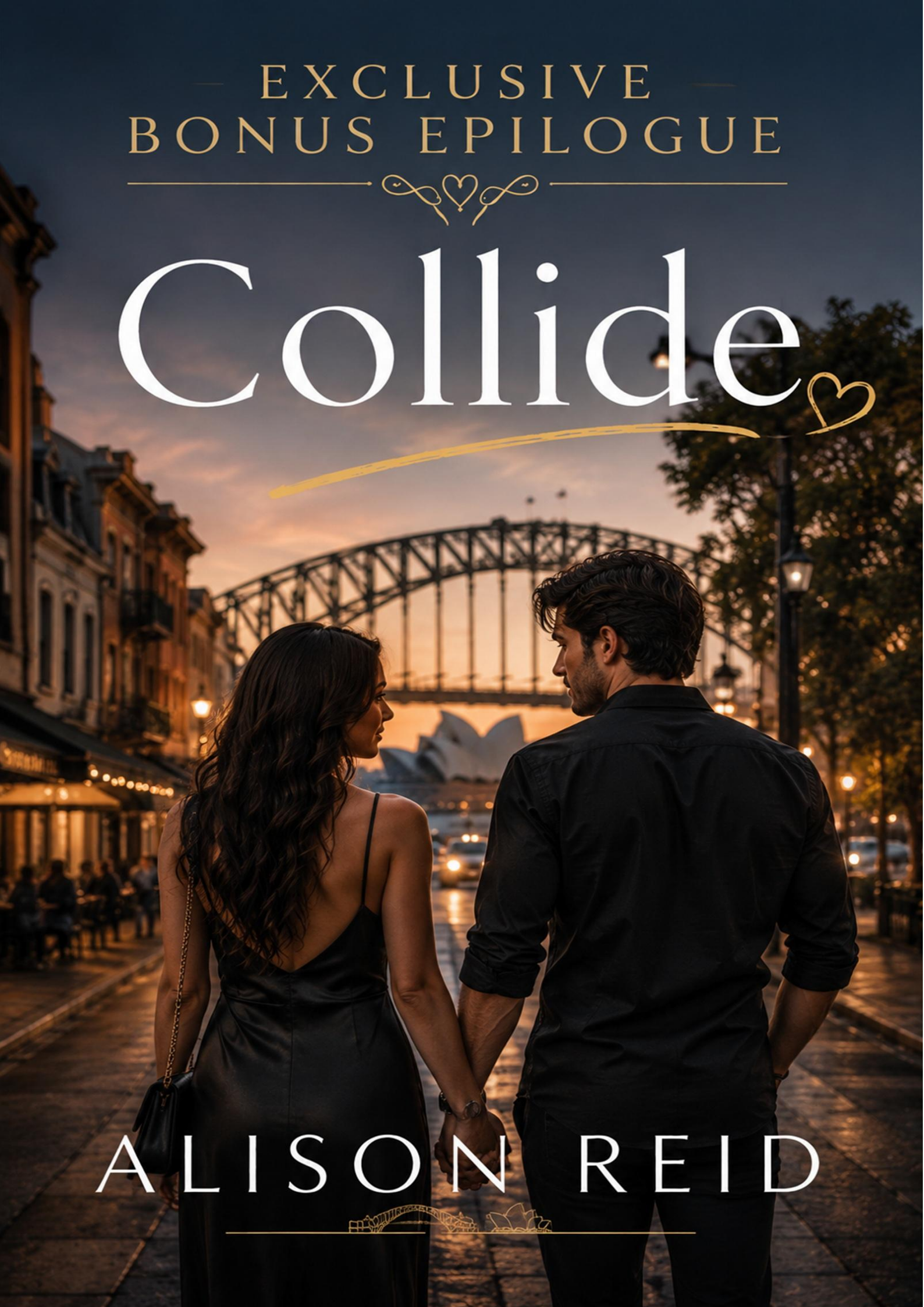
EXCLUSIVE
BONUS EPILOGUE

Collide



ALISON REID

Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Collide

by Alison Reid

Twenty Years Later…

Jason stared through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the boardroom, barely hearing the quarterly projections being discussed around him.

