lizzy wished she could step away, pray and stew and be reassured she wasn’t putting herself in another awful situation. She looked to the bodyguard who had asked the others to back off. He’d also taken a step back but was close enough to hear the

conversation.

“Ma’am, my name is Rockwell. I’ve known Chase since middle school, and I swear to you he is everything Brandon is saying—a true hero and a gentleman. He’ll keep you safe.”

She focused on Rockwell’s dark eyes. “Um, thank you.”

He nodded and gestured around to his men with a deep-brown hand.

“I’ll tell you what. You don’t have to trust this group of large and intimidating men.

But can you trust one man? A man who personally escorted and sat by my grandma at every high school basketball game because the crowd overwhelmed her.

A man who asked a girl with Down Syndrome to Prom and also asked my cousin, who’d never been on a date in high school because she is six-three and intimidated most boys, to Senior Ball? ”

He paused to let his words sink in, his dark eyes sincere.

Lizzy’s heart was still thumping fast, but she liked the image of this man Rockwell was creating for her.

“Just a moment.” She held up a hand, closed her eyes, and said a prayer for protection and strength.

Peace washed over her .

Her eyes opened. She nodded to Madelyne, and then she stepped forward. It was a brave leap of faith, but she did it. “I’ve got this, and God has got me.”

Madelyne cheered and hugged her. “You’ll be so happy you chose to go.”

“Yes, you will.” Brandon grinned and took her arm, escorting her toward the plane.

Lizzy wasn’t quite comfortable with his touch, too famous and buff, but she could imagine it was instinctive for him.

Brandon and Madelyne said their goodbyes, but Rockwell stayed close by. Four of the men followed Brandon and Madelyne. The other four waited next to the plane.

“Eliza,” Rockwell said. “These men will accompany you to Austria and unobtrusively watch over you and my friend Chase.”

She started to feel pressure in her chest again, but she’d prayed and she had to have faith.

“Miss Eliza,” the closest one said. “I’m Captain Peter Macon. Please call me Peter.”

“Hello, Peter. It’s Lizzy.” She tried to extend an olive branch.

They shook briefly.

He tilted his head and released her hand. “Elijah, Joshua, and Tony.”

Each of the men nodded to her but didn’t offer their hands. They all gave her what they probably thought were welcoming smiles, but they were too stiff and seemed as uncomfortable around her as she was around them. Tony was massive. The other men were buff but not veritable giants.

“Nice to meet each of you,” she managed, wondering why Peter hadn’t shared the other men’s last names. “Thank you for watching out for me.”

“Great assignment,” Peter said, obviously the spokesman and leader of the group. “Salzburg and Hallstatt are some of my favorite places on earth.”

“I’m ecstatic to see them,” she said, relaxing a bit. “I can’t wait to run in the green grass and sing ‘the hills are alive with the sound of music’.”

They all smiled a little more genuinely at that. She didn’t tell them she couldn’t run.

Tony murmured to Elijah. “What song is that?”

Elijah gave him an incredulous look. “Your sisters didn’t make you watch The Sound of Music?”

“No sisters.”

“Lucky.”

“Not lucky.” Lizzy smiled at them, feeling a little more comfortable. She’d always wanted a sister. “Maybe we could watch the best movie on earth on the flight.”

She’d heard about watching movies on flights, though she’d never traveled.

Anywhere. She and her mom had made ends meet, and as an adult running a family support center, she had enough for food, some clothing and toiletries, and the rent payment on her center, but never any extra to travel.

This was a thrilling adventure. If only she could stay safe.

“Sounds like a plan,” Peter said kindly.

“You’re all right?” Rockwell asked Lizzy in an undertone.

“Yes,” she said bravely. “Thank you.”

He nodded to her.

Lizzy lifted a hand, climbed onto the plane, and looked around.

There was a huge screen on the front wall, eight nice leather recliners, a long counter in the back with a fridge and snacks, and a couple doors she assumed were bathrooms or storage but might have been a bedroom.

Who knew? She’d never been on a regular jet and here she was flying on a real private jet. Insane.

