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### Synopsis

Alice left her husband after nearly four years of marriage. Robert always said that family was important. Little did he realise that she was his only family until it was too late. Alice fled to Europe and one year later landed in Milan looking for work.

Working for a restoration company in Milan and studying part time, she was promoted as their chief designer of moldings for restoring old buildings. Her boss Ilario knew of her circumstances and had adopted her as a family member. He planned to retire in five years and leave running of the company between Alice and his son Domenic.

Meanwhile in Melbourne, Robert had hired a security firm to look for her every few months and now they had found her. Finally he was on his way to Milan to bring her back. Though what she was doing in Milan, heavens only knew.

Confronting Alice would be uncomfortable, but he loved her, hadn't loved anyone else, never would. He needed her in his life to be whole. Though he hadn't realised this until she left. It was a sad and enlightening time for him. He found out the hard way that Alice needed to do something to contribute and he had stopped her. He was so selfish it was amazing that he could even stand himself. All he had to do now was convince Alice that he had changed.

Their future was bound up in her work. Living in Milan would prove to be good for both of them, they adopted two children who were orphaned and after a couple of years and some medical intervention they were able to add to their family.

Prologue

Tears coursed silently down Alice's face as she stood by the bed watching her husband sleep. Holding her hand to her chest, she tried to stop the pain in her heart that was so strong she was nearly doubled over. It wasn't as if she had to try and remember him, every inch was imprinted in her brain after nearly four years of marriage. Now it was time to let him go. She just hoped that he would understand.

She quietly moved along the hallway trying hard not to sob while tears were tracking down her face. Gathering her bags from the front closet she left the envelope with her note in it under his keys with her rings on the hall table. The taxi was waiting at the end of the driveway so that she wouldn't wake him, it would be too painful to have to face him and he would be sure to try and talk her out of any decision she had made. She knew she was taking the coward's way out but she just couldn't stay. After last year they had both been so sad at losing the baby they had badly wanted. She had found the silence about the miscarriage unbearable. Robert kept saying that it will happen and that family was important. Well finally she has been told after visiting her doctor a few weeks ago that family wasn't going to happen and she realised that she had to move on to give him a chance to have the family he desired. It didn't matter that she only had ever loved him, that she would miss him with her very soul. He needed this chance to have what was so important to him, she just hoped that she could bear the pain.

902 days later

He had found her! At long last after searching for what seemed like eternity, well it is eternity when you are missing part of your soul he thought. The security company that he regularly hired to find her had traced her to Milan. Italy of all places, he would never have thought to look there. The thing that had alerted them was her name on a company website as their wonder woman restoration designer. What else didn't he know about his wife? Her lawyer at the time she left had said that she needed to leave and he personally felt she was depressed but not suicidal otherwise he would have contacted Rob. Talk about not helpful. He missed her every day, he missed the little things that she did for him, he missed the conversations they had, that she patiently let him run ideas past her and she would respond honestly. He missed the physical side of their marriage, though if he was at all truthful they hadn't had a physical relationship for a couple of months before she left. He was worried about her health after the miscarriage and didn't want to put any pressure on her. He missed their infrequent weekends where they went exploring through the city. He loved her with every fibre of his being and he didn't realise how much he missed her until he couldn't hold her any more. Over time he had come to realise that he had been a tad selfish, no make that very selfish with regard to the amount of time he spent with her but that was all about to change. He would find her and bring her home and make sure that she never left again. That just might be the cave man attitude that she always complained about he thought.

Why Milan? What was there that made her happy without him, was she happy He wondered. Within twenty four hours he would be there to ask her just that question. #

## Chapter 1

With no inkling of what was about to befall her, Alice worked quietly in the design office of Marchetti e figlio restauro *Marchetti and Son Restoration* in Milan. It had taken her two years of hard exhaustive work to get exactly where she wanted to be. In the beginning, Ilario Marchetti refused to believe that a slip of a girl from Melbourne could actually reproduce the friezes, cornices and rosettes that were needed to restore the interior of the centuries old castles and villas around Europe. When she finally decided that this was what she wanted to do after a couple of months traveling around Europe, Alice went to a small shop in the back waters of Italy and worked for six months for no pay to learn and develop her own way of creating these things of beauty in plaster. The coloured ones were the hardest but the most rewarding, no over painting for her, she created the colours in the plaster and then cast the individual pieces, slowly painstakingly putting the pieces together. Getting the right colour is a challenge but it is very satisfying. The sanding after the casting was the most difficult, as it needed to be precise and done with care, and of course she always came away looking like she had been in the middle of a dust storm.

After learning all she could, she made an appointment to see Iliario Marchetti and offered her services in the casting room for three months, again with no pay. If she was accepted then they would agree to employ her for three years and give her full reign in casting and mold making area.

Nearly eighteen months down the track and her creative life was excelling all her hopes and dreams. She just wished she didn't miss Robert so much. She missed him more than she ever thought possible. Every day in every way she thought of him. Her body reacted to the water in the shower, thinking of his hands on her, having dinner alone was at times both wonderful and horrible. She thought she was lonely before when Robert worked fourteen hour days, now she truly knew exactly what alone was. The only people she talked to were from work, she hadn't had time to make friends over the last few years, but now that she was established she would have to make an effort she thought. She counted Iliario and his family as her family now and enjoyed their company but she didn't have any other interests. She really needed to get out there and meet other people, may be see some sights, not just let work rule her life. She giggled she was turning in Robert, but at least she didn't leave someone at home to mourn the loss of contact. Only when she was working was her mind still and her body relaxed.

This morning she thought she had seen Robert at the local cafe where she usually had breakfast. Standing in the middle of the café she glanced around as was her usual habit and in the

corner of her eye she thought it was him, she felt her knees go weak and her heart pounded in her chest, she raised her hand to her mouth to stop herself crying out for him. Turning around before Gino could spot her she ran. Not her usual exercise, running, but panic filled her with adrenalin as she ran to get away from the demon chasing her. Finally arriving at work breathless and sweaty she looked around, not seeing anyone that resembled Robert she let herself into her office and collapsed in the chair. Tears in her eyes she struggled to compose herself and get her breathing under control. Though why she should be scared of Robert she didn't know, he never hurt her physically just hurt her heart by not caring enough to come home, not caring enough to support her in her studies, or in her work. He just kept acting the caveman. What exactly he thought she was studying for at University when they met she had no idea. Surely he would have actually given it some thought about her working, or had he always thought she was one of those women who studied just to find a man to support them. She couldn't rationalise his way of thinking, try as she might he wouldn't change his mind about her working. Towards the end she just got so tired of going around and round the same argument she just stopped talking about it.

Thinking back to what exactly he thought she was doing every day sitting home she had no idea because she didn't ask. Most nights he didn't bother to get home till late and only if they were going to a function did he actually ring her and let her know to get ready and what time they would leave. Alice sadly shook her head as she remembered the last month before she left him.

Sitting at her desk Alice hoped that he wouldn't know where she was, her flat was in the company name, all her money went to a Swiss bank account, there was no physical trace of her unless he had connections in the Italian tax office, and even if he did he still wouldn't be here, not after so long. Besides she remembered, Robert didn't like to travel any further than the Mornington Peninsula for camping trips with his friends, not somewhere he ever encouraged her to go. Every six months she rang her lawyer in Melbourne to see if he signed the divorce papers and each time he said no but offered to begin the proceedings for her. Each time she said no. She couldn't understand Rob's reluctance, just as she didn't understand her own. She was unwilling to let go, to sever the tie with him regardless of how far away she was. She wouldn't contest anything, she didn't want anything from him, especially now that she was earning her own money and had a great career. The real question that she honestly couldn't answer was why she hadn't just proceeded with the no contest divorce. After over two years it wouldn't be a problem. What was she waiting for? Lightning to strike? To run back to him? Waiting for him to come and find her? Ha she thought that would take a miracle.

Deciding that today was it, firing up her computer she whipped off an email to her lawyer, even though it was about six thirty in the evening in Melbourne she knew he would get it in the morning and start processing the paperwork. Enough was enough. It was time she stopped being a scaredy cat and just got it over and done with.

Alice sat back on her chair and let the tears flow, at long last she had done it and she was now going to join the divorcee set. Alice laughed at herself, wiped her eyes and left her office.

## Chapter 2

Joining Ilario in the staff canteen Alice sat and discussed the next big project with some of the others who would be involved. Some Duc in Venice had inherited a rather large three story villa outside the city centre and wanted the company to restore it to its former glory, this included gold leaf gilding on the formal ballroom ceiling. They had looked at pictures but the best thing was to go visit and assess exactly what they needed to do. This would be the company's biggest contract yet if they accepted it.

Alice looked forward to the next stage of learning how to do the gold gilding. She had always enjoyed a challenge and this was just one more on a long list that she had written for herself. She was determined to be the very best that she could be, which was why she was where she was.

Ilario knew it would be a long term project which would keep most of the artisans in the company occupied for a very long time. He had suggested that Alice and his son Dominic along with his family move to Venice for the duration of the restoration which was thought to be six to eight months. Alice wouldn't have to move over until she made all the moldings and had them ready room by room. It would be the last thing that went up after the walls and ceilings were restored. She would also do some ceiling painting but nothing like the originals she thought, at least there would be some decorative panels. However a decision would not be made until they saw exactly what they were up for. The only good thing about this project was that the villa wasn't on a canal so they didn't have to worry about water damage, seepage or the building sinking. She, Ilario, his son Dominic and a few of the crew were due to leave tomorrow to fly to Venice and inspect everything and it will be up to Ilario if they took the project on but they would all have input.