Graphs flickered across the enormous screen behind the presenter. Voices debated profit margins, international expansion, and shareholder expectations. Around the polished mahogany table, directors nodded thoughtfully, occasionally asking questions that normally would have demanded Jason's full attention.

Today, he couldn't have cared less. His thoughts weren't on profits or shareholders. They were a hundred kilometres away. With Sarah. And Derek.

Their eighteen-year-old son was finally leaving home.

After weeks of shopping, packing boxes, labelling containers, and endless conversations about budgets, classes and dorm life, today was the day they had driven him to university.

Jason should have been with them. He had every intention of going. Then, at eleven-thirty the previous night, his mobile phone had rung. An emergency board meeting.

One of the company's overseas acquisitions had encountered a serious legal issue, and every director was expected to attend first thing in the morning.

Jason had apologised so many times he'd lost count.

"I'm sorry," he'd said for what felt like the tenth time as Sarah folded another of Derek's shirts into a moving box. "I'll tell them I can't make it."

She'd immediately shaken her head.

"No."

"Sarah—"

She walked over, slid both arms around his waist and looked up at him with that familiar smile he'd fallen in love with all those years ago.

"We've already said goodbye to Derek," she said softly. "Your work is important."

"I wanted to be there."

"I know." She reached up and kissed him. "We'll survive one day apart."

He rested his forehead against hers.

"I hate this."

"I know you do." She smiled again. "I've got this."

He'd still argued for another ten minutes before finally admitting defeat.

* * * * * * * *

This morning hadn't been any easier.

Their SUV had been sitting in the driveway, already packed with Derek's belongings. Boxes. Suitcases. A mini fridge Jason had insisted they didn't need. Sarah had laughed and told him every university student needed one. Jason had stood beside the passenger side door, looking at his son.

It felt impossible that the little boy who used to sit on his shoulders at the beach was now taller than him.

"You've got everything?" Jason had asked.

"Dad..."

"I'm serious."

"I've got everything."

"You know you can call anytime."

"I know."

"For anything."

"I know."

Jason had pulled him into a hug. A proper one. The kind fathers rarely admitted they needed just as much as their sons.

"I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Dad."

He stepped back before his emotions got the better of him. Sarah was already smiling knowingly from the driver's seat.

"You finished?" she teased.

He rolled his eyes before walking around to her window.

"Drive carefully."

"I always do."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

She leaned out and kissed him.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

He rested his hand against her cheek for a second longer than necessary. Then reluctantly stepped away as the engine started. He watched them drive out of the gates until the SUV disappeared around the corner.

Only then had he climbed into his own car and headed into the city.

Now, hours later, he still couldn't concentrate.

"...our projected earnings for the next financial year..."

Jason glanced down at the mobile phone lying face down beside his notepad. Silent. Just as it had been since the meeting began. For the hundredth time, he wondered whether Sarah and Derek had arrived.

She'd probably be helping him unpack. Making his bed because Derek would undoubtedly do a terrible job. Stocking the tiny bar fridge she'd insisted on buying. She'd probably already cried after saying goodbye.

Jason smiled to himself. She'd promised she wouldn't. She absolutely would have. He looked at the clock. Another ten minutes. As soon as the meeting finished, he'd call her. Maybe he'd even leave early and surprise her with dinner tonight.

The chairman finally closed his folder.

"Unless anyone has anything further..."

Jason barely waited.

"No."

"Excellent. Meeting adjourned."

Chairs scraped across the timber floor as directors began gathering their laptops and paperwork.

Jason slipped his phone into his hand while walking toward the boardroom door. He turned his phone on. The screen immediately lit up. His footsteps stopped. Twelve missed calls.

Unknown Number.

Unknown Number.

Unknown Number.

Voicemail.

Unknown Number.

His stomach dropped so violently it felt as though the floor had disappeared beneath him. Before he could even process it, the phone began ringing again.