She settled into a leather recliner as soft as butter. The men sat down as well, but they thoughtfully left the recliners closest to her open, obviously giving her some space.

They soared into the air not five minutes later. She gripped the hand rests, and her stomach lifted as she cried out, “Ooh!” which made the men smile.

They reached altitude quickly and Tony explained that they wouldn’t have a flight attendant, but she was welcome to any food or drinks she would like.

He led her to the back of the plane. She oohed and ahed over all the options, finally grabbing small bags of trail mix, Swedish fish, and Skinny Pop popcorn and a water and declaring she was ready for the movie.

Elijah figured out how to cue *The Sound of Music* for her.

Surprisingly, most of the men seemed to pay attention to the movie, at least looking up from their phones and smiling when she sang along or laughed out loud.

Lizzy relaxed, and her excitement grew as she watched her favorite movie.

“Oh, I hope I can go there,” she kept exclaiming, and one of the men would nod and sometimes murmur, “I hope you can.” They were being very kind, and she appreciated the distraction from worrying about some unknown guy she was going to spend two weeks with.

After the movie, she ate a delicious dinner, then they dimmed the lights and Elijah showed her how to lay the recliner down flat like a bed. She was able to sleep, which was a pleasant surprise and made her realize she was trusting these men.

When she awoke, they were all eating again.

She ate part of a breakfast burrito and half of an acai bowl.

Her stomach hurt as she'd done nothing but sleep after eating last night and she wasn't hungry.

She was getting more nervous about meeting her match for this week, and she always ate too much when she was nervous.

If only she had asked Brandon, Madelyne, and Rockwell why she had to be partnered with this friend of theirs.

She could've brought her mom or Janie along, but they'd offered this gift and she wasn't in a position to set the parameters.

Did they think she and this Chase would hit it off?

Taking her backpack into the bathroom, she freshened up as best she could. Maybe she should change her clothes, but this was her best dress and she wanted to look

good when she met her protector.

They finally landed in Salzburg, Austria, and out the window she saw soaring green peaks. “Mountains,” she cried out, clapping her hands together. Even the fear over placing her trust in an unknown man disappeared at the glorious sight of mountains.

The four men escorted her off the plane. It smelled fresh and like spring, even though it was June and hot at home. They walked to a dark gray Mercedes-Benz SUV, acting as if she were royalty and they were her own personal bodyguards.

Comfortable with them because of their kindness on the plane, Lizzy managed to push away her worries and gape at the scenery.

She stared at the soaring mountains framing in a lush green valley with a river running through it.

“Oh wow, oh wow. There’s the castle. You know, Hohensalzburg Fortress from the movie? ”

Tony nodded. “I remember.”

“Can you even believe it? Perched on a hill above the town, the fortress stands watch over the gorgeous valley. Oh, I hope we tour the fortress and Nonnberg Abbey. I just have to see the town square. You know, Residenzplatz and the Schloss Leopoldskron Palace and Schloss Hellbrunn. Is that all a part of our two weeks? Oh, how I hope so.”

“I hope so too,” Elijah offered.

Instead of driving toward the main part of town and the fortress, Tony navigated in the wrong direction, away from the fortress and out of the valley.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Lizzy exclaimed, turning backward in her seat to keep Salzburg in her view. “You’re driving the wrong way.”

They all gave her indulgent smiles.

“We’re staying in Hallstatt,” Peter explained from the driver’s seat. “It’s a little over an hour away and even more scenic than Salzburg.”

“More scenic.” She gestured around at the most gorgeous town, river, valley, and mountains on earth. “How can you top this?”

He chuckled. “I don’t think you’ll be disappointed.”

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She was disappointed. She wanted to stay right here in Salzburg, at the Von Trapp mansion if possible.

Okay, she knew that wasn't possible, as they'd used a Hollywood set and different locations in Salzburg for the interior and exterior of the home, but she wanted to see every iconic filming location.

She wanted to sing and get carried away in the music and the picturesque indoor and outdoor settings.

"Do you think we'll come back for a Sound of Music tour?"

"It's on the schedule for the end of next week," Peter said.

"Oh, bless you." She relaxed into the seat and was quickly distracted and had plenty of mind-blowing scenery to occupy her.