So far in the nearly two years she had been involved in the company they had restored three stately mansions in Turin and one in Milan. Alice had argued long and hard to get them to put pictures of their work on their web site, it had been so successful they now employed a full time photographer and webmaster who took pictures of the restoration as they went along, capturing the details and design. Their website looked really good with lots of great before and after photos. Ilario was very happy with the idea of potential clients being able to see how good it can be.

"All set for Venice, mia piccola colomba?" Ilario asked Alice in his heavily accented English. He always called her his little dove, since she had first met him.

"Si" she nodded recalling when she first arrived that she had asked Ilario to speak to her in his dialect. She felt it would be the quickest way to learn. She also got Domenic's children to

teach her a little bit each day. She thought that it was a good thing and helped the family get to know her better. For her it was the quickest way to learn and now she spoke like a native and looked like one, something that she enjoyed, not standing out. If Robert could see her now she thought, plaster all over her, hair shorter, she was thinner but stronger, he wouldn't believe his eyes. She shook her head, she needed to let go and stop thinking of him.

Ilario's frown increased as she smiled. He always worried that she worked too hard. He thought she was too young for this kind of life but she seemed to thrive on it. At least the haunted look had gone from her eyes he thought. When she first arrived he knew she was running away from someone but after nearly two years she seemed happy, at least now there was a spark in her eyes and the light in her face danced as she described some form of molding that she wanted to explore. Pity he thought that she didn't have a man to go home to. Being happily married was the best thing he mused as his wonderful wife's face came to mind.

They sat and discussed all the requirements for the new restoration. They were all flying out tomorrow to get some understanding of exactly what was required.

Alice locked her office after a full day of casting, molding, sanding and experimenting with gold leaf. She quickly made her way down the street towards her studio apartment. It was nearly dusk and in the area of Bresso in Milan at this time of year that meant close to eight o'clock. She hadn't realised the time until she was ready to go home. She usually stayed late, there was no reason not to really. Unless Ilario and his wife Marissa invited her for dinner which was a regular thing, Marissa was always trying to fatten her up. Alice smiled at the thought as she walked quickly home. She loved to walk the streets and discover the different types of architecture, the small cobbled streets, the tiny courtyards.

Her weekends were filled with her exploring her neighbourhood, getting to know the people. The area was old and had more industry than new housing which for her was a good thing. She like seeing the old places and how people adapted them to suit.

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Robert couldn't believe his eyes as he followed Alice down the road towards her flat. It took him a while to recognise her, he had been waiting nearly all afternoon for her to leave the factory, trying not to be an obvious stalker. She was dressed in a nice dress and coat with heels. She was holding onto large leather bag. It was late and she should have left the factory hours ago he thought. Why was she working so hard when she could have been home with him? What had happened to her to make her want to do this? He just couldn't fathom it. He had provided her with a good house, money, everything she could want. He knew she wanted a baby but after the

miscarriage her doctor said to take it slow. Then she was gone, leaving him a note to contact her lawyer to sign the divorce papers. A note for god's sake, he thought angrily, she didn't even try to tell him how she felt or what was wrong and how to fix it, just a note with her rings. For nine hundred and two days he had missed her, searched for her, worried about her and dreamed of her. The platitude of not realizing how much you would miss someone till they were gone was certainly true in his case. He missed her with every fibre of his being. He worked, socialized and survived without her but not by choice.

As he watched her walk ahead of him, he could feel the need for her pool in his groin. After two and a half years he still wanted her. As remote as the thought of having her wrapped in his arms again seemed at times, he still needed her in his life. He had been devastated when she had left. He tried every avenue to find her but she obviously hadn't wanted to be found, and now he had her or will have her again, he would take her home to Melbourne with him. He was angry enough to just pick her up, throw her over his shoulder and take her home but he needed answers before he went all caveman on her.

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Alice stopped at the cafe that was situated on the ground floor of her building. Greeting Gino always got her a hug, she hadn't realised how much she missed tactile contact until he declared that he and his wife would look after her when she moved in. Gino did his best to make sure that she was fed and every day he hugged her. That was usually enough to bring a smile to her face. It was a great way to start and end the day when she didn't have anyone else to hug. Tonight was a busy night in the cafe and she collected her dinner of pasta and waved to the staff. This was a usual thing as her place wasn't large enough to have a proper kitchen but she did have a microwave oven and a small fridge along with the all-important coffee machine. Since being in Italy she had grown to love the thick syrupy short blacks. As she made her way up the three flights of stairs to her place, she had no idea that life as she knew it would change so soon.

### Chapter 3

Robert hung back allowing her time to shower and change before he knocked on the door. What would she say, how would she react when he told her he didn't want a divorce, that he just wanted her back. He sat at one of the outdoor tables, ordered coffee and tapped his fingers on the tabletop. He was nervous, his heart was racing, his knee was jiggling up and down, why he just couldn't fathom. He was an intelligent man coming to see his wife. Why would that make him nervous? He thought. He could face criminals, police, judges and angry prosecution lawyers, even angry clients but the very idea of facing Alice actually scared him. What if she said no, what if she had someone else, what if... He had to stop with the *what ifs* or he would drive himself crazy he thought as the coffee arrive.

Gino had noticed the stranger that had been hanging around the past day, he saw him this morning and noticed that he left just after Alice had run out the door like la diavolo was after her. He moved closer to him as his staff served the ordered coffee.

Gino sat down at the table and blatantly asked "What is your interest in our Alice? I saw you following her this morning and again to her home tonight, if you don't answer satisfactory I will call the Carabinieri," he said as he folded his large forearms over his barrel chest and placed his mobile phone on the table.

Robert looked up in surprise at the older man sitting in front of him. He had not thought that anyone would challenge him or even bother to notice him. Sitting up straight and placing both hands on the table in a classic non-threatening manner he looked at him.

"I am Alice's husband and I want to take her home to Australia."

Gino looked at the man in surprise. He had known that Alice had a past, hell they all had, but she was here, where she wanted to be and Gino kept an eye on her, along with his wife and staff. Heck he was old enough to be her father but they always looked out for her, making sure that she ate every night and they often kept her company when she stayed for breakfast on Sunday mornings.

"How do you propose to do that I wonder? You know that she works hard and has a good job. I think that she is happy no?" Gino queried "She must have been unhappy to leave you so long ago?" he wasn't afraid to dig into her past to make sure that the man who called himself her husband wasn't going to hurt her.

Robert looked tired and unsure "It has taken me a long time to find her and I just want the chance to talk and understand how she came to be here. I need to know that she is alright and if we can have a second chance." Robert felt thoroughly miserable after confessing this.

Would she really want him back? Why would she bother to talk to him after being away for so long?

Gino nodded “It is not good that she is alone” with that he got up and went back to his kitchen to discuss the problem with his wife. She always knew the best way to handle things.

After an hour, Robert slowly climbed the stairs leading to her apartment. Gino had told him that she lived on the top floor. No wonder she looked thinner if she did this every day he thought. He had noticed that her hair was lighter and shorter, he couldn’t wait to explore her body to see the differences, to find out if she tasted exactly as he remembered her, if her skin was the same texture, if she still moaned when he caressed her.

Robert knocked on her door with more force than he intended, his hand shaking, he couldn’t believe he was so nervous. She was his wife who walked out on him for heaven’s sake, get a grip he told himself.

“Un memento” he heard from behind the door.

Suddenly there she was standing in the doorway, the sun shining through the windows behind her hiding her features from him. He couldn’t see her emotions, her face, her expressive eyes were all hidden from him.

“Hello Alice,” Robert nodded and shouldered his way inside and dropped his backpack on the floor. He stood by the door of her cluttered space taking in the view of the roof tops and the desk by the window with books stacked high, he kept his hands in his pants pockets to stop him from kissing her into next week and never letting go.

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Alice slumped against the door frame, pale, OMG Robert, what was he doing here? How did he find her? Her mind was shutting down, her entire body quivering. She had forgotten how stunning he was, how tall he was, how much space he took up. The presence of him in her small studio overwhelmed her. He seemed taller than she remembered, his six foot two frame towering over her five foot four. There seemed to be no oxygen left for her to breath she thought as her breathing became shallower.

“What what are you doing here? How did you find me?” she stuttered as she held her hand to her chest.

She looked shocked, and well she should be Robert thought.

Now that he had found her Robert was not going to let her go ever again. He stood there his nostrils flaring in anger, no hello, no glad to see you, no I missed you, he was getting cross

with her all over again, very slowly he walked towards her, reaching around her he closed the door. Being so close he could see the shock in her beautiful blue eyes.

“I’m here to take you home,” his soft deep voice whispered in her ear.

Alice shuddered as his voice wrapped itself around her like a cashmere sweater, safe and warm.

“What?” she looked incredulous “Why?”

“Because I find I can’t forget you even if you have forgotten me,” he looked at her. He wasn’t sure exactly what he was feeling, he thought angrily because she hadn’t jumped into his arms all welcoming and loving. Then that was immediately followed by love and lust, all his blood leaving his brain and travelling south. Thank god he had his jeans on and his t-shirt hanging outside. He didn’t want to scare her. All the emotions that he had felt when he realised she was gone were there close to the surface and if she didn’t say something soon he would explode. He couldn’t believe that he was standing so close to her, she looked so good, her hair sticking out at all angles, her face free of makeup, if anything she looked better than the last time he remembered.

“Not happy to see me Alice?” Robert enquired sarcastically as he took a step back.

“No.. yes.. oh,” she stammered putting her hand against her mouth, the mouth that he was desperate to kiss, desperate to taste again.

He took in the changes that he noticed earlier, her thinness, her short hair, her eyes, always expressive but now they were brimming with tears. What did that mean he thought, was she so unhappy to see him? Was she happy to see him? Plunging his hands in his pockets to stop himself from grabbing her he stood directly in front of her watching all the emotions flicker across her face. She always had been easy to read he thought.

