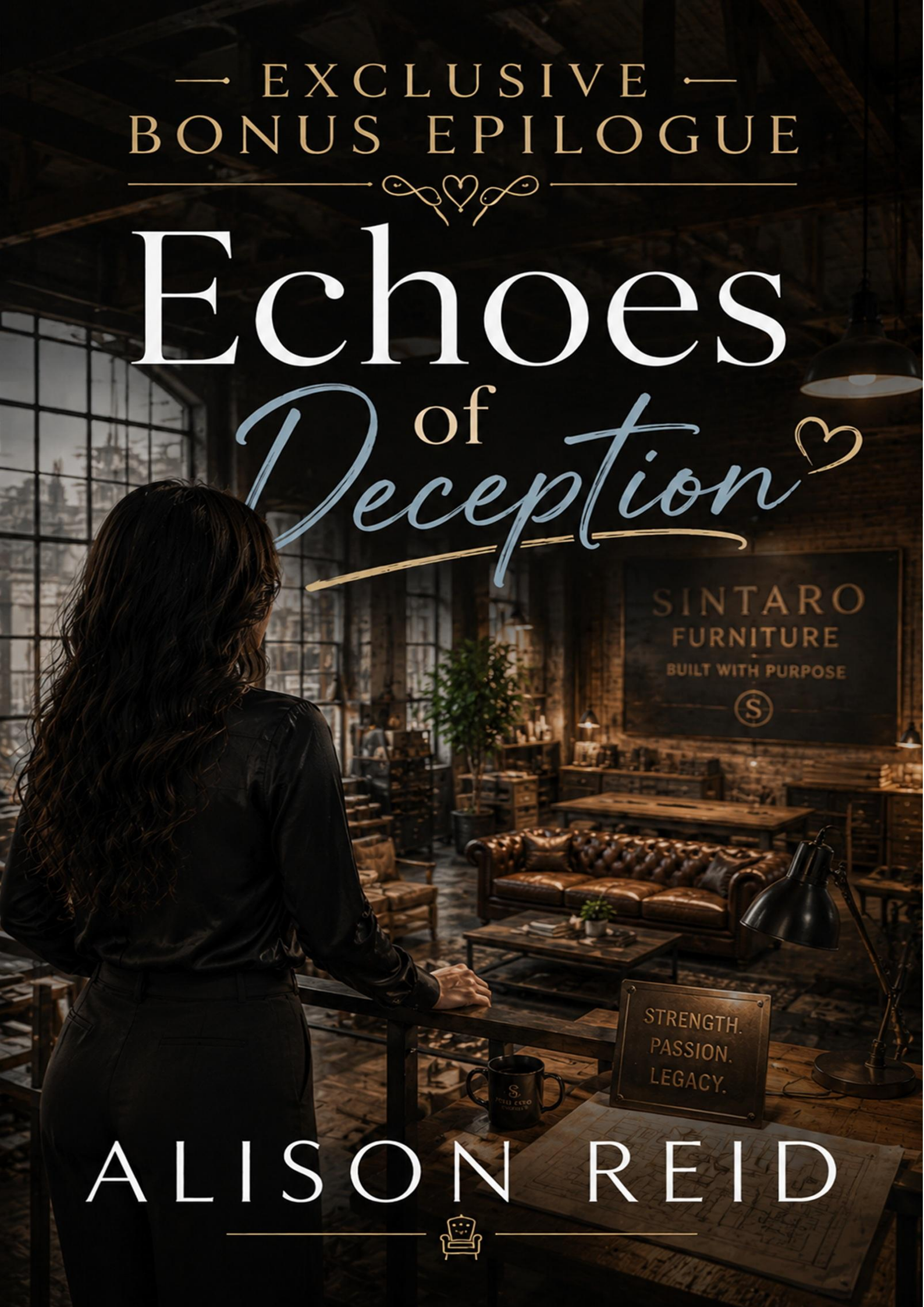
EXCLUSIVE
BONUS EPILOGUE

Echoes of Deception



ALISON REID

Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Echoes of Deception

by Alison Reid

Twenty-Five Years Later…

Soft music drifted through the bridal suite while snow fell lightly beyond the tall windows overlooking Boston's glittering skyline. Inside the elegant hotel room, warmth and excitement wrapped around everything — champagne glasses scattered across marble countertops, makeup brushes strewn beside bouquets of white roses, and the constant murmur of laughter filling the air.