She gaped at and commented on the picturesque canyon overflowing with greenery.

A river rushed along beside the car and if she tilted her head, she could almost see the tip-tops of the green and blue mountains.

These mountains blew her away. They were as thrilling and novel to her as the fortress, the Nonnberg convent, the Von Trapp mansion, and the opera house made from a stone quarry.

Would she be able to hike or bike and explore the gorgeous mountains? What would

she do when her legs got tired? She'd be mortified if her protector noticed the disability her former boyfriends had at first tolerated and eventually ridiculed her for. The familiar panic pressed in on her chest.

The men hadn't said much on the flight, and none of them were too chatty on the drive. They simply murmured responses to all her effusiveness.

She exclaimed over every bit of the scenery from the mountains to the river and every wildflower and craggy rock and ...

"Bells!" she cried out when they reached a wider valley with green sloping hills and cows chomping lazily on the grass. "The cows really do have bells on them."

They all chuckled.

She rolled down her window and leaned out. It was cooler than she was used to in June and she only had the thin dress on, but she didn't care. She could smell the freshness of this land, the river and flowers and greenness of it all, and she could hear the cowbells.

After half an hour of geeking out about the landscape, she realized they were approaching their destination and found herself praying.

She prayed she hadn't offended any of the men with her earlier comments, prayed she'd made the right choice coming on this crazy adventure and trusting Madelyne and Brandon.

She wished Janie was here or that she was comfortable enough to share her feelings with one of these men.

Being surrounded by children all day, mostly toddlers, silence was an anomaly to her,

but even as verbose as she was, she wouldn't share the discomfort creeping back in with huge men she hardly knew.

The epic scenery the good Lord had created had distracted her, but as the minutes wore by, she started to worry again about being alone with some tough military man for two weeks. She tried not to focus on her sweating palms and tightening neck muscles whenever she was approached by a buff man.

Four weeks ago, she'd broken up with her abusive ex Darren when she found out he was only marrying her for an inheritance.

He'd pushed her to the ground, mocking her.

She'd been attacked by the disgruntled father of one of her charges two days later.

Added to previous boyfriend neglect or misuse and her own father's abuse, her fears had grown to where her friend Janie had to greet any large men who brought their children into the center.

Spending most of her life in Eudora, Kansas, she'd never been around mountains and had seen nothing to compete with the likes of the soaring and verdant Austrian Alps. She'd only seen such scenery on a movie screen or social media post.

She loved her hometown—down-to-earth people, the vast prairie stretching from their small city as far as the eye could see, lots of opportunities to help the children shuffled through foster care and using her facility as a safe space until they were placed in a new home.

She'd miss the children for the next two weeks, but her staff at The Safe Spot reassured her they had it all under control.

The local police were more diligent than ever protecting her facility, staff, and children since the awful night a month ago when Grady Worthen had broken in, tried to kidnap his two-year-old son, and almost killed Lizzy as she fought to protect little Harrison from his abusive father.

She boasted a gnarly scar from the knife wound to her chest, but miraculously she'd lived.

Her efforts to battle Grady had held him at bay.

Her best friend Janie had hid with Harrison in a closet, and Grady had no choice but to run when he'd heard the sirens approaching.

Harrison was with a loving family in Lawrence now.

They all prayed his father never found him.

Unfortunately, Grady was still at large and sending her threatening notes through the mail.

The notes all stated that she'd ruined his life and that he would destroy hers.

Two nights ago, her ex Darren had the nerve to show up at her apartment, acting all sweet and humble and offering to be there for her as he'd heard about the notes and threats from Grady from a friend in the police department.

She'd been terrified to stand up to him, but she'd stood her ground and told him their relationship had ended a month ago when she'd found out he'd asked her to marry him because he received millions in inheritance from his grandfather for getting engaged to a 'sweet, God-fearing woman' and he'd get more money when they wed.

She had told him she didn't want any kind of help from him, and if he didn't leave she'd call the police.

It was a relief when he claimed she'd live to regret dumping him and stomped away. He hadn't hit or shoved her again. That was something.