#### Chapter 4

Alice shook her head in response to his question, no never forgotten she thought, she missed him every day but she wasn't going to let him know. That her whole body was turning liquid just at the sight of him. For over two years she had put aside her sexual needs to learn her craft, to try and forget him, but every night no matter how tired she was he was always there in her head. He was her only lover, she had never wanted anyone else once she had fallen in love with him.

Alice stood next to the door, refusing to believe that he would want her once he found out the truth, she re-opened the door.

"Please leave Rob. I need you to contact my lawyer, I filed for divorce today," she said sadly tears flooding her eyes.

"What?" he spluttered indignantly "why after all this time would you do that?" he asked looking at her confused.

"Because it was time" she looked at him "I am not going home and I thought that this would give you the nudge in the right direction."

"Right direction?" he looked at her as if she had suddenly grown two heads. "Right direction?" He repeated, so close to shouting that he had to take a breath and try and calm down. Robert stood very still and looked Alice in the eyes to make sure that she understood everything he said "The only direction I am taking is with you on the plane home," he smiled, he would win no matter what, she would come home with him regardless, no matter how long it took, she would come home he thought.

Alice shook her head "No Robert," she said firmly, "I am never going to go back to Melbourne. This is my home now," tears threatening to spill over. "Please understand I can't go back to what we were," her voice lowered to a whisper as she ducked her head avoiding looking at him "I just can't."

Robert wanted to draw her into his arms and promise her that everything would be better. She looked so sad standing next to the open door with tears in her eyes, but he couldn't. He couldn't promise that, when he felt torn, his very heart breaking, cracking down the middle. She didn't want him? Is that what she was saying? He thought back to her words. No, she said she wouldn't go home. Did she still want him? Did she still love him?

"Alice, I am not agreeing to the divorce and I will not sign the papers," Roberts hands were clenched, his eyes glittered in fear and anger. He stood tall and imposing over her as he took a step closer to her.

She bowed her head and whispered “I know, but it has been so long it doesn’t matter if you don’t sign them. My lawyer can still process them,” and closed the door in resignation, this was going to be a very long night she thought.

“Coffee?” she asked aiming for some sort of normalcy as she moved towards the small area that pretended to be her kitchen.

“Yes please” he answered politely, his senses heightened, his erection straining against his jeans. Robert couldn’t believe how quickly he reacted to her. She still smelt the same. He wanted to gather her up and kiss and lick every part of her. He walked over to her desk by the large window and looked out over the view. A view of roof tops of the industrial district. He looked down and noticed the titles of the books on her desk, moldings, restoration, gilding and Italian architecture. He wasn’t sure why she would be reading this if she worked in a factory? What did the man downstairs at the café mean by a good job, if she worked in a factory and came home covered in dust, though today she looked great as she walked home, but how good could her job be? What did he do that she would hate him so much that she couldn’t ask for help and why had she run to Italy. He had thought their marriage was good, solid, except for the miscarriage. He closed his eyes as he remembered the pain they both shared at the time, how they had both cried when at fifteen weeks she suddenly went into labour with no warning.

With the tray in her hands Alice moved to the coffee table hoping Robert wouldn’t notice the tremor in her hands. Her whole being was tingling. She was so very aware of him, his physical presence in her tiny flat. Her skin was crawling with need, her legs had trouble holding her so she quickly sat down. He always had this sexual power over her. She wanted to jump into his arms and have him hold her tight and never let go, but that wasn’t ever going to happen again. He had to move on without her, he just had to, she thought desperately.

Robert took the two steps to her side and as he accepted the coffee cup he asked “What do you do exactly at the factory?”

Alice looked shocked, “How do you know about the factory?”

“That’s how we found you, on their web page,” he sighed, “it took nine hundred and two days to find you Alice, and nine hundred and nine days to see you,” he ran his fingers through his hair. Looking at her he sighed, “I missed you.”

“We?” she looked at him trying to ignore the last statement.

“The security firm that I had hired to look for you for the last two years.”

“Oh” Alice looked down and noticed her hands were clenched. She didn’t realise that the webpage had her name on it, if she did she would have had it removed. Something she couldn’t

change now she thought as she slowly unclenched her fists. Alice got up and walked over to her desk and gathered some material. Moving back to the couch she showed him the pictures of her last project.

As she spoke he noticed the light in her eyes, the excitement in her voice. He was surprised she was so animated and happy. She was also very talented. She could take a small piece of cornice and restore a whole room and do the same with the ceiling decoration.

Eventually she ran out of steam and just sat there on the couch with hands on her lap, head bowed. Quietly Alice asked “Robert why exactly are you here?” Desperately afraid of the answer, her heart pounding, she felt hot and wet just looking at him.

Robert reached over and unclenched her hands and placed one in his, the jolt of electricity between them nearly flew her off the couch. Alice looked up and saw something flash in Rob’s eyes before it vanished. As he played with her fingers “I missed you,” he said softly, “there hasn’t been anyone else and heaven help me I find that I still love you, come home please,” he whispered as he drew her hand up to his mouth and licked the inside of her wrist. His whole body alive with need, the need to sink himself deep inside her and never come out again.

Tears glistened in her eyes but she dashed them with the back of her hand. “No Robert I can’t” she shook her head.

He stared at her “There is someone else,” letting the anger wash over him. His eyes flashed as he looked at her.

Alice shrank back into the couch, “No there isn’t, there never will be, but I can’t go back. I have changed,” she said. “I have got a good job, friends, people who care, things I didn’t have in Melbourne with you.” She sighed “Remember what happened when I got a job, you railroaded me into quitting with the no wife of mine is going to need to work routine. Rob,” she pleaded as she spread her hands in supplication “I need this, it satisfies my artistic ability as well as being able to be part of a good team of artisans to preserve these wonderful old homes. You can’t ask me to go back. I feel that here is home now and that I am actually doing something good.”

She continued “In Melbourne the only good thing I did was hold your work soirées, sorry I can’t go back.” She backed up and shook her head, tears flooding her eyes.

“I didn’t realise you were so unhappy” he said grumpily, he felt lost, that something was missing and he didn’t know what it was or how to fix it. What right did she have to say these things, didn’t he provide for her. Didn’t she have a nice house, all she could wish for if she just asked? Just then he realised that she had never asked him for anything, just stayed home and did the housewife stuff just like he wanted, it was such an epiphany that he sat very still. How could he have forgotten the argument they had about her getting a job, he was determined to provide

for her and she just wanted to get out of the house. He remembered shouting a parting shot at her that day before he left for work “Go shopping if you want to get out!” he cringed as the memory flooded through him, his pride was obviously a stumbling block that he needed to get over.

“How could you notice, you worked 14 hour days, what exactly did you expect me to do while you were working?” her voice trembling.

Robert stood and paced the room, wondering what to do now, “You knew I had to work hard to establish the practice, you didn’t complain about the money I earned!” He wasn’t going to beg her to return, maybe he could just seduce her into it. Just as he turned to her there was a knock on the door.

Alice got up and opened it.

“Buone nuit Dominic, Come stai? cosa posso fare per lei ? *Good evening Dominic, how are you? What can I do for you?*”

Dominic started rattling off instructions for their flight tomorrow to Venice when he looked past her and saw Robert. Stunned he stopped talking, staring at this tall good looking stranger. Dominic had never seen Alice with anyone other than their family, what was a man doing in her apartment? What was going on? He looked back at Alice a frown on his face, a question in his eyes.

Alice looked back at Robert not sure how to introduce him, was he her ex-husband, her husband or just Rob? Switching to English she waved her hand towards Robert.

“Dominic this is my husband Roberto visiting from Australia, Robert this is Dominic Marchetti, son of the owner of the factory and he manages the day to day staffing routines.”

The two men shook hands. Dominic was very surprised.

“Scuzi Alice” Dominic continued in his heavily accented English “I didn’t realise you had company. We leave at lunch time tomorrow. Do you need me to pick you up as usual?”

“Si grazi I will be ready, I have some great books on the houses of Venice so we should be able to start fairly quickly on the restoration if Ilario approves. Are the owners going to meet us?” she looked up at Dominic, resolve in her eyes.

“Si for dinner tomorrow night so we can start with their sketches. Oh I have also booked Giacomo to come with us and take pictures at each stage so we can put it on the internet. The owners have agreed to this.”

Robert had never seen her so focused before, taking in Italian to Dominic, she obviously liked him, it was fascinating to watch her face light up, her eyes glowed, she even talked with her hands. She sounded like a native Italian, how had he missed that she must have been so bored at

home. How did he miss the signs that she had tried over and over to tell him that she was unhappy. He obviously was so self-centred he thought. No self-centred wasn't the word, absorbed in his work and trying to establish the law practice, in the early days it was very hard with long hours and even longer social functions to establish their standing in the community and amongst their peers. He had thought that she understood and she was always willing to take on a dinner no matter how short notice he gave her. Now he realised that she was so bored and unhappy she latched onto any attention he gave her. Why hadn't she been happy with him? Had she really loved him? What should he do now? He felt bereft, angry with himself, angry with her for not taking the time to talk to him and make sure that he understood exactly what she was feeling. She hadn't had to leave if only she just talked to him he thought.

After Dominic left Alice stood at the door "Are you staying somewhere?" she looked at him.

Robert had the grace to blush a little "Well I thought I could stay here" he said looking at the floor instead of her.

"After over two years you thought you could just waltz right back into my life! I don't think so," she said sarcastically. Alice was fuming, how dare he, she thought she just wanted to stamp her foot in frustration but that would just be childish. "Just bloody typical," she mumbled to herself. "Right just let me gather some things and I will sleep on the couch."

