EXCLUSIVE
BONUS EPILOGUE

Always You

ALISON REID

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by Alison Reid

Three Years Later…

The late afternoon sun cast a golden glow across the sprawling backyard of Robert and Jasmine's Vaucluse home.

The harbour sparkled beyond the sandstone terrace, Elizabeth laughed on the lawn, and the scent of barbecue drifted through the warm spring air.

It was perfect. Exactly the kind of day Jasmine loved. Family. Friends. Noise. Happiness. And everyone she loved most gathered in one place.

Kelly Steele sat beneath a large umbrella near the outdoor dining table, watching the activity with a huge smile. She had a camera in her hand and had already taken what Robert claimed was "an unreasonable number" of photos.

"There's no such thing as too many photos," Kelly informed him.

"There absolutely is."

"There isn't."

"You're proving my point."

Kelly ignored him completely and took another photo.

Nearby, William stood at the barbecue pretending to help while Terry actually did the cooking.

Mary sat on a lounge chair beneath the shade with a glass of lemonade while keeping one eye on their almost three-year-old daughter.

Elizabeth Whitaker was racing around the garden with all the energy of a small tornado.

"Daddy! Daddy! Watch me!"

William immediately abandoned the barbecue.

"Look at that! Fastest runner in Australia!"

Elizabeth beamed.

Mary rolled her eyes.

"You tell her that every day."

"Because it's true."

Their daughter took off again, completely convinced she was destined for Olympic glory.

Not far away, Heidi sat with her fiancé Brian, laughing as they watched the chaos unfold.

"This is exactly how I pictured parenthood," Brian said.

"Exhausting and sticky?"

"Mostly sticky."

Heidi grinned.

"You'll be fine."

Jasmine smiled at the familiar banter around her. She sat comfortably on one of the outdoor lounges with her feet elevated.

At nine months pregnant, comfort had become something of a priority. One hand rested on the enormous curve of her stomach. The other held a glass of sparkling water.

And beside her sat Robert. Of course. Because these days Robert rarely ventured more than a few feet away.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked.

Jasmine didn't even bother counting anymore.

"Yes."

"You need another cushion?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"Robert."

"What?"

She laughed.

"I'm fine."

He studied her suspiciously.

"I think you're being nice."

Across the patio, William burst out laughing.

"There he goes again."

Robert glanced over.

"What?"

"The hovering."

"I'm not hovering."

"You absolutely are."

Terry chuckled into his beer.

Kelly nodded.

"He definitely is."

"He watches her constantly," Heidi added.

Brian looked between them.

"Now that you mention it..."

"I do not," Robert protested.

The entire group stared at him. At that exact moment his eyes immediately returned to Jasmine.

William pointed dramatically.

“Case closed.”

Laughter erupted around the patio. Robert remained completely unapologetic.

“She’s my wife.”

“So?” William asked.

“So, I like looking at her.”

William groaned.

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

Jasmine felt her cheeks warm. Robert leaned over and kissed her temple.

“I love you.”

The words came as naturally to him as breathing. Every day. Several times a day. Without fail. Jasmine smiled.

“I love you too.”

Kelly’s expression softened instantly.

Even after three years together, her son still looked at Jasmine like she’d hung the moon. And frankly, Kelly adored it.

William shook his head.

“You realise we’re all here, right?”

Robert glanced at him.

“Yes.”

“Yet somehow all your attention is still on my sister.”

Robert didn’t even pretend to be embarrassed.

“Correct.”

Mary laughed.

“At least he’s honest.”

“I’ve waited years to be married to her,” Robert said matter-of-factly. “I’m not apologising for enjoying it.”

Jasmine's heart melted a little. Even now. Especially now. After everything they'd been through to get here.

William made a gagging sound.

Elizabeth immediately copied him.

Mary covered her face.

"Oh no."

William looked horrified.

"Elizabeth!"

The little girl dissolved into giggles.

Everyone laughed.

Even Robert.

The baby kicked suddenly. Jasmine rested a hand on her stomach.

"There she goes."

Robert's attention immediately snapped back.

"You okay?"

"She's practicing karate."

He placed his hand gently over hers. The movement beneath his palm earned a look of pure wonder. No matter how many times it happened, he never seemed to get over it.

Brian smiled.

"You look amazed every single time."

"I am."

"Mate, she's kicked about ten thousand times."

Robert ignored him.

"She's our daughter."

As though that explained everything. And honestly? It did.

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The afternoon drifted by comfortably.

More food. More laughter. More stories. The children played. The adults relaxed.

And Robert continued his completely shameless habit of watching Jasmine whenever he thought she wasn't looking.

Then suddenly Jasmine froze. Her eyes widened.

"Oh."

Instantly, Robert straightened.

"What?"

She looked down. Then back up.

"Oh wow."

Every conversation stopped. William lowered his drink. Mary sat upright. Kelly stood.

"What is it?" Robert asked.

Jasmine looked at him. A slow smile spread across her face.

"My water just broke."

Silence. Absolute silence. Then Robert's face went completely white.

"What?"

Jasmine laughed.

"My water broke."

For one long second nobody moved.