Helena Tramain stood in the centre of the room wearing a silk robe while the stylist secured the final curls into place. Her dark chestnut hair framed features so reminiscent of Ashley's at that age it almost hurt to look at her sometimes. Kelly sat curled dramatically on the sofa clutching tissues like the wedding personally affected her health.

"I just want everyone to appreciate," she announced emotionally, "that my son had excellent taste."

Ashley laughed softly from beside Helena as she carefully fastened a delicate sapphire bracelet around her daughter's wrist. "Kelly, Brian has been in love with Helena since high school."

"Yes, and he inherited that intelligence from me," Kelly replied immediately.

Helena laughed, shaking her head. "You're unbelievable."

“And emotional,” Kelly corrected, already dabbing beneath her eyes again. “My baby is getting married.”

Ashley smiled fondly. Twenty-five years later and Kelly was still exactly the same beneath the designer clothes and expensive jewellery — loud, loyal, dramatic, and impossible not to love.

Helena glanced between them, her expression softening. “Honestly, I’m just glad you both approve.”

Kelly barked out a laugh. “Approve? Helena, sweetheart, I’ve been planning this wedding in my head since Brian was seventeen.”

“That is disturbingly believable,” Ashley muttered.

“It’s true,” Kelly said proudly.

Helena’s gaze shifted toward her mother in the mirror.

Ashley looked elegant in a pale blue gown, sapphire earrings catching the soft golden light from the chandeliers. Time had changed her in subtle ways — softer around the eyes, calmer somehow — but she was still beautiful in the effortless way Helena had watched people notice her her entire life.

Most noticeably, Beau still noticed her.

Constantly.

Helena smiled gently. “If Brian and I are even half as happy as you and Dad are, I think we’ll be doing pretty well.”

The room quieted. Ashley’s hands paused briefly against Helena’s bracelet while emotion flickered softly across her features.

Kelly reached over and squeezed Helena’s hand. “Sweetheart,” she said warmly, “your parents are disgustingly in love. It’s honestly exhausting for the rest of us.”

Ashley laughed under her breath.

“It’s true,” Kelly continued. “Twenty-five years later and Beau still looks at Ashley like she personally hung the moon.”

Helena smiled. “Dad still follows Mom around parties.”

“Exactly!” Kelly pointed triumphantly. “I’ve seen less devotion in Nicholas Sparks movies.”

Ashley rolled her eyes affectionately. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“No,” Kelly said. “I’m being accurate.”

Helena’s expression softened again as she looked at her mother. “Seriously though… I’ve always loved the way Dad loves you.”

Ashley went quiet for a moment.

Outside, snow drifted slowly past the windows while distant city lights shimmered across the skyline.

Finally, Ashley smiled softly. “Your father and I weren’t perfect,” she said gently. “There were years we hurt each other badly because we stopped talking honestly and started assuming the worst.” Her voice softened further. “But no matter what happened… we kept finding our way back.”

Helena swallowed emotionally.

“I love Brian like that,” she whispered.

Ashley’s eyes warmed instantly. “Then hold onto that. Even when marriage gets hard sometimes.”

Kelly sniffed loudly. “I swear if you all make me cry before the ceremony my makeup artist is getting sued.”

Helena burst into laughter just as a knock sounded at the suite door.

“Come in,” Ashley called.

The door opened. Beau stepped inside — then stopped completely. Silence fell over the room. His eyes landed on Helena, and all the colour slowly drained from his face.

Helena smiled nervously. "Dad?"

Beau stared at her for several long seconds, visibly overwhelmed. "Oh God," he muttered quietly. "You look exactly like your mother."

Kelly immediately dissolved into fresh tears. Ashley laughed softly, though her own eyes glistened. Beau crossed the room slowly, unable to look away from Helena. Emotion tightened his expression as he took both her hands carefully in his.