"No, Alice I'll do that you don't have to put yourself out for me". He replied loading his voice with scorn knowing full well that he wouldn't fit on the couch.

"Cut the crap Robert," she snapped her eyes blazing. She couldn't believe he was so arrogant. Just an hour in his company and they were at loggerheads already.

"You are six foot two and I am five foot four of course I will fit on the couch." She growled.

Alice barely made it past Robert without hitting him and gathered her pj's and alarm clock after she used the tiny bathroom.

"I have lots to do before we fly out tomorrow so its best I go to sleep now, goodnight." with that she gently pushed him into her bedroom, handed him his backpack and closed the door.

OMG she thought how was she going to survive the night with him in her bedroom. Her whole body was humming. She was so sure he was going to offer to share her bed with him, her whole body just shuddered at the thought. Not in a bad way, the tingles travelled from the top of her head to her very toes. No way was she ever going to be tempted to do that again. How dare he assume that he could just step back into her life? What a mess she thought. She had never

dared to hope that he would come after her. That would have been just too much for her to bear, to hope for, to dream.

With a sigh she made up the sofa. Lying down and watching the moonlight through the large window Alice's mind was racing along with her heart. What was he really doing here? Why wait two years, did he still want her, and did he still love her? She thought that while he still caused her heart to skip and her nerves to tingle, she really didn't want to leave. She loved Milan and the people she interacted with. Her work might not be lifesaving but it was good and she loved it. With steely resolve she decided that he might as well go back tomorrow because she wasn't going to budge.

## Chapter 5

While she was gathering her resolve, Robert paced the floor of the small bedroom he was now tucked into, wondering what he was going to do now. He had never had cause for Alice to ever say no to him in all the years they had known each other. She always acquiesced to his requests and now she had pushed him around and stuffed him into her small bedroom while she slept on the couch. This just wouldn't do. He loved her, he missed her, his body had reacted instantly to her without even touching her. He wanted to run his hands through her hair to feel it, explore it, he wanted to kiss her to see if she still tasted the same, if she felt the same in his arms. As he went through his normal routine getting ready for bed, he thought it prudent to leave his boxers on. Lying down he listened for any noises that Alice might make.

Robert woke to a tortured scream. He raced out of bed into the lounge barely stopping to open the door. He saw Alice sitting up on the couch, bed clothes around her, terror in her eyes, her breathing laboured. He gathered her in his arms and sat on the couch with her on his lap.

“Shhh it was only a dream,” his hands quelling her fright, slowly stroking her hair and back. She was soaked but he wasn't willing to let her go. She felt so good, smelt so good. He resolved right there to never let her go ever again.

Alice sobbed into his chest. Her breathing in short pants, her face pale, sweat beaded on her forehead.

He gladly wrapped his arms around her gathering her as close as he could. He recognised the signs of fear and panic and wanted to help, but the truth be known it was so good to hold her, to smell her, to feel her, even if she was trembling in fear.

Gradually, as the panic subsided and she relaxed in his arms, Robert lifted her head and kissed the tears on her cheeks, kissed her eyes, he sighed and kissed her lips, savouring her taste. He slowly moved his tongue over her lips lapping at her bottom lip as if he was a starving man and she was his last meal.

As her lips parted with a soft Ohh against his, he plundered, unable to hold back. His tongue explored her mouth thoroughly, tasting her, feeling her teeth, her tongue as it duelled with his. He couldn't believe that he was sipping at her lips, that she was kissing him. His heart was rejoicing though all his blood was racing south. There was a roaring in his ears, his erection straining against his boxers, one hand stroked her back and the other held her head right where he needed her to be. She tasted exactly the same, just as she had always tasted, just as he

remembered. He was ready to lay her down on the sofa and sink into her when he realised that she was pushing at his chest.

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Alice was drowning in his taste. Her senses aflame from his tongue exploring her. From her tongue exploring him. She could not hold back anymore. After two years she needed to taste him, have him. Her hands skimmed over his bare chest and she moved her head to allow him better access. Her whole body was tingling, Alice sighed into his mouth. Her blood pounding through her chest, it felt like her heart was going to explode. She thought she might come just from kissing him. Slowly she realised that she couldn't breathe, but the alternative wasn't any better. Stop kissing him or breathe. Why did she need to breathe she wondered, raising her hands to frame his face

Realising what she was doing, Alice pushed at his chest and tried to move away, shocked that she would react to him so quickly so thoroughly, it was something that she hadn't expected.

"Alice," Rob's eyes softened wanting to keep hold of her as long as he could.

"No," she pushed against him. More cross with herself than him but he should not have taken advantage of her.

"Can't you see what you do to me, I love you, I want you, I need you." He sighed into her hair as he held her close to his chest.

Alice shook her head trying to dispel the feeling of neediness, the way he made her feel, that they were made for each other, that the last two years were erased instantly.

Robert groaned realising that he needed to let go but had trouble opening his arms. It was with great effort that he stood up and let her slide down his body. He felt her shiver as her feet met the floor. Watching her to make sure she was stable Robert held out a hand just in case.

"You need to get changed, I'll make you some tea."

Alice nodded and slowly made her way to the bathroom. She was shaking, her legs barely moving, her brain was all over the place. What brain she thought, he had kissed her and all her neurons were floating away. Her synapses had snapped. She needed to think, needed to get away from him. After changing into clean pyjamas she washed her face and looked in the mirror, noting her wide eyes, pale skin, lips swollen, she looked loved. Raising her shaking hand she ran her fingers across her lips still feeling his tongue. Alice shivered. Her eyes harden as she remembered all the work she had put in establishing herself as an artisan, she would never have

achieved any of it in Melbourne, Robert would never have agreed to her working, let alone have a job that got her hands dirty. He was so alpha male like that.

A knock on the door brought her back to earth with a crunch.

“Tea’s ready.”

Alice made her way out, she noticed that he had put on some clothes. Phew, pity she thought he still looked great.

Sitting at the small dining table Robert had set out the tea, she sat down and reached for her cup, her hands still shaking from both the nightmare and the kiss. After a couple of sips her cup clattered to the table.

“Tell me.” He insisted.

“Tell you what?” she queried knowing full well what he was referring to.

“The nightmare” he said bluntly.

Alice shrugged “it’s not much.”

“No much” he exclaimed “you were screaming in terror, you were soaked in sweat, please I want to know, I want to help.” He said exasperatingly. How could she think that he didn’t care, didn’t want to help.

Shaking her head “Thank you for the tea, I should go back to sleep now, I have a very busy day in the morning,” she stood up and made her way back to the couch.

Robert stood up and looked at her, she was pale but obviously determined to put the nightmare behind her. Sighing he walked into the bedroom and closed the door.

Alice breathed a sigh of relief. She used to have the nightmare when she first left him. Time and time again a large dark bear was chasing her and just as it reached to slash her to pieces she would wake in terror. It took more than six months to survive it. She would go to sleep so exhausted she hoped that she wouldn’t dream but every time she woke in fear and trembling. Eventually it gave way to dreams of succeeding on her own, of learning more, of ideas that blitzed around her brain.

What was she going to do? She didn’t have any defences against him. He invaded all her senses. She was so aware of him and her wanting him, her body was thrumming. She didn’t want to go back to her previous life, where all she had was him. She hadn’t had a life in Melbourne, he was her life. Now, here, she had friends, acquaintances, and most importantly a career. Something he would never let her have, but if she was at all truthful she was lonely. She had a good life but no real close friends if she was at all honest with herself and she missed Robert, missed their love and their comradery. Their laughter and their in depth discussions that often went late into the night when they first got married. Towards the end it just got too hard to talk,

to bare her soul to him, needing the comfort but unwilling to ask for it, not wanting to ask for it. Her throat thickened, tears welled in her eyes and she clutched at her chest to try and alleviate the pain but within seconds she was sobbing, great heaving sobs that racked her entire being.

Suddenly Robert has there lifting her into his arms and stroking her “Oh love,” he murmured and took her back to bed. He settled beside her, holding her close gently soothing her. As her sobs quietened he held her letting her tears sink into his skin as she drifted to sleep.

Over the last two years Robert had come to realise that he not only missed her presence but missed her love. He knew that he had made mistakes but surely there was still hope. He had to cling to that, hope that Alice still loved him and hope that she would have him back. This thought was in his head as he too drifted to sleep.

Hours later Alice woke with a strange sense of wellbeing, strong arms wrapped around her, her hand resting on his chest, fingers curled in his chest hair. It felt so good not to be alone. For over two years she had slept alone, lonely, missing him. She stretched and tried to move out of his arms.

Robert pulled her closer, sighed and kissed her hair.

“We need to talk.” He murmured as his hands wandered over her back.

“No we don’t.” Alice immediately went on the defensive and wriggled out of his arms then went into the bathroom.

Robert smiled, he relaxed and put his hands behind his head, she would come around eventually. He thought he should let his partner know that he would be here a while.

Alice came out of the bathroom, cold fury in her face at the way he was relaxed in her bed. “I have things to do, do you think you could leave sometime this morning?”

“I was planning a leisurely breakfast with you and then I thought I would go to Venice with you.” He looked thoughtful.

“No way.” Alice stood in the middle of the room, hands on hips, eyes blazing.

God he loved her when she was all riled up he thought.

Alice continued, “You are not going to Venice, I will not have you disturb me while I am working, it will be distracting enough knowing you have been here.”

“All right, then I will stay here and wait for you.” He smiled. There was no way he was leaving before they had resolved their marriage, and he certainly wasn't going to leave her behind.

“What!” spluttered Alice, her cheeks red, her eyes flashed with indignation.

“Well if you won’t let me go with you then I will wait till you get back, we really need to talk Alice,” his eyes smouldering as they made their way down her body.