Then chaos erupted.

Kelly gasped.

Terry stood up so quickly he nearly knocked over his chair.

Heidi squealed.

Mary jumped to her feet.

William started laughing so hard he doubled over.

And Robert simply stared at his wife.

"The baby?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

"That's generally how labour works."

"Oh my God."

His voice cracked.

William laughed even harder.

"Oh, this is fantastic."

Robert ignored him.

"The hospital bags."

"In the nursery."

"The car seat."

"Already installed."

"The paperwork."

"In my handbag."

"Oh my God."

Jasmine couldn't stop laughing. After all the calm confidence he'd shown throughout the pregnancy, Robert Steele was officially panicking. And everyone was enjoying it.

Everyone except Robert.

Who crouched in front of Jasmine and took both her hands. His eyes were bright. Emotional. Overwhelmed. Terrified. Happy. All at once.

"You okay?" he asked softly.

Jasmine squeezed his hands.

"I'm okay."

His throat worked.

"I love you."

Her eyes filled.

"I know."

"No. I really love you."

The emotion in his voice silenced everyone. Jasmine smiled through the tears gathering in her eyes.

"I really love you too."

For a moment, the noise around them faded. There was only Robert. Only Jasmine. Only the daughter they were finally about to meet.

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They reached the hospital in record time. Not because there was any real urgency.

There wasn't.

The contractions were still relatively far apart, and every midwife they encountered assured them they had plenty of time.

That didn't stop Robert from driving like a man on a mission. Nor did it stop him from parking in the wrong section of the hospital before being redirected by a security guard.

Nor did it stop him from asking the nurses approximately every twenty minutes if everything was normal.

"Mr Steele," one of the midwives said kindly after his fifth round of questions. "Your wife is doing beautifully."

Robert nodded. Then asked another question.

Jasmine loved him for it.

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Six hours later, she loved him even more.

Labour hadn't been easy. There had been moments when she'd cried. Moments when she'd doubted herself. Moments when she'd squeezed Robert's hand hard enough that he would probably be sporting bruises for a week.

Through all of it, he never left her side. Not once. He'd held her hand. Wiped away tears. Pressed cool cloths against her forehead. Whispered encouragement when she needed it most. And told her he loved her so many times she'd eventually laughed through a contraction and accused him of being repetitive.

His response had been immediate.

"I love you."

"See?" she'd gasped.

"I know."

Then he'd kissed her forehead and said it again anyway.

And when their daughter finally entered the world—when her tiny cry filled the room—Robert had simply stopped breathing.

The nurse placed the baby on Jasmine's chest. Jasmine burst into tears immediately. So did Robert. Though he would deny that for the rest of his life.

Now, nearly an hour later, the room felt peaceful. Quiet. Complete.

Jasmine rested comfortably against the pillows, exhausted but happier than she'd ever been.

Their daughter slept peacefully in her arms.

A perfect bundle wrapped in a pink hospital blanket. Tiny fingers. Tiny nose. Tiny eyelashes. Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Robert stood beside the bed, one hand resting gently on Jasmine's shoulder. He hadn't moved very far since the birth. Jasmine wasn't entirely sure he'd even blinked. His eyes remained fixed on his wife and daughter.

Wonder filled every line of his face. Disbelief. Joy. Love. Awe.

The door opened quietly.

William stepped inside first, followed by Mary carrying Elizabeth. Behind them came Terry and Kelly. Then Heidi and Brian.

Everyone entered cautiously, almost reverently. As though afraid to disturb the magic filling the room. Kelly was the first to cry.

"Oh, my goodness."

Terry slipped an arm around his wife as both stared at their granddaughter. William smiled broadly.

"There she is." Mary's eyes immediately softened. "She's beautiful."

Elizabeth peered over her mother's shoulder.

"Baby."

Everyone laughed.

"Yes," Mary said gently. "That's the baby."

The little girl considered this seriously.

Then announced, "Tiny."

More laughter filled the room. Robert finally looked away from his daughter long enough to smile.

"Jessica is tiny."

Heidi's eyes widened.

"Jessica? Is that her name?"

A smile softened Robert's face as he looked down at the sleeping baby.

"Yes."

"It's beautiful," Mary said softly.

Kelly pressed a hand to her chest.

"Oh, I love that."

Elizabeth leaned further over Mary's shoulder, studying the baby with great concentration.

"Jess-ca," she said carefully.

The adults immediately melted.

"That was very good, sweetheart," William told her.

Elizabeth looked extremely pleased with herself. Kelly moved closer to the bed. Tears shimmered in her eyes as she looked at Jasmine.

"How are you feeling, sweetheart?"

"Tired," Jasmine admitted. "But happy."

Kelly reached down and squeezed her hand.

"I always knew you were the one." Jasmine's eyes immediately filled. Kelly smiled through her own tears. "From the very beginning."

Emotion lodged in Jasmine's throat.

"Really?"

Kelly nodded.

"Absolutely. The way Robert looked at you was different. Even back then."

A soft laugh escaped Jasmine.

"It took him long enough to figure that out."

That earned a round of chuckles from around the room.

"You're not wrong," Terry said.