Her mom and Janie believed she'd find an amazing and kind man someday. The easier and wiser plan was to stay single.

She wouldn't be alone for the next two weeks.

What would that look like? Terrifying was the only answer she had.

Maybe it was just unsettling. Surely the 'kindest man' Brandon and Madelyne knew wouldn't physically abuse her.

The men in this vehicle were supposed to protect her, and they'd been nothing but kind to her.

She'd be fine. She hoped.

Lizzy pushed all the angst away and focused again on the vibrant landscape framed by the vehicle's windows.

The soaring purple, blue, and green Alps, the sweeping green carpet covering the fields and the hills leading up to the mountains, the wildflowers, the sparkling teal-blue streams, rivers, and lakes.

Even the sky looked more intensely blue than she'd ever seen it.

The valley started to open up again, and they drove past more cows grazing in the

fields. She heard the clanking of bells as they bowed and lifted their heads.

“The bells are so quaint and perfect,” she said and gestured up the green hill. “This looks like where Maria sang in the opening scene.”

The men smiled but didn’t comment.

She leaned out the window as Peter slowed down.

“This is Hallstatt,” he explained. “We’ll be staying just across the lake.”

“Oh, my,” she breathed.

The mountainous town of Hallstatt and the lake were a feast for the eyes and something straight out of a storybook. The small town looked to boast several churches, but she loved the Gothic style church complete with the perfect steeple the best.

“You were right, Peter. I’m not disappointed. This is gorgeous and I love it here! ”

The men chuckled.

“How old do you think this town is?” In the cemetery at home, they had some graves that were from the 1800s.

“Hallstatt is actually seven thousand years old,” Elijah said.

“What?” She yanked her focus from the view to the man.

He nodded seriously. “The salt mines date back to five thousand BC. It’s on the schedule to take a tour and you can learn about it.”

“Oh, my. I am overwhelmed. I can’t even wrap my mind around that.” She wanted to get a daily itinerary, but she adored surprises and would love to simply see what each day brought. As long as she got her Sound of Music fix eventually, she’d be thrilled.

She focused on the beauty as they skirted the lake and drove away from Hallstatt.

For the moment, she buried her uncertainty and fear of Grady Worthen or Darren Henderson and reveled in the scenery.

Sadly, she couldn’t completely bury the anticipation slash trepidation of meeting the man who would be by her side for the next two weeks.

She couldn’t believe the famed model Madelyne Presley and the even more famous billionaire bachelor Brandon Richards had found her through a newspaper article online about her center and the drama of her and Janie protecting Harrison and her being knifed by Grady.

Those two incredible people had offered her this two-week escape.

She prayed it would be an escape and not another nightmare.

What if the man she was supposed to hang out with the next two weeks made her feel uncomfortable and uncertain? What if he scared her and she couldn’t relax even amidst such beauty?

She knew logically that most men were great guys, and it was on her that she was uneasy around the opposite sex. But she preferred children and skinny teenagers of the male variety.

She’d been born with a mild case of cerebral palsy.

When she got tired or overanxious, her knees naturally bowed together and it was hard not to drag her feet.

Most of the time nobody noticed, but it was something her exes had belittled her about and the reason her dad had most often touted for hitting her.

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The car pulled up to the most charming home she'd ever seen in real life.

The exterior was light wood with a steeply pitched roof, numerous large windows boasted wooden window boxes overflowing with petunias, and gleaming windows overlooked the green valley.

The view of the teal-colored lake and the towering mountains outside those windows would be glorious.

The house was three stories with a delightful wraparound porch.

Lizzy yanked on her door handle as soon as the vehicle stopped. It didn't open, and panic made her chest tight. "Please ... can you open my door?"

"Please sit tight for just a few more moments," Peter said. "Tony and Elijah need to perform a scan of the property's interior and exterior while Joshua sets up cameras. I will stay in the vehicle with you until we've determined it's safe."

"I'm not some movie star." She doubted Grady Worthen had the resources to follow her here.

"You're more important," Peter said.

She didn't know how to respond to that. "Thank you," she managed. She was grateful they were taking her security so seriously.

"Of course, ma'am."