Alice felt decidedly under dressed in her summer frock and sandals, her nipples hardened as Rob’s gaze raked her.

Turning, Alice mumbled to herself as she packed a backpack with her research and began to pack her suitcase for the next few days. With everything ready and by the door, Alice looked at Robert lazing in her bed “I am going to get breakfast, are you coming with me or lazing in bed all day? I will need to introduce you to Maria and Gino and let them know that I will be away.”

Robert took this as her acquiescence to him staying, so he leapt up and quickly dressed and together they made their way to the cafe at the bottom of the stairs with her luggage.

Alice sat at the first table she found outside, Gino came up with a big smile and his arms opened, Alice stood up and stepped into them willingly.

Robert scowled, he had met Gino the night before but had not understood the depth of their friendship.

“Buongiorno Alice Come stai?”

“Bene bene Gino.”

“Your usual?” he asked.

“Si Grazi Gino. This is my husband come to visit, I am going away for a few days and he is staying at my place.”

Gino leaned back and looked deeply, noticing dark bruises under her eyes and the wariness in her face.

“Si Si” he nodded, “I will look after him” not acknowledging that they had met the night before.

Robert ordered breakfast and decided to ignore the questions that were lurking in his mind. He kept to subjects safe like sightseeing in Milan, places to visit, what to do in her flat while she was away.

A couple of hours later a black limo pulled up and Dominic exited. Alice guiltily stood up, she had forgotten about her trip for a while there. The last couple hours had been as if the last two years had never been. They had talked about family, well his family, friends, well his friends, cricket and Australian Rules Football. Alice gave Robert her key, gathered her bags and looking at Dominic she asked “Where is Ilario?”

“Oh he has a few things to do but he will join us tomorrow.”

With a worried glance at Robert Alice left. Her heart in turmoil. She hadn't had that nightmare for over a year and as for crying well she gave that up days after leaving. What was she going to do, her mind was whirling in a thousand directions.

## Chapter 6

For the next hour as they flew to Venice, Dominic and Alice chatted with Giacomo and the guys that were assigned to the restoration about what they all thought would be needed for the job. Ilario had always included everyone on the discussions. He learned early on that everyone had a contribution to the business and if encouraged everyone on the team learned and the project was better for it.

Just as Dominic and Alice were settling into the small hotel near the villa that was to be their home for the next week, Ilario was knocking on her apartment door. After Dominic had rung him last night to tell him Alice's husband was visiting he couldn't settle, talking with his wife Marissa helped him decide that as Alice was the daughter they never had he would go find out what was going on. He felt responsible, Marissa insisted that he go talk to this Roberto and find out exactly what he intended with Alice. Ilario remembered the revealing conversation he had with Alice a year after she started. Obviously she trusted him as she mentioned things long buried. He will always remember the tears burning in her eyes as she told him about the miscarriage and the doctors' bad news.

Robert was jolted out of his trip down memory lane when he heard the knock on the apartment door. No one in Italy knew he was here and Alice was away so why anyone was knocking he had no idea. Opening the door he recognised Dominic's father, the resemblance was unmistakable. Ilario held out his hand "Roberto I am Ilario, Alice's friend and boss can we talk?"

"Sure," he replied as they shook hands.

"Not here but downstairs in the café," and he turned and began walking down the stairs. Robert grabbed his wallet and keys and hurried after the retreating figure wondering what they were going to talk about. He thought it was about Alice's job and now that Robert was here he would be worried.

As they waited for Gino to serve their coffee Ilario moved back in his chair, "I won't flog the bush" he said in his heavily accented English, "I need to know what your intentions are with our Alice?"

Robert smiled, “I think you mean beat around the bush, and as her husband my intentions have always been about her, to provide for her and love her. I have waited two long years to find her and now I want her back in my life.”

Ilario nodded “It is as it should be, however you need to know a little of Alice’s life since she left Australia.”

Robert sipped his coffee confident that Ilario couldn’t tell him anything that he didn’t know or hadn’t already guessed.

“Firstly, know that I will not interfere between a husband and wife, however Alice has been family for nearly two years and my wife will kill me if I allow any harm to come to her. She is the daughter we never had and Dominic looks to her like a sister, his wife and children adore her.”

“I get it, she is family, and important to me too.” Robert said impatiently gripping his chair, as if this man could tell him what was important. He knew exactly what was important, for the love of God, he was here wasn’t he, had spent time and money trying to find her for two years, of course she was important, she was his wife. No one could tell him how important she was.

“About a year ago Alice felt she could trust me enough to tell me her story. We were discussing our travels and favourite places to visit. Alice mentioned being married but leaving you after some difficulties. She left Australia and travelled a bit, trying to leave false clues so you wouldn’t find her, she was obviously worried that you would find her. I was concerned about what you would do when you found her but she didn’t elaborate and said that you were an honourable man, so I had to believe that. When she got to France she bought a bicycle and cycled the countryside because she knew you would not be able to trace her. All her money is in a Swiss account and she only used cash. Now while I respected her need to hide and recover, it was the depth of fear of discovery that worried me.”

Robert sat up puzzled, his hands spread open across the table, “I have never hurt her or touched her in anger, I don’t understand.”

“I didn’t either till the next part of the story. She wanted to give you a chance to find someone to have a family with. She knew you wanted children and she couldn’t, so she thought, rightly or wrongly, that if you couldn’t find her you would find someone else.” Ilario explained.

“What do you mean couldn’t have children?” Robert’s blood froze, “The doctor said after the miscarriage to take things slowly and allow us time to grieve and recover.”

“Apparently six months later she had a check-up and the doctor said that while it wasn’t impossible to conceive with help, it would never happen naturally nor would she naturally carry a child to term without help.” Ilario continued.

Robert paled, he shook his head and ran his hands through his dark hair, “She never told me, it wouldn’t have mattered, I only wanted her, only ever loved her,” he whispered.

“That’s not what you told her after the miscarriage,” Ilario spat out angry on Alice’s behalf.

“Because I thought she needed to hear that we would have children,” Robert protested.

Ilario nodded “There is more though, while you were working hard each day, what did you think our Alice was doing?”

Robert shrugged “You know, girl things, shopping, coffee, stuff,” he couldn’t confess that he really hadn’t been interested in her days back then. He was too busy trying to establish his legal practice and had worked fourteen hour days, barely dragging himself home to sleep.

“You think an intelligent woman like Alice would be happy with that? Would be able to survive each day that you were at work without something to distract her? She said that you were not happy with her working. That would be the cave man theory she mentioned. Did you know that during your marriage she managed to do an online degree on design and in the last two years she has just finished her Masters in Design through Oxford University online? She is extremely clever and we are very proud of her and her achievements. I want to keep her as part of our design team.”

Robert was flabbergasted. How had she managed to hide something as important as study from him? How had he missed that? Was he so self-centred he hadn’t even considered her at all? The answer to that must have been hell yes.

Ilario could see that Roberto had a lot to think about so he took his leave to catch up with Alice and Dominic in Venice.

Standing up from the table Robert looked around, may be a walk would do him good.

He walked through the historic streets of Bresso. It was an older suburb of Milan only eight kilometres from the heart of the city. There were old cobbled streets not wide enough for a car, buildings that were older than Australia and many had survived the Second World War. Streets that led to pretty courtyards. Not that Robert was seeing any of it. He would have to re-think his strategy to get her back in his life. After seeing her, he realised that he still did love her, needed her in his life every day, he wouldn’t, couldn’t go another day without her anymore. He came to Milan to bring her back to Melbourne, now having experienced a bit of her life and met some of the people who mattered to her, and she mattered to them, he would have to concede

that she hadn't had this in Melbourne. He remembered with a shock when she first left that he had never met any of her friends. That he didn't know who to call to find out if anyone knew where she was. The café owner down the road from the house stopped him one day and asked if she was ok as he hadn't seen her for a while. That was the only time someone had asked about her. Why didn't she have friends when they lived together in Melbourne? Was that partly his fault? He didn't know but he certainly had to talk to her when she returned.

As he walked the streets of Milan he remembered meeting her, he knew from the first day he met her at their university campus that he wanted her. She was studying history and medieval architecture while he was forging ahead with law. He knew that she didn't have any family, her parents were older when they had her so she didn't have any grandparents and being an only child was encouraged towards scholarly achievement. She had always been a little on the shy side and it took all his encouragement to have small parties at home to meet important clients and keep the social aspect going with the partners and their wives.

He thought back to this morning and how they seamlessly got to talking about life in Australia, discussing their favourite things like cricket and football. Her smile just lit up her whole face, her eyes sparkled and if he could make things better he would. Based on what Ilario told him she was cleverer than he had ever given her credit, despite the fact that he had met her at University and she had finished a double degree in the time that he did one. The fact that he had married her straight out of university and she didn't use her education had never bothered him before, but now looking back he could see that he had been very selfish and their relationship had been extremely one sided. Did that make him sound like a Neanderthal? Yes. Sure he was a lawyer with a well-established practice and worked hard, made good money. But after Ilario mentioned that his plans for the future involved making Alice and Dominic partners and that the value of her take home pay in Australian dollars well and truly outweighed his current salary, what was she doing living in that pokey one bedroom flat in the industrial area? Then again why would she want him back?

Pulling himself up short on the pavement, he was shocked by his thinking. He hadn't realised that he was so materialistic. He had given himself lots to think about, she was obviously happy but would she want him back. Could he stay in Italy? Would she want him to stay? What would he do?

He would have to re-evaluate everything he had thought was important. Obviously money wasn't a motivating factor for her, not that it ever had been he thought, remembering him transferring money into her account and finding out later that she had hardly used any of it except for housekeeping. He would have to think about this more carefully. Why he hadn't

thought about it earlier he had no idea. He had just been obsessed with getting her back in his arms regardless. He thought, obviously incorrectly, that once he found her she would fall back into his arms and beg his forgiveness. He was such an arse he snorted.