Robert looked mildly offended.

"I wasn't that slow."

The entire room stared at him. William barked out a laugh.

"Mate."

Even Jasmine laughed. Robert glanced around the room before finally surrendering.

"Fine. Maybe a little."

"A little?" Heidi repeated.

"A lot," Brian corrected.

More laughter filled the room. Kelly shook her head affectionately before looking back at Jasmine.

"But I never doubted it. Not once."

Her gaze shifted to the sleeping baby.

"And now look at this."

Her voice trembled.

"A beautiful granddaughter. The family you've built together."

Jasmine felt tears sting her eyes again.

Beside her, Robert slipped his hand into hers.

Their fingers intertwined instantly.

Natural.

Familiar.

Home.

Kelly looked between them and smiled.

"You were amazing today."

Jasmine glanced at Robert. His eyes immediately met hers. The look he gave her nearly stole her breath. Like she was extraordinary. Like she'd performed a miracle. Like he couldn't quite believe she was real.

"You were incredible," he said quietly.

His voice roughened.

"I've never been more proud of anyone in my life."

Emotion tightened Jasmine's throat.

"I had help."

Robert shook his head.

"No." His hand brushed gently over their daughter's dark hair. "You gave me her."

The room fell silent. Even William looked suspiciously emotional. Heidi wiped discreetly at her eyes. Brian looked away and cleared his throat. Kelly openly cried. Terry squeezed her shoulder.

And Robert remained exactly where he'd been since the moment his daughter arrived.

Beside Jasmine.

Unable to stop looking at either of them. William finally broke the silence.

"You know you've been staring at them for an hour, right?"

Robert didn't even pretend to be embarrassed.

"Probably."

William laughed.

"Still obsessed with my sister."

"Absolutely."

"At least you're consistent."

Robert's gaze returned to Jasmine. Then to the tiny baby sleeping peacefully in her arms. His family. His future. Everything he'd ever wanted standing right in front of him.

And for a man who had once almost lost everything, the sight felt nothing short of miraculous.

"I love you," he said softly.

Jasmine smiled.

"I know."

His eyes drifted to their daughter.

"I love both of you."

And judging by the look on his face, everyone in the room knew one thing with absolute certainty. Robert Steele had fallen completely and hopelessly in love.

All over again.

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The room had finally fallen quiet.

Visiting hours were over. The family had gone home.

Jessica slept peacefully between them.

Robert sat beside the hospital bed staring at his daughter.

"You should get some sleep," Jasmine whispered.

He shook his head.

"What if I miss something?"

Jasmine laughed softly.

"She's asleep."

"She's perfect."

His voice broke slightly on the word. Jasmine's smile softened.

"She is."

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

Jessica's tiny chest rose and fell steadily beneath the hospital blanket. One impossibly small hand rested beside her face. Every now and then her mouth twitched in her sleep.

Robert looked completely mesmerised.

Jasmine wasn't sure he'd taken his eyes off her for more than a few seconds since she'd been born.

"You're staring again," she teased gently.

His gaze lifted briefly to hers.

"I know."

"At least you're self-aware."

A smile touched his lips before his attention drifted right back to their daughter.

"I can't help it."

Jasmine reached across the bed and threaded her fingers through his. His grip tightened immediately.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

She frowned.

"For what?"

His eyes remained fixed on Jessica.

"For this."

Emotion thickened his voice.

"For her."

His gaze finally met hers.

"For our family."

Jasmine felt tears sting her eyes.

"You helped."

Robert gave a soft shake of his head.

"No."

The word came out rough.

"You have no idea how many times I imagined this."

His thumb brushed over her knuckles.

"And how many times I thought it might never happen."

Jasmine knew exactly what he meant. The accident. The rehabilitation. The fear. The endless uncertainty. There had been a time when neither of them knew what the future would look like. A time when everything they wanted seemed impossibly far away.

But somehow they'd found their way here. To this room. To this moment. To each other.

Jasmine glanced down at Jessica.

"She's going to be spoiled."

A laugh escaped him.

"Definitely."

"By her grandparents."

"Absolutely."

"By Uncle William."

Robert smiled.

"Without question."

"And by her father."

His expression turned completely unapologetic.

"The most."

Jasmine laughed softly.

"I thought so."

The room fell quiet again. Comfortable. Peaceful. Home. Eventually Robert stood and carefully leaned over the bed. His hand brushed gently across Jessica's dark hair. Then he kissed the top of Jasmine's head.

"I love you."

The words were no less powerful for how often he said them. Jasmine tilted her head back to look at him.

"I love you too."

His eyes drifted to their daughter once more. The wonder was still there. The disbelief. The gratitude. The overwhelming love. And Jasmine realised she would never grow tired of seeing it.

Because after years of missed chances, heartbreak, mistakes and second chances, Robert finally had everything he'd ever wanted.

His daughter.

His future.

His home.

And the man who had once feared losing everything now had more than he'd ever dared hope for.

As Jessica slept peacefully between them and Sydney glittered beyond the hospital window, Robert slipped his hand into Jasmine's and held on tightly.

And neither of them ever wanted to let go.

— The End —

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