Three of the men exited the SUV. Lizzy waited with hands clasped in her lap.

It was instinct to pull out her phone and check texts, emails, or social media, but she studied the lush greenery around her instead.

She wanted to disconnect from her phone and the world and savor this beauty for the next two weeks.

If only she could run through the green fields singing, 'The hills are alive with the sound of music'.

She would settle for walking and singing instead.

Madelyne had explained in her emails that she had adventures and tours set up for Lizzy and her companion throughout the next two weeks. Lizzy would be safe, have a grand adventure in the Austrian Alps, and be gifted a hundred thousand dollars for The Safe Spot.

It was all a dream come true. If only she could get her heart rate to slow down.

What would this friend of Brandon and Rockwell's be like, and how close did Lizzy have to get to him over the two weeks?

She hated that she instantly put up a shield in front of any tough man, but she'd learned the behavior throughout her life, and Darren and then Grady's attacks had taken her fears to night terrors.

Another Mercedes-Benz silver SUV pulled into the driveway.

Lizzy's chest tightened as her heart raced even faster.

A single man climbed out of the driver's seat.

She thought she'd had her mouth gaping and eyes wide as she'd surveyed the scenery, but taking in this man's appearance and stature felt far too similar.

He was a well-built man.

Despite her programmed fears, she found herself mesmerized by him. It was an unsettling mix, similar to when she'd met Darren, and that put her on edge.

The muscles in the man's arms, chest, and shoulders were all too evident, even through the material of his short-sleeve button-down shirt.

His jeans fit nicely over appealing thigh muscles.

He had closely cropped sandy-blond hair, eyes as blue as the lake behind him, an attractive and manly face, and an engaging and easy smile.

He wasn't model-handsome like Darren, but he held his own in the looks department.

"Just one more moment, ma'am," the driver said to her, obviously noticing she was itching to get out of this car.

"Of course." She tried to recline into the seat, but she was too keyed up.

Was she excited to greet the man she'd spend fourteen days with, or was she fearful and anxious?

With muscles like his, and knowing he was her cohort for two weeks, she should be terrified.

But this man was also a hero, a retired Army Ranger and now a policeman, and Brandon, Madelyne, and Rockwell had vouched for him.

She'd told Rockwell she'd trust this one man. What had she been thinking?

Prayer. She'd prayed then and had felt settled.

She prayed now, but she was lacking faith.

The driver nodded as two of his men came back out of the house and onto the wide front porch and one gave him a signal of some sort. He pushed open his door and stepped back to open hers.

"Thank you," she murmured.

Time to face the music.

She said one more prayer for protection, discernment, and bravery. Her hands trembled as she climbed out and her legs felt gooier than Jell-O.

The blue-eyed man's gaze zeroed in on her. The warm welcome in those eyes made her heart race faster, but for a different reason than her fear.

She wobbled and leaned into the door, putting a hand over her knife wound.

Peter turned to her with concern. "Ma'am?"

Lizzy forced a smile. "I'm fine, Peter. Thank you. Just too many hours sitting on my rear in an airplane and in a car." She wasn't about to tell him about the weakness in her legs. All of them would notice sooner or later.

"I hear you." He gave her a genuine smile. They both turned at footsteps approaching.

Lizzy stared as the blue-eyed man approached her. She didn't have the strength to

straighten away from the car door just yet. The confidence and kindness this man radiated had her knees weak and her hands trembling.

Peter stepped forward, blocking her view of the handsome blond man and shaking his hand.

They conferred in low voices. She couldn't hear what they were saying.

Finally, Peter drew back and gestured to her.

"Miss Eliza Birmingham, allow me to introduce your adventure companion for the next two weeks, retired Army Ranger Lieutenant Chase Tenley."

Peter didn't appear to know fanfare. Lizzy could've made that introduction much more dazzling. She hid a smile and forced herself to step forward, grateful her legs supported her.

Chase had his hand out. She placed hers in it.

He grasped her hand in a firm but somehow gentle way.

His smile was welcoming, blinding really.

He wouldn't be considered classically handsome, but he appealed to her with his well-honed muscles, blue eyes, even facial features, and incredible smile.