Unknown Number.

Every instinct inside him screamed. His thumb stabbed the answer button.

"Jason Olander."

"Mr Olander?"

The unfamiliar male voice was calm. Professional. Too professional.

"Yes."

"This is Senior Constable Harris with New South Wales Police."

Jason's blood turned to ice. Every instinct told him something was horribly wrong.

"My wife?"

There was a pause. Just long enough for terror to tighten around his chest.

"Sir..." The officer's voice softened. "...there's been a motor vehicle collision."

Jason stopped breathing. The constable's voice remained calm, professional.

"Mr Olander, your wife's vehicle was struck by another vehicle that crossed onto the wrong side of the road."

Jason's grip tightened around the phone until his knuckles turned white.

"What?"

"The other driver was heavily intoxicated, sir."

His heart slammed against his ribs.

"No..."

"Your wife has been transported to St Vincent's Hospital."

Everything around him disappeared. The executives walking past. The conversations filling the corridor. The polished marble beneath his feet. Nothing existed except the voice coming through the phone. Jason swallowed hard. His mouth had gone completely dry. He didn't care about the accident. He didn't care whose fault it was. There was only one question that mattered.

"Is..." His voice cracked. He tried again. "Is she alive?"

Silence. Only a second. But it felt like an eternity.

"She's alive, sir." Jason's knees almost gave way with relief. Until the constable continued. "But she's currently in surgery."

The tiny flicker of hope shattered.

"What hospital?" Jason demanded.

"St Vincent's."

"I'm on my way."

He ended the call before the constable could say another word. For a heartbeat he simply stood there, unable to move, staring blindly at the phone still clutched in his hand.

No...

Not Sarah.

Please...

Not Sarah.

Then his body finally obeyed. He ran. Not dignified. Not composed. He sprinted down the corridor, leaving his briefcase sitting beside the boardroom table.

"Jason!"

Someone called after him. He didn't stop.

"Mr Olander!"

Another voice. Ignored. The lift doors were closing. He jammed his hand between them. They opened reluctantly.

"Come on..."

The doors seemed to crawl shut again. The descent felt endless. Every passing floor tightened the crushing pressure inside his chest.

Ground. Come on. Ground.

The doors finally opened. Jason burst into the lobby and ran through the revolving doors, barely noticing the startled looks from reception staff.

His BMW chirped as he unlocked it.

Moments later, tyres screeched against the concrete as he shot out of the underground car park. His breathing was ragged. His hands trembled so violently on the steering wheel he could barely keep the car straight.

"No... no... no..."

The words escaped without him even realising. Traffic lights blurred past. Cars became obstacles. The city around him disappeared. Because twenty years vanished in an instant. Another phone call. Another accident. Another drive to this same hospital.

His brother.

Derek.

The memory crashed into him with brutal force.

"She betrayed me, Jason..."

The last words he'd ever heard from his little brother. Then...silence.

The frantic drive. The flashing red and blue lights painting the hospital entrance. The police tape. The smell of rain. The sickening scent of petrol and twisted metal. Walking through the emergency department.

The doctor's face before she'd even spoken.

"I'm very sorry..."

Derek was dead. And Sarah...

Sarah had been lying unconscious in the trauma bay, tubes everywhere, her body broken, machines breathing for her.

He remembered standing in the corridor watching the doctors and nurses fight to save her life. Not knowing whether he hated her. Or desperately needed her to survive.

He remembered the smell of antiseptic that clung to every corridor. The relentless beeping of cardiac monitors. The crushing helplessness of watching the woman who would one day become his entire world fight for every single breath. He had almost lost her before he'd even realised he loved her.

Now...

History was repeating itself. Except this time there was no Derek. No unanswered questions. No confusion. Only fear. Pure, paralysing fear. Sarah wasn't just his wife. She wasn't simply the mother of his son. She was his best friend. His safe place. His home.

The thought of walking into another hospital...

Of hearing another doctor tell him someone he loved hadn't survived...

It was unbearable. His vision blurred. He blinked hard, refusing to let the tears fall.