"You ready for this, sweetheart?" he asked, voice rough.

Helena nodded, suddenly tearful herself. "I think so."

Beau exhaled shakily before glancing toward Ashley. And just like always, the moment he looked at her, his entire face softened. Twenty-five years later, and Beau Tramain still looked hopelessly in love with his wife.

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Ashley quietly slipped from the bridal suite and slipped into the front row beside their twenty-year-old son, Ethan. On the opposite side of the aisle, Kelly was already crying openly with Daniel's arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"Oh God," Kelly whispered dramatically. "Our son is getting married."

Ashley laughed softly, though her own eyes burned with emotion.

Ethan leaned closer. "Dad cried before she even reached the aisle, didn't he?"

Ashley smiled knowingly. "Completely."

Rebecca laughed softly beside him. "Honestly, I think it's sweet."

"It's terrifying," Ethan muttered. "He looks at Brian like he's handing over nuclear launch codes."

The string quartet swelled through the grand ballroom as the guests rose to their feet. At the end of the aisle, Beau stood beside Helena, her arm linked through his while she clutched her bouquet with trembling fingers. For one suspended moment, neither of them moved.

Helena looked radiant in white lace and satin, emotion shimmering in her eyes beneath the cathedral veil trailing behind her. But Beau could barely process the wedding dress. Because all he could see was his little girl. The toddler who used to fall asleep on his chest. The child who demanded bedtime stories. The teenager who rolled her eyes exactly like Ashley. And now somehow… she was getting married.

Helena glanced up at him nervously. "Dad?"

Beau blinked quickly, visibly pulling himself together. "Sorry," he muttered, his voice rougher than usual. "Just trying to figure out when you grew up."

A watery laugh escaped her. "You okay?"

"No," he answered honestly, making her laugh harder through her tears. Then he squeezed her hand gently. "But I love him. So, I'll survive."

At the altar, Brian looked completely overwhelmed the moment he saw Helena appear. The ballroom seemed to fade around them as father and daughter walked slowly down the aisle beneath glittering chandeliers and soft candlelight. Beyond the enormous windows overlooking Boston Harbour, snow drifted quietly against the dark winter sky while the city lights shimmered in the distance.

Halfway down the aisle, Helena tightened her grip on Beau's arm.

"You know," she whispered softly, "I always hoped whoever loved me would love me the way you love Mom."

Beau's throat tightened instantly.

He glanced down at her, emotion breaking openly across his face. "Sweetheart," he murmured quietly, "that man has loved you since he was sixteen years old. Trust me… you did just fine."

Helena smiled tearfully.

When they finally reached the altar, Brian looked seconds away from emotional collapse himself. Beau stared at him for a long moment before carefully placing Helena's hand into his.

"Take care of her," he said quietly.

Brian nodded immediately. "Always."

Beau held his gaze another second before pulling him into a brief hug that surprised everyone nearby. Then he kissed Helena's forehead softly.

"I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you too, Dad."

Beau stepped back slowly and finally made his way toward the front row. Ashley laughed quietly under her breath the moment he reached her. As soon as he sat beside her, he exhaled deeply and reached for her hand automatically, like instinct. Ashley intertwined their fingers without hesitation. For a few seconds neither of them spoke while the ceremony began around them.

Then Beau leaned closer. "This feels wrong."

Ashley smiled faintly. "What does?"

"Sitting here." His eyes remained fixed on Helena. "I should still be carrying her on my shoulders and threatening boys."

Ashley laughed softly before squeezing his hand. "You threatened Brian for years. I think you covered that."

"I'm serious."

"I know."

Beau finally turned toward her, emotion still lingering heavily in his expression. "I now know how Samuel felt."

Ashley's face softened instantly at the mention of her father.

"He trusted you," she said quietly.

Beau stared at her for a long moment, his thumb brushing slowly across her wedding ring. Twenty-five years later and the simple feel of her hand in his still grounded him in ways nothing else ever could.

A faint, disbelieving laugh escaped him. "I bet he didn't feel that way when I broke your heart."

