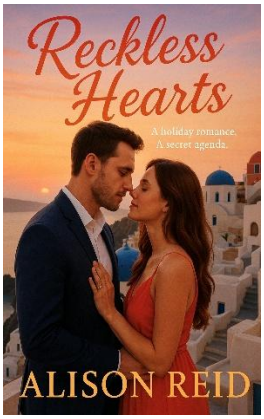
Reckless Hearts

by Alison Reid



"I'm asking as a friend, Brad," Alec said, voice low but resolute. "Not as a client."

Brad turned from the window, slowly, his expression unreadable. "That's exactly the problem."

His voice was calm, but underneath it ran the familiar edge of controlled friction. Personal and professional never mixed well—not in his world. Brad didn't take favours lightly, especially not from men like Alec Hale. There was always a cost, even if no one said it aloud.

"I run a full-service protection firm, Alec," Brad said, folding his arms across his chest. "I don't tail people anymore. I haven't in years. I hire operatives. I review reports. I write contracts. You want surveillance, I've got a dozen men and women who can shadow your sister across Europe without ever being seen."

Alec shook his head, jaw tightening. "This isn't about the job, Brad. It's about trust."

Brad let out a quiet, humourless breath. "You mean it's about control. You don't want someone watching Scarlett. You want someone you trust watching her."

Alec didn't deny it.

Brad's gaze narrowed. "Why me? Why now?"

"Because she's vulnerable," Alec said simply. "And because you're the only person I know who won't lie to me about what he sees."

Brad tilted his head, sceptical. "You don't need me. You need a therapist, a guilt coach, and maybe a family mediator."

Alec gave a tight smile that didn't reach his eyes. "That too. But right now, I need you."

Brad looked at him for a long moment, jaw flexing, every instinct telling him to say no. He didn't babysit billionaires spoilt sisters. He didn't follow socialites through cobblestone streets and cocktail bars in foreign countries. That wasn't his work anymore. He handled real threats. Real risk.

But Alec had once pulled Brad from a burning Humvee after an ambush in Kandahar. Had kept him alive with his bare hands. Brad owed him his life.

And Brad wasn't the kind of man who forgot a debt.

Alec leaned forward across the sleek glass desk, fingers laced, sharp green eyes fixed on him. "I wouldn't ask if it weren't important."

Brad exhaled and crossed his arms. "Your sister's twenty-four. She's not a child."

"No," Alec said tightly. "She's reckless. She always has been."

Brad didn't respond immediately. He knew Alec well—well enough to know that beneath the polished billionaire exterior, the man was wound tight with guilt and responsibility. They had shared more than a battlefield overseas.

But this—this wasn't a battlefield. This was Europe. And this was about Scarlett.

Scarlett Hale.

The name alone stirred something unsteady in Brad's mind—half a memory, half a question mark.

He had only met her once. Years ago. She'd been fourteen then, all legs and laughter, with a shock of wild red hair that refused to be tamed and a mouth that didn't know how to filter a single thought. There'd been something electric about her even then—too much life crammed into one fragile frame, like she didn't know how to be quiet or small. Not in those sterile Hamptons hallways, not in the shadow of her powerful family. She hadn't fit, not even a little.

He remembered her laughter most. Sharp, unfiltered, and unbothered by pretence. She had called him "Soldier Boy" after overhearing Alec mention his rank. Then she'd spent the entire weekend needling him with questions about snipers and stealth tactics—barefoot in the garden, sipping lemonade like a southern belle in a war film.

He'd found her amusing. Unsettling, too. Like a flash of colour in a greyscale world.

That was before the crash.

Before the Hale family jet went down somewhere over the Atlantic and took both of their parents with it. Before the light behind Scarlett's eyes—so Alec had told him—dimmed to something quieter. Angrier. More careful.

Before the silence.

Whatever bond had existed between the Hale siblings fractured that day, not loudly, but completely. Brad had watched from a distance as Alec buried

himself in Hale Industries, and Scarlett disappeared into the kind of grief that didn't make headlines.

"She's going to Italy," Alec said, breaking the silence between them. "Then Greece. Maybe the south of France."

Brad blinked, dragged back to the present.

Alec frowned. "She wouldn't give me an exact itinerary."

Brad arched a brow. "And that's where your concern lies?"

Alec's jaw clenched, his voice low and sharp. "That, and the man she's travelling with. Jeff Bozeman."

Brad's brow furrowed. "The boyfriend?"

"Friend," Alec corrected, though the word sounded like it left a bad taste in his mouth. "At least, that's what she says. They met in college. I barely know the guy—he's never spent more than ten minutes in the same room with me, and that was years ago."

Brad raised a brow. "So, what's the concern?"

Alec exhaled hard through his nose. "Ever since our parents died, Scarlett's had partial access to the family trust. Enough to live comfortably. But on her twenty-fifth birthday next month, she inherits everything—the remainder of the estate, stocks, international assets, property, you name it. No restrictions. No oversight. Overnight, she'll become a multimillionaire in her own right."

Brad whistled low under his breath. "Hell of a birthday present."

"Hell of a target," Alec muttered.

Brad crossed the room slowly, his steps silent on the polished floors. "And you think Jeff's playing the long game."

"I think," Alec said carefully, "that I can't afford to be wrong. If he's a good guy, fine—I'll eat my words. But if he's using her? Manipulating her? I want to

know before my sister ends up heartbroken, or worse—married to a man who sees her as a walking bank account."

The room went still, tension hanging between them like a held breath.

Brad turned his gaze back to the skyline, the late-afternoon light casting a soft amber glow across the city. Below, Manhattan buzzed with its usual symphony of motion and noise, though none of it could pierce the insulated glass.

He didn't like this.

Brad hated assignments tangled in personal history and emotional landmines. Family made things messy. Women made them dangerous.

Brad didn't trust women. Not in any lasting sense. In his experience, they always wanted more than he was willing—or able—to give. More time. More openness. More heart.

Things he'd long since learned to lock away.

It wasn't bitterness. Just survival. The kind learned the hard way—when you realised love had a longer half-life than the truth. He'd seen what happened when emotions got involved. Messy breakups, blurred boundaries, expectations that crept in and grew teeth. He didn't do attachments. He didn't do forever. He did clean exits, controlled outcomes, and zero complications.

He felt like Scarlett Hale would have complication written all over her.

But loyalty was a complicated thing. Brad knew all about carrying debts that didn't come with an expiration date. And Alec—Alec had never let him down. Not once.

He drew in a slow breath. "What exactly are you asking me to do?"

Alec's eyes didn't waver. "Shadow her. Stay close. Keep her safe. Keep Jeff honest."

Brad's shoulders stiffened. "Does she know you're sending someone?"

Alec shook his head. “No. And I want it to stay that way. If she finds out I’m interfering, it’ll just push her further away.”

Brad’s jaw worked silently as he weighed the ask. He didn’t like it. But he already knew what his answer would be.

Alec’s voice was quieter now. Not colder—sadder. “I wasn’t there for her when our parents died. I should’ve been, but I couldn’t look at her without seeing the crash. The guilt.” He looked down at his desk, then back up. “I’m trying now. It may be late, but I’m trying.”

Brad didn’t speak. The part of him that had shut down years ago wanted to walk away. But the part of him that owed Alec—really owed him—remained.

“How long?”

“Ten days, two weeks at the most. I’ll cover your expenses, of course—private flights, accommodations, whatever you need.”

Brad rolled his neck once and nodded slowly. “You get me a name for her hotel in Rome. I’ll take the next flight.”

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