He walked for hours, his mind awash with possibilities. Every time he thought of her beautiful body curled up next to him last night he felt the heat pool in his groin. She was thinner than he remembered but her breasts were still the perfect size, round with those lovely cherry tips waiting for him to kiss. A shudder ripped through him. Now that he had found her he resolved that he would never let her go. What he had to do was to let go of the old fashioned ideas that he always held. That he had to protect and provide for her. Was he strong enough to let go and keep her. The other question was would she let him.

## Chapter 7

Alice spent the days in Venice working hard and the nights wondering what Robert was doing. She had never been interested in anyone else, she had never met anyone else that she wanted to be with from the time that she met him at University to now, all she had was work. Funny she thought how things work out, when they were together all he had was work, now her work was all consuming and she was extremely passionate about it. Talk about role reversal.

Looking back she knew as she had always known since the first time she had met him that he held her heart in his hands. Not that she'd had time for a relationship since leaving him. Just seeing him again and her nipples had instantly hardened, thinking of what he could do to her was making her wet with desire. Each night she touched herself the way she remembered Robert doing, each time left her wanting, unfulfilled.

The work on the villa would be long and arduous. She had the designs mapped out for the main reception rooms, the ballroom and the main bedroom. The meetings with the Duc were long and sometimes loud, but Dominic was there to make sure everything went smoothly. Apparently there were several firms vying for the project but as Dominic had said, she was not only beautiful but very convincing that she was the best to recreate his heritage.

The Duc had made it very clear at the first dinner they had together that he expected the best and he was reluctant to agree that this *piccola donna petite woman* was the best. Dominic had argued that not only was she talented but she had studied hard for this. She knew what was required to restore the interior of his villa and showed him examples on their website. The Duc was still reluctant until he saw her in action, climbing up the scaffolding, getting pictures with her digital camera, and rubbings of what was left on the ceiling.

Dominic had included her in every discussion with the Duc, trying as it was, she worked hard with her sketch book to show him what she could do with the moldings and eventually she would send him the finished product but for now the Duc had to be happy with quick sketches. Alice proved time and time again that she was the best that the Duc could get, there were other companies who were good, however they were the best and she badly wanted to work on his villa, it would be the hardest challenge yet.

Dominic and Alice promised to share all the pre work with the Duc. The Duc had provided her with access to his family paintings that had shown the rooms in their earlier glory. She grinned at the thought of what she would be able to do as she sketched the sixteen century renditions of the ballroom and reception halls. The detail was fantastic. She sketched just parts

of the ceiling and walls. Using a magnifying glass she got all the detail on paper, ready for her to take back and recreate the cornices and ceiling moldings. She also had a contact in Florence who would make handmade wallpaper if the Duc really wanted to have the rooms authentically restored.

On their last day in Venice, Alice was up early and on her way to the villa before Dominic awoke. With the five level scaffolding in place it was an easy thing to climb up to the ceiling of the ballroom and take the last pictures that she needed.

Over the centuries, pollution and so called renovations had taken their toll. The next thing to do was to sketch the now, and then how she envisioned the room finished, even if it didn't exactly match what it had looked like in the paintings the owner had showed her.

After taking more rubbings of the current cornice work and sketching some of the ceiling artwork, hanging over the edge of the 5<sup>th</sup> story of the scaffolding Alice didn't feel very safe. She began to gather her things and stuff them in her backpack when she heard a loud bang behind her, startled she lost her footing and began to fall, screaming she tried to grab the railing but to no avail.

The next thing she knew the Duc was hovering over her, his hands holding her to the planks, her vision blurry. She had fallen a couple of levels and landed across the railing on her back. The Duc had hauled her over the railing onto the level planks.

"Are you alright?" His accented English heavy with concern.

"I, I." her vision swirled, black dots wavered in her head. "My head hurts and my ankle." Alice moved to lean against the upright, her face pale.

"Let me have a look," and he settled at her feet.

He undid the laces of her work boot and she nearly fainted with the pain that went screaming through her ankle.

"Ohhh," she murmured as she held on to the scaffolding, her knuckles white with pain.

The Duc cursed something low in Italian which she had never heard before so it must have been bad. "Your ankle is very swollen I will get help."

She must have blacked out because the next thing she knew there were first aiders and an ambulance crew all crowded around her, loudly trying to get her down the three levels of scaffolding.

"Memento," she shouted holding her hands to her head and miraculously they quietened. Holding onto the scaffolding she levered herself down to the next level, there were plenty of hands to help and guide her once they realised what she was doing.

When she was at the floor level she collapsed. Her ankle swollen to twice its size, her back hurt and her head was throbbing so badly she thought she just might be sick.

“My camera and notes,” she cried trying to reach them before the ambulance crew lifted her gently onto the barouche.

“Si Si I will make sure that Dominic gets them, now go and get fixed up,” the Duc shook his head, he could never understand women wanting to be so independent.

The ambulance crew quickly had her in the vehicle and on her way to the nearest private hospital. The Duc had insisted and she was in too much pain to resist.

A couple of hours later resting with her ankle wrapped Alice was feeling a bit groggy with the pain medication but lying comfortably with her foot resting on two pillows. Dominic crept in with her bag and Alice struggled to sit up as he approached “Grazi Dominic.”

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Better, though it will be a while until I am climbing scaffolding again,” she smiled weakly.

“The doctor said you can go home tomorrow. Mamma said that you can come and stay with them but Pappa said that you might like to be home,”

Dominic looked at her, the realisation of Robert being at her flat danced across her face. Despair, joy, anguish. Dominic took pity on her, “You can stay with Mamma and Papa you know. Mamma would love to fatten you up,” he smiled.

Alice shook her head “As much as I love Marissa and Ilairo, I really need to sort things out with Robert and I can’t very well run away again,” she grimaced at the thought of talking to him, of baring her soul to him, that thought was more painful than her ankle.

If she could have, she would have tossed and turned all night, however with her back so sore and her ankle immobilised it wasn’t possible, but it didn’t stop her brain from looping round and round about Robert and what to do. The nurses gave her more pain medication to try and encourage her to sleep but even that didn’t shut her mind down with all the things that she needed to say to Robert. She wasn’t sure how he would react, even if he would stay and listen but she had to try. She did love him, had always loved him, and as he was determined to have her back and had professed to still love her, it was now her turn to make sure he understood why she left, obviously the short note she had left more than two years ago wasn’t enough.

Alice thought back to the day she wrote the note.

*Dear Robert, I really can't do this anymore, please forgive me. My lawyer's card is enclosed, please contact him and I will sign the divorce papers. No contest, no property. I am so very sorry. Alice*

It really didn't say too much. She knew she was depressed at the time but didn't know how deep it went until she left home. She remembered that it was about six months before she actually laughed at something and wanted to share it with Rob, that realisation at the time hit her between the eyes and she thought back over the last few months and came to the conclusion that she was depressed but getting out of the fog now.

Alice thought that fate had produced the perfect opportunity to sort out the last two and half years and the reasons why she ran. Even now it wasn't always clear cut in her head, but she had to try and get him to understand. After everything he might not want to have her back but he had to have all the facts to make the decision that would affect both their futures.

Now that she had seen him again she realised that she had the chance to have him back in her life. She just hoped that he would love her enough to stay in Italy, because she wasn't giving up her job not now, she thought furiously. Then she thought, why would he stay in Italy, she hadn't stayed in Melbourne, the first sign of trouble and she had ran, long and hard, to get away, to make sure that he wouldn't find her. As she slowly drifted off she could see Robert and his beautiful face smiling at her.

In the morning she was greeted by Dominic and a wheelchair. After a quick assisted wash she was well and truly ready to go home. Alice arrived home after much difficulty and not considerable pain. She had a wheelchair at the airport and was first on the plane, sitting at the front with her leg sticking out of the aisle. Hoping against hope that no one would trip over her. Flights were bad enough but she didn't have the distraction of chatting about work.

She was exhausted as she tried to get out of the car that Dominic had driven from the airport. It showed in every pore of her face, her hair was sticking up all over, her eyes pale, with dark circles under them, her mouth a slash of pain.

Robert was there waiting anxiously. Ilario had visited yesterday to let him know that Alice had fallen and was in hospital. Robert's first thought was to go straight to the airport but Ilario restrained him. It was no good to go there when she would be home in the morning. She had her ankle wrapped to stabilise her torn ligaments and she had a slight concussion, along with a very bruised back. The doctors said that she would need to have her leg put in plaster next week when the swelling had reduced. So Robert would have to make arrangements for that and to look after her for the next six weeks or so.

The nerves in Roberts face ticked as she got out of the car. It took all his effort to stand at the entrance of her apartment stairs and not rush out and make sure she was ok. Dominic helped her out of the car and went to grab her gear.

Alice looked at Robert “Sorry.” She apologised, she could see that cross look on his face that she had seen before when something wasn’t going his way. She could still read him and his moods she thought.

“Sorry?” what could she possibly be apologising for? He wondered

“I have messed up your sightseeing” She shrugged.

“I don’t think so, are you all right? Stupid question of course you aren’t,” he grinned at his own stupidity.

“I will be when I can get up three flights of stairs,” Alice grimaced at the thought of trying to hop up all those stairs.

Robert smiled that lazy smile that always set her insides wobbling, moved closer and gently lifted her off her feet. Alice stiffened “Relax,” he murmured against her hair.

“What?”

“I can’t carry you up three flights of stairs with you stiff as a board,” he smiled, he had her in his arms again. God she felt so good.