"Please..." he whispered into the empty car.

"Please, God..."

His voice broke.

"Let her be okay."

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel until his hands ached.

"I can't lose her."

The words came out as little more than a sob.

"She's my life."

Jason barely remembered parking the car. One moment he was behind the wheel. The next he was running.

He burst through the sliding glass doors of St Vincent's Hospital so fast that several people turned to stare. The familiar smell of antiseptic hit him like a punch to the chest, instantly dragging him back twenty years.

Not again. Please... not again. He hurried to the reception desk, struggling to catch his breath.

"My wife," he gasped. "Sarah Olander. She was brought in after a car accident."

The receptionist's fingers flew across the keyboard. Jason's foot tapped impatiently against the floor. Every second felt like another hour. Finally, she looked up.

"Mrs Olander has just come out of surgery."

Jason's heart lurched.

"Is she—"

"The surgeon will speak with you shortly." She offered a reassuring smile. "In the meantime, they've moved her to Recovery. You can see her now."

He didn't wait for another word. Following the directions she'd given him, he broke into another run. The corridors blurred around him. Doctors. Nurses. Patients. None of them existed.

Only Sarah.

He reached the recovery ward and stopped abruptly outside the curtain bearing her name. For the first time since receiving the phone call... fear rooted him to the spot. He wasn't sure he could do this.

Twenty years ago, he'd stood outside another hospital room.

Twenty years ago, he'd watched the woman who had unknowingly become his future fight for her life.

He'd promised himself he'd never stand outside another room wondering whether the person he loved would survive. Yet here he was. His hand trembled as he reached for the curtain.

Slowly... he pulled it aside. His breath caught.

Sarah.

She lay motionless beneath crisp white hospital blankets. An oxygen cannula rested beneath her nose. An IV disappeared into the back of her hand. Fresh bandages wrapped one arm, while another disappeared beneath the sleeve of her hospital gown. Bruising had already begun to darken one side of her face, and a white dressing covered a cut near her hairline.

She looked so impossibly small in the enormous hospital bed. Jason stood frozen. His eyes searched desperately for one thing. Her chest. It rose. Then fell. Rose. Fell. She was breathing.

Only then did the air finally leave his own lungs. A shaky breath escaped him as his knees threatened to give way.

Thank God.

Thank God.

She was still here.

She was sedated, her face peaceful despite the bruises, completely unaware of the panic she'd unleashed only an hour earlier.

Jason crossed the room on unsteady legs and lowered himself into the chair beside her bed. With trembling fingers, he reached for her hand. It was warm. Not cold. Warm. He closed his eyes as tears he'd been holding back finally escaped.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles.

"You frightened me," he whispered, his voice breaking. "So much." His thumb gently stroked the back of her hand. "I thought..."

He couldn't finish the sentence. He simply bowed his head over their joined hands, overwhelmed with gratitude that he still could.

"I love you," he whispered. "I don't care how many board meetings I miss for the rest of my life." His voice cracked into a quiet sob. "Just stay with me."

The steady rhythm of the cardiac monitor answered him.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

It was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard.

A gentle knock sounded at the partially open door. Jason looked up, quickly wiping the tears from his face. A man in blue surgical scrubs stepped inside, removing his surgical cap.

"Mr Olander?"

Jason rose immediately.

"Yes."

"I'm Professor Mitchell. I'm the trauma surgeon who operated on your wife."

Jason glanced back at Sarah before looking at the surgeon.

"Can we talk outside?"

"Of course."

Jason gave Sarah's hand one last squeeze before reluctantly following the surgeon into the quiet corridor.

"How is she?" he asked before the door had even closed behind them.

Professor Mitchell offered a reassuring smile.

"Your wife was very fortunate." Jason released a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. "The collision caused significant internal bleeding from a laceration to her spleen. We were able to stop the bleeding, and she's stable."

“Stable?”

“Yes.”

Jason closed his eyes briefly.

“She also has three broken ribs, a fractured left wrist, a broken collarbone, a concussion, and numerous cuts and bruises. She’s going to be very sore for a while.”