Ashley smiled softly. "No. He wasn't very happy with you."

Beau shook his head slightly, his gaze drifting briefly toward Helena beside Brian at the altar. "I can imagine," he admitted quietly. "I know exactly how I'd feel if anyone ever hurt Helena."

His expression shifted then, becoming quieter somehow. More vulnerable. When he looked back at Ashley, all the emotion he usually kept buried sat openly in his eyes.

"I love you."

The words were simple. Certain. Spoken with the same reverence he'd carried for her since she was sixteen years old. Warmth tightened Ashley's chest instantly.

"I love you too."

For a moment neither of them spoke again.

They simply sat together holding hands while their daughter married the love of her life beneath the glow of candlelight and crystal chandeliers. Snow drifted softly beyond the ballroom windows overlooking Boston Harbour, the city glittering against the dark winter sky like something out of a dream.

During the vows, Ashley rested her head lightly against Beau's shoulder, and almost immediately he turned instinctively toward her, pressing a soft kiss against her temple without taking his eyes off Helena. It still amazed her sometimes — how natural loving him remained after all these years.

When Brian slipped the ring onto Helena's finger and their daughter burst into tears, Beau visibly lost the last of his composure.

"Oh God," Ethan muttered beside them. "Dad's crying again."

Rebecca laughed softly while Ashley reached over and squeezed Beau's hand tighter.

"I'm fine," Beau whispered hoarsely.

"You're absolutely not fine," Ashley whispered back affectionately.

A weak laugh escaped him. "No," he admitted quietly. "I'm really not."

But he smiled anyway.

And when Helena and Brian were finally pronounced husband and wife, Beau rose immediately with everyone else, applauding harder than anyone in the ballroom while Ashley laughed softly through her own tears beside him.

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Later that evening, the reception ballroom glowed beneath hundreds of crystal lights while music and laughter echoed warmly through the enormous space. The speeches had long since dissolved into emotional chaos, with Kelly openly sobbing through most of hers while Daniel unsuccessfully tried to take the microphone away from her.

"She's my daughter now too," Kelly had cried dramatically while Brian buried his face in his hands.

Now the bridal waltz had begun. Helena and Brian moved slowly across the dance floor together while guests gathered around the edges of the room watching them with soft smiles and teary eyes. Ashley stood near the edge of the ballroom nursing a glass of champagne when familiar warmth settled against her waist from behind. Even after twenty-five years, she recognised Beau's touch instantly.

"You disappeared," he murmured softly near her ear.

"I was letting Helena have her moment."

Beau hummed quietly before turning her gently within his arms.

"You've had my moment for twenty-five years, angel face."

Ashley laughed softly, warmth blooming through her chest exactly the way it always had with him. The music shifted as the bridal waltz came to an end and the announcer invited the parents of the bride onto the dance floor.

Beau immediately held out his hand.

Ashley smiled as she placed hers in his. "Still asking me to dance after all this time?"

"I'll ask until I'm eighty."

"You'll still be overprotective at eighty too."

"Absolutely."

Laughing quietly, Ashley allowed him to guide her onto the dance floor. The moment his arms settled around her waist, the rest of the ballroom seemed to fade away. It always had. Beau pulled her closer slowly while soft music drifted through the room around them. Nearby, Helena smiled tearfully watching her parents together while Brian wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

Because even now — after children, heartbreak, forgiveness, decades together, and an entire life built side by side — Beau still looked at Ashley like she was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him.

Ashley rested her hands lightly against his shoulders. "You okay?"

Beau smiled faintly. "Ask me again tomorrow after our daughter leaves for her honeymoon."

She laughed softly before smoothing her hand gently along his jaw.

"You did good, Beau."

His expression softened instantly.

"So did you."

For a moment they simply swayed together beneath the lights while snow fell softly beyond the windows. Then Beau leaned down, brushing his lips gently against her temple.

"You know what the strange part is?" he murmured quietly.

"What?"

"I still see the girl in the blue prom dress every time you walk toward me."

Ashley's breath caught softly.

Twenty-five years later.

And somehow, after everything, they still loved each other exactly the same way.

— The End —

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