Alice slowly wound her arms around his neck and inhaled deeply. His smell shook her to her very core. She shivered slightly as Robert carried her up the stairs.

“Ilario and I have made arrangements for a nurse to come and see you every morning.”

Oh you have, have you she thought darkly, just back in my life and already taking over.  
“Mmmm”

“We thought that you would need help showering and such. Unless you want me to help?” he smiled knowing full well that she would refuse any help from him.

By the time they reached her door there was a sheen of perspiration on Rob’s face that Alice wanted to lick and lap up, but everything that had happened between them stopped her. Her nerves were at breaking point.

Robert didn’t stop until he tenderly placed her on the bed. It was all he could do to put her down, his erection was so obvious, he wanted to strip her and check every inch of her. Her smell had enveloped him and he wanted to rediscover every part of her.

Dominic followed close behind with her cases and crutches “Alice *mia piccola colomba* no worrying and no working for a few weeks. This is what the doctor ordered.”

“Si Dominic,” she said as she sagged against the pillows and closed her eyes. If she kept them closed they might both just go away she thought.

Chapter 8

Ten minutes later Robert crept in and stood watching her from the doorway. His heart aching with the wrongs he needed to right. How was he going to make it all better? How was he going to convince her that his love was still there, that he needed her, that the last two years had been incredibly lonely with an emptiness no one would be able to fill but her? Not that he had tried to replace her. He never could, never would.

Alice couldn't stand the tension any longer. "Are you going to stand there all day?" she opened her eyes, "I can't sleep with you standing there."

He moved closer.

Help she thought as she shivered, he was going to kiss her, her whole body was on high alert, and she would be lying to herself if she said she didn't want him to. It had been so long since he had touched her, besides the other night, it was over two years since she had laid next to him, touched him and tasted him. Her nerves just tingled in anticipation, her nipples taut and rubbing against her lacy bra making her clit throb.

Robert could see her flushed face, her breathing had shallowed, her breasts straining against her shirt, her nipples peaked. He smiled knowing that she wasn't as unaffected as she pretended. He reached down to brush her hair back.

"Do you need anything?"

Alice closed her eyes and sighed "If I could have a pillow under my ankle that would be nice, thank you."

Once she was settled he went for a very long walk.

Alice spent the next few hours going over and over all the things that had gone wrong, she gave herself a headache trying to sort it all out. She had succeeded in Milan to the point where she could afford whatever she wanted and what she wanted was to be left alone she thought or was it? With Robert being here her thoughts and feelings were in turmoil. Why couldn't he have done the sensible thing and just divorced her she thought.

When Robert came back with dinner he found her asleep on top of the bed, her face flushed and the tracks of dried tears along her cheeks. Was him being here causing her so much distress or should he have stayed and made sure she wasn't in pain. He removed his clothes and covered them both, gathering her close. She smelt so good. Not quite how he remembered, maybe she was using a different perfume or shampoo. It felt so good to hold her. He vowed to

himself that he was never going to let her go again, no matter what she thought was the best for him.

Waking a couple of hours later Alice couldn't work out why she felt so safe and warm. Robert's arms were wrapped around her and she was pulled up close to his chest, his bare chest. Snuggling a bit deeper into the bed, she realised that she missed him, not only on an emotional level but also physically as well. For two years she hadn't had anyone to cuddle, to confide in, to weep over and to cook for. She had missed him every day in every way that she could imagine.

While her mind was whirling around, Robert cradled her in his arms and murmured "Stop thinking and go back to sleep."

Closing her eyes Alice drifted off again, feeling safe and loved for the first time in so very long.

Robert lay in the bed with his arms full of Alice and her scent wrapping itself around him. He gently pushed her hair away from her face so that he could look at the changes that had occurred over the last two years. She had a few more lines around her eyes and mouth, the frown line on her brow was a bit deeper but they all combined to ensure that she was still beautiful and real. Not one of those plastic wives a couple of his fellow lawyers totted around.

Sometime in the early hours Alice slowly woke to the most delicious sensation that she hadn't felt for a long time. Her nipples were being worshiped. Slowly and carefully he licked, sucked and pinched her breasts until she was writhing under him.

"You have the most beautiful breasts," he murmured as he continued to pay homage to her.

Alice held his head to her chest wanting more but unable to articulate, her mind had turned to mush, her breathing rapid, her body on fire, all that she could feel was him, his length against her body, his heat pouring into her.

His erection was hard against her hip leaving a trail of pre-cum. His hands slowly made their way down her abdomen to her core, stopping on the way to explore every inch of her that he hadn't touched in over two years. Removing her panties, he settled between her legs, savouring her honey as he tasted her after so long. He thought that she tasted so much better than he remembered.

Alice was mindless, shaking from trying to reach the orgasm that he was slowly denying her, torturing her. "Please Rob, please" she begged, tears dripping down the side of her face.

“Please what baby?” He murmured against her thigh. “Please make you come, please love you forever, please take you to heights you haven’t been to in over two years? I will do all that and more, I love you Alice.”

“Yes yes ” she cried as her body shook unsure of exactly what she had agreed to.

He settled to ensure that she forgot any man that had been with her during the two years she was away. He was so jealous at the thought of anyone coming near her he nearly exploded. Stroking and pushing her to her limits he continued to make love to her, to relearn every inch of her delectable body, inside and out. As she neared her climax he pulled back.

“Nooo” she moaned. “Please Robert please let me come,” she begged, shaking with need, her hips rising to try and force him closer.

“Not just yet baby,” and he moved behind her, ensuring that her leg was supported and slowly he entered her. Oh God she felt like coming home. He knew it wouldn’t take long, he hadn’t been with anyone since she left. She was tight and wet as his erection slid inside.

“You feel so good love, it has been so long” he whispered as he pulled her closer. His length slowly invading her, slowly making her his again. As he dragged his erection back he slid across the delicious spot that sent her into spasms. Holding her tight so she wouldn’t hurt her leg, Robert slowly moved in and out, hoping he would last a bit longer.

Alice couldn’t remember the last time she felt like this. Not the last few months when they were together. “More please, harder” she moaned as Robert did his best to please her without hurting her.

On and on he slowly slid out, then a quick hard slap of his body against hers, his erection slamming against her cervix causing that delicious hurt she craved.

Robert continued the slow drag out and the quick thrust back until he felt her walls closing on him, reaching around he flicked her clit with his finger and she screamed his name over and over, as he joined her in orgasmic bliss. Hours, months, years later he opened his eyes watching her for any signs of discomfort.

Alice was slowly becoming aware of her surroundings, she had forgotten how good it felt to be thoroughly loved by Robert. He was devastating. Realising that she was too comfortable, she moved and tried to get out of his arms. It was difficult with her leg propped up on the pillow.

“Robert?” she squirmed against him.

“Mmm,” he murmured against her hair.

“I need the bathroom,” what she really wanted was to get away from him, from his attention and think about what happened, how did she let this happen she admonished herself.

He moved, lifted her out of the bed and took her into the small bathroom. There really wasn't enough room for both of them. Putting her down gently, he ran his hands through her hair and tilted her head to look at him, as he looked into her eyes he saw them swimming with tears, leaning in he slowly kissed her, dragging her closer and sucking on her bottom lip.

Alice shivered and melted into him, trying to get closer. All thoughts had gone out the window, he was annihilating all her defences. Finally he ended the kiss and she lent on him to get her balance and clear her head.

"I am ok now, just let me clean up." She said as she squirmed to get comfortable.

Raising her chin so that her eyes met his, Robert stared, slowly taking in her swollen lips, her eyes reflecting doubts and her flushed skin. "Alice, just so you know, I am not letting you go, not now, not ever again, don't care what it takes but know that we will be together forever from now on."

She looked into his eyes, seeing love and determination. She realised that running away probably had not been the best decision that she could have made. Looking back she was sure she was depressed but hadn't recognised the symptoms to seek help at the time. Could she trust her judgement with Robert, could they sort out their issues? Oh God she hoped so, as she ran her hands through her hair, she didn't want to be alone anymore she thought as her eyes filled with tears.

Robert walked out of the bathroom and put on a pair of track pants and went to heat up the dinner that they missed last night. Waiting for her coffee to brew he thought about their lovemaking, he had no regrets, and would do it again in a heartbeat, but what of Alice. He knew that there was no way he was ever leaving her here when he went home. Would she come back with him? Why would she? He thought. She was correct when she said that he didn't like her working and yet here she was respected and loved by the people that she worked with, expressing her creativity, doing something that she was obviously good at. He evidently hurt her when he wouldn't let her work, it was all due to his pride, where was his pride when she had left? Now that he had found her how could he expect her to come back to Melbourne with him when she had a good life here, except her life didn't have him in it. They really needed to talk, they needed to make a decision about his future, no their future he thought as he ran his hands over the front of his pants. Yes he really felt like talking, not, he grimaced.

Chapter 9

When Alice slowly made her way back into the main room, she leant against the door frame watching him get their food and drinks together. He had never looked comfortable in the kitchen at home, now he looked as though he had been doing it all his life. Maybe they could talk, as painful as it might be to her. She acknowledged that she had been very selfish leaving him but for her peace of mind at the time she had to.

“Robert?” she looked at him.

“Yes,” he stopped, turned with two plates in his hands and looked back.

“Can we talk?” she gestured to the chairs at the table.

“You can always talk to me Alice,” he said as he put the plates on the table and moved closer to her.

Alice hobbled and sat on the couch and settled her injured leg on the small low coffee table.

Robert sat next to her but sideways so that he could see her face. “What is it?” he asked taking her hands in his.

“I need to explain why I left. I have always felt guilty for not staying but when you hear me out I hope that you might be able to understand.” She said. “At least I hope you will,” she whispered.