“But...” The surgeon smiled knowingly. “...she’s going to make a full recovery.”

Jason’s shoulders sagged with overwhelming relief. For several seconds he couldn’t speak. His throat simply refused to cooperate.

Finally, he managed a hoarse, “Thank you.”

Professor Mitchell nodded.

“She’s still sedated from the anaesthetic, but I’d expect her to wake over the next hour or so.”

Jason shook the surgeon’s hand.

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You don’t have to.” The surgeon smiled warmly. “Just take your wife home when she’s ready and enjoy many more years together.”

Jason nodded.

“I intend to.”

He watched the surgeon disappear down the corridor before turning back toward Sarah’s room. His hand paused on the door handle. She’s going to be okay. The words echoed through him. She’s going to be okay. He stepped quietly back inside. Sarah hadn’t moved. She still looked impossibly fragile beneath the blankets.

He pulled the chair closer, sat beside her once more and slipped his hand gently into hers.

“I heard everything,” he whispered. “You’re going to be alright.” He brushed a loose strand of auburn hair away from her forehead. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this frightened.”

Silence settled around them. The rhythmic beeping of the monitor was the only sound. Minutes drifted by. Jason never let go of her hand. Then... he felt it. The faintest movement. His head snapped up. Sarah’s fingers curled weakly around his. His heart leapt.

“Sarah?”

Her eyelashes fluttered. Once. Twice. Slowly, her beautiful blue eyes opened. They were unfocused at first, blinking against the bright lights before eventually settling on the face beside her bed.

“...Jason?”

Her voice was barely audible. It didn’t matter. He’d never heard anything more beautiful. Relief crashed over him so powerfully his eyes filled instantly with tears. He let out a shaky laugh that sounded dangerously close to a sob.

“Hey, beautiful.”

She frowned slightly.

“What... happened?”

“You were in an accident.”

His thumb stroked the back of her hand.

“But you’re safe now.”

She looked around the room, then back at him.

“You look awful.”

Despite everything, Jason laughed.

“I’ve had better days.”

She managed the smallest smile.

“I’m sorry.”

“No.” He shook his head immediately. “Don’t you dare apologise.”

He leaned forward carefully, afraid of hurting her, and pressed a gentle kiss against her forehead. When he pulled back, tears were running freely down his face.

“I thought...” His voice broke completely. “I thought I was going to lose you.”

Sarah squeezed his hand as much as her weakened body allowed.

“I’m still here.”

“I know.” He swallowed hard, struggling to compose himself. “You scared me more than you could ever imagine.”

His green eyes locked onto hers. Raw. Honest. Filled with a love that twenty years earlier he never could have imagined feeling for the woman he’d once blamed for his brother’s death.

“You are my world, Sarah.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “My entire world.” Another tear slipped down his cheek. “None of it means anything if I don’t get to come home to you.” He brought her hand to his lips again and kissed it gently. “The only thing that matters to me...” He looked into her eyes. “...is you.”

Sarah’s own eyes filled with tears.

“I love you.”

Jason smiled through his tears.

“I love you too. More than my next breath. And after today...” He rested his forehead gently against hers. “...I’m never taking another day with you for granted.”

* * * * * * * *

Sarah made a full recovery, just as the surgeon had promised. Eight weeks later, Jason finally kept the promise he'd made beside her hospital bed—to never take another day with her for granted.

The soft glow of candlelight danced across the white tablecloth as a violinist played quietly in the corner of Sydney's most exclusive waterfront restaurant.

Sarah looked radiant.

The bruises had faded weeks ago, leaving only a faint scar hidden near her hairline as a reminder of the accident. Her wrist was finally free of its cast, though Jason still instinctively reached for her whenever she stood, as though she might disappear if he let go.

She caught him watching her over the rim of her wineglass.

"What?" she asked with an amused smile.

"You."

"I've been sitting here for an hour."

"I know."

"And?"

"I still can't believe you're here."

Her smile softened.