He had to be over six feet tall, as he had her five-eight by at least half a foot.

"A pleasure, Miss Birmingham." His deep, lyrical voice interrupted her worries. "With a name like that, you must be from the South."

There was a twang in his voice that said he was from the South, but his voice was

smooth like a jazz singer.

“Lizzy, please, and sadly, no,” she said. “I’m from a small town in Kansas nobody’s ever heard of. ”

“Try me.” Chase’s smile was glorious, and he hadn’t released her hand yet.

Instead, he softened his grip and held on as if he really enjoyed the feel of his palm against hers.

Warm tingles radiated from his fingertips brushing gently against the back of her hand.

The attraction caused a dual reaction. She wanted to keep holding his hand and run away at the same time.

“Eudora,” she said, realizing her legs felt strengthened as he held her hand and they exchanged smiles.

“Okay, you got me,” Chase said. “Is it close to anything?”

“No, sir.”

“Ah ... yes, ma’am . You sound like you’re from the South.”

She laughed at that, and he joined her.

“I like you,” she declared, forcing herself to be open to being friends. Her natural impetuousness overpowered her lingering concerns. “Can we be friends?”

His grin became irresistible, and she almost forgot all her reservations. “Absolutely,” he said, his thumb trailing enticingly over her hand.

Warmth filled her from the simple touch, his gaze, and his words.

“Thank you for being so welcoming and gracious,” he continued. “I appreciate ya.”

Had he been nervous to meet her? His words and the relief in his eyes said he had.

She relaxed even more. “I appreciate y’all.”

He laughed, and she startled.

“What was funny about that? Did I do the accent wrong?”

“No,” he assured her, his smile enticing. “I loved your accent but y’all generally refers to more than one person.”

His voice was sensual. She was drawn to it.

“Well ... maybe I was including Peter.”

Their head guard had stoically stood to the side as they greeted each other. Lizzy had almost dismissed their need for guards, the danger she’d been in, her fears, and even the epic scenery as she met and flirted with Chase.

Did she need to be more cautious, not proclaim she wanted to be friends within moments of meeting him? Most likely. Even with her past experiences and fears, it was difficult to bury her inclinations to be verbose, happy, and open.

“Forgive me. Of course you were including Peter.” His smile and the twinkle in his blue eyes said he knew she wasn’t.

“Which part of the South are you from?”

“Marietta Georgia, just north of Atlanta.”

“And are you wealthy and a womanizer like your friend Brandon Richards?”

Maybe she shouldn’t have asked that.

Chase’s eyes widened. He released her hand and folded his thick arms across his chest. She felt the loss of his touch clear through.

Her legs went weak again, and she wanted something to lean into.

She stood, tightening her muscles as best she could.

For most of her life, she’d been granted strength and conditioning coaches and a free gym that helped her manage her cerebral palsy.

Today, her muscles were weary, and she feared she’d walk with her knees bowed in like she hated to do.

“No, ma’am,” Chase answered her. “I’m as humble as Brandon is wealthy, and I rarely date.”

Could she believe him? She looked him over, trying to ascertain if she could trust his words. She couldn’t contain the hope growing inside of her or her smile. “I love it! If you’re telling the truth, I think we can be great friends.”

He chuckled at that, not seeming offended by her comment. “I make it a habit to tell the truth, and I hope we can be great friends, seeing as we’re stuck together for the next two weeks.”

She gestured around. “I’m sorry you’re stuck with me, but the scenery is incredible.”

He didn't look away from her face. "I agree about the scenery, and I don't mind being stuck with you. Not at all."

Lizzy's face flared with warmth. He was flirting with her. He seemed like a genuinely nice guy, and he was definitely attractive.

These two weeks might be incredible.

But then again, all of her former boyfriends had been charming and kind when they first met.

You fall for the wrong guy every single time, her inner voice cried out .

Lizzy took a step back and broke eye contact. She'd be wise to take this slow. No matter what hidden agenda Brandon and Madelyne had for the two of them being paired these two weeks together, she had to be smart and aware.

She could enjoy this adventure, but she had to guard her heart.