Alice sat and stared across the room seeing the morning sun making shadows across the skyline. Just as he was about to leap in with something profound, she started talking. Taking them back to the horror and misery of the miscarriage, the diagnosis of the doctor, the discussions that they had before she left that had cemented in her mind rightly or wrongly that she had to leave and let him get on with his life and have a family. How she had travelled, avoiding the most obvious tourist routes, working, studying, and finally moving to Milan and working with Ilario. Her eyes shone when she talked about work and the challenges that she faced when trying to restore a home or public place.

All the while Robert studied her face and her body. She avoided looking at him so that she could tell him everything without sobbing, though she did shed a few tears now and then trying to explain how she felt. Finally she talked herself out and was slumped against the pillows of the couch.

Robert took her hands in his “Alice my love, look at me” slowly she turned her head to see the love shining in his eyes. “Firstly I just want to say sorry, sorry that you felt that you couldn’t come and talk to me about what the doctor said, sorry that I was such a caveman that I

wouldn't let you work, you are so good at what you do you can never give it up. I can see that it is important to you and that Ilario would fight me to the death rather than lose you," he smiled. Looking down at her hands he rubbed his fingers over the spot where her wedding ring used to be "I have never loved anyone but you, there could never be anyone to replace you, many tried to set me up after you left but I just couldn't look at anyone." Gathering her close to him and resting his chin on her head, he held her, just to have her in his arms again was the best thing ever.

"What do you say to us house hunting in Milan? I can't leave you here and I can't see you coming home to Melbourne. Love, will you have me back, can you see yourself loving me again? Can we try again? Please? Can we make Milan our home, I know now that home is where you are and I will do anything to stay with you." By the time he had finished he had tears in his eyes and Alice had moved albeit awkwardly to sit on his lap.

She was in shock; he had never ever before expressed any desire to travel let alone move to another country permanently. Oh my god what was she to do. Could she ask him to sacrifice his career and law practice to move to Milan? Shaking her head she didn't think that she had the right to ask that of him.

Robert held her tight against him, trying to read her face and understand what was going through her mind. He sat very still while she was trying to work it all out in her head.

Alice lent against his chest, soaking up his strength as she thought about the sacrifices he would have to make. She really couldn't ask him to do that could she?

"Robert," she mumbled into his shirt "I can't ask you to give up your practice that you have worked so hard to establish, that's not fair."

"What is not fair is us not being together Alice," he replied stroking her hair "I want to be where you are, and at the moment you are here. Your career is just as important, I have come to realise, and I can transfer to any law firm anywhere, I just have to learn how to speak Italian and I am sure that you will help me with that. Please Alice give us a chance, let me back into your life." His voice took on a vibrating quality as he tried to contain the tears and the lump in his throat that had grown to biblical proportions.

Alice recognised that what he said made the difference to her way of thinking, he still loved her. That revelation brought a smile to her face. She also accepted that she loved him, always had and always would. "Yes" and she reached up and kissed the life out of him.

Robert pulled back and looked into her eyes, they were shining with love and full to the brim with tears of joy. He gently stood up and placed her back on the couch. Going to his bag he reached into the side pocket. Walking back to Alice he kept his eyes on hers, trying to let her

know how much he loved her without words. Kneeling in front of her he reached for her hands. “Alice will you wear my rings again, please? We can have another ceremony here with your friends and reaffirm our commitment if you want. Please say yes my love please.”

Alice sat with tears streaming down her face “Yes” she managed to get past the tears and constrictions in her throat, as she ran her hands over his face “I would love to wear your rings again, I have missed them.”

Robert looked at her quizzically “You have missed your rings? What about me?”

She took his hands into hers “Every moment of every day I have missed your love.”

He slowly placed her engagement and wedding bands on her left hand. It felt a lot more significant now than it did when he married her. This was more real, this was forever. He would never be parted from her ever again.

## Chapter 10

### EPILOGUE

Alice couldn't believe they had been in the house for three years. She looked out the kitchen window towards Robert in the backyard with pride at what they had achieved in such a short time. They had their house in Melbourne packed up and shipped over, Robert had gone back to clean up his office and sell the house. She had missed him terribly but she was in Venice at the time sorting out the restoration, so the distraction was good. When he returned they had a wonderful reunion at Como, not only was the weather perfect but Robert proved to her time and time again that he loved and worshiped her.

Once they had settled in the area of Cusano Milanino, not far from the factory and close to the superhighway to Como they had a ceremony to celebrate their love. Ilario provided the back yard and the family. They even had a second honeymoon in Como.

Good thing that they had never divorced, it made things so much easier for Robert to get a working visa, while Alice had become a citizen of Milan. Another excuse to have a party. But the best excuse was when child support services talked to them about fostering a couple of children instead of adopting outright. They had been on the adoption list from the moment that Robert had got his visa. The children were brother and sister aged 4 and 2 and they had lost their parents in a car accident. The children were ok but very scared and alone. Unusually there was no extended family to care for them only one old great aunt whom they kept in contact with, the social worker thought that this was their best shot at becoming parents. Everyone rallied around and helped pack up the children's house, the social worker had organised for it to be sold and the money put in trust. At least the children had their own things with them along with pictures of their parents to remind them that they now had two sets of parents to care for them.

Alice had been beside herself with worry about being a good mum, but as the last year had proved, they all had adjusted well with Salvatore just about to start school and Anna going to childcare at the factory with Alice. They had one more year and they would be eligible to adopt them formally.

Robert had passed all the tests to practice law in Italy as long as he had an interpreter until his Italian got better, then the Law Society would check on him again. He was currently working with a company involved in migration to other countries. He enjoyed the challenge of learning the laws of different places which was something completely different from his family law practice in Melbourne. He was also looking at purchasing a summer house in Como, he wanted to surprise Alice on their next anniversary. They all really loved it there and the children thrived when they went on holidays.

Out in the backyard Robert looked up towards Alice in the kitchen, he noticed that she was still pale, she had been unwell lately so he arranged for Ilario to pick up the children after tea and he was going to make sure that she rested. Their backyard was set up similar to their old home in Australia, though not as large, it had a fenced pool and a BBQ, along with an outside kitchen area. All their family and friends delighted in teasing them about never becoming real Italians. They really were living the life they were supposed to be thought.

Moving across the garden and entering the house he pulled Alice into his arms. "Are the children ready to go with Ilario?"

"Yes, and thank you for that, it is a wonderful idea. They enjoy each other's company so much. Marissa spoils them so. The children have thrived with all the family around them," she snuggled into his arms.

"I am only doing this so that you can rest, you have not been well and you do too much for them and me," Robert smiled.

"I went to the doctors this morning while you took them shopping." She looked up at him her eyes shining "I am pregnant."

"What, how did that.. what when," he stuttered his heart fluttering in his chest, his legs felt so weak he had to sit down, taking her with him.

"Well as to when I think it was that day we made love by the lake," she smirked remembering the clear day and the sound of water lapping against the hotel steps drifting through their window "As to how, if you haven't worked it out by now then I might have to teach you all over again," she smiled.

Robert looked at her incredulously, his hands fluttering around her stomach "How far?"

Handing him the grainy ultrasound picture "10 weeks, so it is no wonder that I have been feeling so ill."

"What is this?" he asked as he looked at the picture.

"Our baby, here is the head, and see the little hand?" Alice pointed out the less obvious details to him.

Robert looked at her again trying to process the news. Then it hit him, they were going to have a baby, holy hell "Alice," he fussed, "What did the doctor say? What about your health?"

Alice laughed and lounged back against his chest. "It is ok Robert, the doctor said that the last six years were healing for me and not having any pressure while we were apart was a good thing for my mind as well as my body. But for now he doesn't want me to work too hard, so I will have to talk to Ilario and go part time or maybe working some of the time at home, I figured I could do the sketching at home." She mulled over some of the restrictions the doctor had laid

out “and no lifting, not too much walking, not carrying anything too heavy, you know that sort of thing.”

Robert looked at her, his love shining in his eyes, “I will make sure that you are extremely spoiled from now on, and that you don’t do anything that you shouldn’t. When is your next doctor’s appointment I will need to speak to him.”

Alice smiled knowing that he would make sure that she stuck to all the restrictions but she would have done it anyway, there was no way she was going to put this baby in jeopardy at all no matter how bored she might get. “You can come with me next week to make sure all is ok.”

Robert frowned at this, thinking that she should give up work altogether but for now he would be guided by her and the doctor.

“Now Robert don’t be a worry wart, I will be able to work and have this child, don’t go all caveman on me now, you have been so good about me working, women have been having babies and working for years now. Though we do have to discuss when to tell the children.”

He looked worried, “Will you be able to cope with the three of them?”

“Of course Sal will be at school when this one is born and Anna will be a great help, you’ll see and we have Marissa, Ilario, Dominic and his family, they will all help, we have a large family now and family pitches in.” She smiled at him.

Robert sat back and hugged her, never in all his wildest dreams did he think that his life would be so wonderful, so full. Alice was the love of his life, as long as she was happy then all was right with his world. Robert leaned in and kissed her, possessed her, showing her exactly what he thought and how much he loved her, his tongue demanding entry to her mouth, his hands exploring her. He tried not to think about the nine hundred and two days when he couldn’t find her. Here and now were it, these were the best times for him and he made sure that she knew how much she was loved.

As they parted trying to get air into their lungs Alice leaned into him and whispered, “We have an audience.”

Robert looked around, saw his two children wide eyed grinning and as they noticed him looking at them they ran and jumped on them both. Gathering the children to them Alice and Robert smiled. Their love showed in everything they did and their children reflected their happiness. Robert thought that his life couldn’t have got any better after her had found her, but Alice had showed him that it was about to be more exciting than either of them had ever hoped or dreamed.