"I'm beginning to think that accident frightened you."

Jason actually laughed.

"Frightened me?"

She nodded.

"You've barely let me out of your sight."

He reached across the table and threaded his fingers through hers.

"That's because every time I close my eyes, I see you lying in that hospital bed."

Her smile faded.

“Jason...”

“I thought I was going to lose you.” The confession came quietly. Without embarrassment. Without restraint. “I’ve lived through that nightmare once before.” His thumb slowly stroked the back of her hand. “I wasn’t sure I could survive it a second time.”

Sarah squeezed his hand.

“You won’t lose me.”

“I’m planning on becoming an old woman who annoys you every single day.”

Jason chuckled.

“I’d like that.”

“No...” she corrected with a teasing smile. “You’d love that.”

“I would.”

The waiter arrived with dessert before quietly slipping away again, leaving them alone beneath the soft glow of the restaurant lights.

Jason barely noticed the food. He was too busy watching his wife. Watching her laugh. Watching her smile. Watching her breathe. Simple things. Things he’d almost had taken away from him.

After dessert, a slow piano melody drifted through the restaurant. Several couples wandered onto the small dance floor. Jason stood. Sarah looked up curiously.

“What are you doing?”

He extended his hand.

“Dance with me.”

She laughed.

“Jason...”

“I’m serious.”

She glanced toward the dance floor.

"I don't know..."

"You'll always dance with me."

There was no arrogance in his voice. Only love. She smiled and placed her hand in his.

"I suppose I don't have much choice."

"You never did."

He led her onto the dance floor. The music was slow. Gentle. Jason slipped one arm carefully around her waist while their fingers intertwined. He drew her close. Very close.

As though even now he couldn't bear the thought of any distance between them. Sarah rested her head against his chest. His heartbeat was steady beneath her ear.

"I've missed this," she whispered.

Jason kissed the top of her head.

"So have I."

They swayed slowly beneath the crystal chandeliers, completely oblivious to everyone else around them.

To anyone watching, they looked like every other couple dancing. Only they knew that every step felt like a gift. Jason closed his eyes for a moment, simply holding her. Feeling her heartbeat. Feeling the warmth of her body against his. Feeling alive because she was alive.

"I love you," he said quietly.

Sarah tilted her head back to look at him.

"I know."

“No.” He smiled. “I don’t think you do.” His green eyes glistened. “When I got that phone call...” His voice caught. “I honestly believed I was about to lose you.”

She reached up and gently cupped his face.

“But you didn’t.”

“No.”

He covered her hand with his own.

“And I never want another day to pass without you knowing exactly how I feel.” He leaned down until their foreheads touched. “You are the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. My wife. My best friend. The mother of our son. My home.” His voice became almost a whisper. “ I fell in love with you twenty years ago. I love you today. And I’ll love you for every day I have left.”

Tears shimmered in Sarah’s eyes.

“Oh, Jason.” She smiled through them. “I’ve loved you from the moment I realised the man I thought hated me was actually falling in love with me.”

A soft laugh escaped him.

“I did make that rather difficult to notice.”

“You certainly did.” She wrapped both arms around his neck. “But I’d fall in love with you all over again. In every lifetime. In every version of our story.” She brushed away the tears on his cheeks with her thumbs. “I love you more than I have words to explain.”

Jason’s composure finally cracked. He lowered his forehead against hers, overcome with emotion.

“I don’t deserve you.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “You do.”

She kissed him softly. Slowly. Tenderly.

The kind of kiss shared by two people who had survived heartbreak, loss, misunderstandings, tragedy and almost losing one another twice... and had chosen each other every single time.

When the kiss ended, Jason smiled.

"So..."

"So?"

"What do you say we spend the next fifty years growing old together?"

Sarah laughed, the beautiful sound filling the space between them.

"I think," she said as the music continued around them, "that sounds absolutely perfect."

Still holding one another, they continued to sway beneath the lights, neither of them in any hurry for the song to end. After everything life had thrown at them... they were exactly where they belonged.

Together.

— The End —

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