EXCLUSIVE

BONUS EPILOGUE

Hearts on the Line

ALISON REID

Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Hearts on the Line

by Alison Reid

Six Years Later…

The first cry shattered the silence.

Daniel didn't realise he'd been holding his breath until it escaped in a broken laugh.

"It's a girl," the obstetrician announced with a smile.

A girl.

The words echoed through Daniel's mind as the tiny, crying baby was carefully lifted onto Julia's bare chest.

Julia burst into exhausted tears.

"Oh... sweetheart..." she whispered, her trembling hands cradling their daughter against her skin. "Hi, baby."

Their little girl quieted almost instantly beneath the sound of her mother's heartbeat. Daniel couldn't move.

Five years of negative pregnancy tests. Five years of telling each other Nathan was enough, even while secretly praying for one more miracle.

Now she was here. Tiny. Perfect. Beautiful. Dark curls already covered her tiny head, and she had Julia's mouth.

Daniel reached out with a shaking finger, brushing across the baby's impossibly small hand. She wrapped her fingers around his. His chest tightened so violently he thought it might burst.

“She grabbed me,” he whispered.

Julia smiled through tears.

“Of course she did.”

Daniel leaned down and kissed Julia’s forehead.

“You did it.”

“No...” Julia laughed weakly. “We did.”

“I love you.”

She looked into his eyes.

“I know.”

“No,” he said, his voice cracking. “I don’t think you do.”

She smiled.

“I think after six years together... I have a pretty good idea.”

He laughed, tears filling his own eyes.

“I still don’t tell you enough.”

“You tell me every day.”

“Not enough.”

He bent down and kissed her again, lingering against her lips.

“You gave me everything.”

Julia rested her cheek against their daughter.

“I think she’s perfect.”

“She is.”

Neither of them noticed the nurse quietly glance toward the sheet beneath Julia. Her smile faded. She looked at another nurse. There was more blood than there should have been. The nurse discreetly reached for the call button. Another midwife entered the room.

Daniel was still completely focused on his wife and daughter.

“What should we call her?” Julia asked softly.

Daniel smiled.

"I thought we agreed I wasn't allowed to change my mind."

"You've been trying to convince me of Charlotte for months."

"It suits her."

Julia looked down at the baby sleeping peacefully against her chest.

"...Charlotte."

Daniel smiled.

"Charlotte Moore."

"I love it."

"So do I."

Julia suddenly frowned.

"...Daniel?"

His smile vanished.

"What is it?"

She swallowed.

"I feel..."

She blinked slowly.

"...really cold."

"The room's warm."

"It feels..." She shivered violently. "...freezing."

A nurse stepped forward.

"Julia, I'm just going to have a quick look."

Julia barely acknowledged her. She never took her eyes off Daniel.

"I don't feel right."

His stomach tightened. The nurse lifted the blanket. Her expression changed instantly.

"Doctor."

The single word changed everything. The obstetrician was at the bedside within seconds.

"What's happening?" Daniel asked.

No one answered. Another nurse rushed in. Then another. The room filled with people. Charlotte was gently lifted from Julia's chest.

"My baby..."

"We're just keeping her safe for a moment," the midwife said.

Daniel took Charlotte automatically, his eyes never leaving Julia. She had gone frighteningly pale. Her lips had almost lost their colour. She reached for him.

"Daniel..."

He caught her hand.

"I'm here."

"I feel dizzy."

The monitor erupted into alarms. The doctor pressed firmly against Julia's abdomen. More blood soaked the pads beneath her. His expression hardened.

"We have a postpartum haemorrhage."

Everything stopped. Daniel knew the words. His mind simply refused to believe they applied to Julia.

"Activate the major haemorrhage protocol," the doctor ordered. "Now."

The room exploded into motion. IV lines. Medication. Blood samples. An emergency cart. Daniel stood frozen, still holding his newborn daughter while his entire world lay on that bed.

Julia looked at him, fear breaking through the haze.

"Daniel..."

He was beside her instantly.

"I've got you."

She glanced towards Charlotte.

"Don't let her..."

Her voice trembled.

"...don't let her be scared."

Daniel's heart broke.

"No."

He kissed her forehead.

"You're going to tell her that yourself."

The doctor looked up.

"Sir, we need to move."

Moments later, Julia's bed was racing towards theatre. Daniel stumbled beside her, refusing to let go of her hand.

"Julia..."

She turned her head weakly.

"I love you," she whispered.

The words cut straight through him.

"No."

His voice cracked.

"Don't say that."

"I love you."

"You can tell me again when this is over."

She tried to smile.

"I'll always—"

The anaesthetist stepped between them.

"Sir, we need to take her now."

Daniel tightened his grip.

"Please..."

Julia's fingers squeezed his one last time. Then slipped from his. The theatre doors swung shut. Daniel stood motionless, staring at them. Barely thirty seconds later, hurried footsteps echoed down the corridor.

"Daniel!"

Joseph.

He looked up to see Julia's older brother hurrying towards him with Nathan asleep against his shoulder. Kylie followed close behind, with Mary and Frederick only a step behind.

"What happened?" Joseph asked.

Daniel opened his mouth. Nothing came out. He simply stared at the red light above the theatre doors. Kylie noticed the tiny bundle in his arms.

"Oh..."

Only then did everyone realise he was still holding Charlotte. She slept peacefully, completely unaware that her mother was fighting for her life only metres away.

Kylie stepped closer.

"Daniel..."

He didn't respond. His eyes never left the theatre doors.

"Let me hold Charlotte."

He looked down as though he'd forgotten she was there. His daughter blinked up at him. She already looked so much like Julia.

"I promised her..."

"What?"

"I promised I'd protect them."

"You are."

"I couldn't protect her."

His voice broke.

“I couldn’t stop this.”

Kylie gently lifted Charlotte from his arms. Daniel didn’t even seem to notice. His empty hands hung uselessly at his sides. Blood. Julia’s blood still stained his skin. His knees buckled. Joseph caught him.

“I’ve got you.”

Daniel grabbed his shirt.

“I saw how much blood there was.”

His voice shook.

“They just... kept bringing people into the room.”

He buried his face against Joseph’s shoulder.

“I can’t lose her.”

Joseph held him tighter.

“You won’t.”

Daniel shook his head.

“I will.”

His whole body trembled.

“They wouldn’t tell me anything.”

Joseph closed his eyes.

Seeing the man he’d once warned away from his little sister reduced to this was almost unbearable. Daniel wasn’t just Julia’s husband. He loved her with every part of who he was.

Mary knelt in front of him.

“Daniel.”

He looked at her, shattered.

“I never told her...”

“What?”

“How grateful I am.”

His voice cracked.

"I tell her I love her every day..."

He laughed bitterly.

"...but I never told her she saved me."

Mary took his hands.

"You've told her."

"No."

He shook his head.

"Not enough."

"When I finally admitted my feelings to Julia..."

He laughed weakly.

"...I thought I had my life together."

He shook his head.

"I didn't."

"She made me a better man."

His voice was barely a whisper.

"She believed in me before I believed in myself."

He looked towards Kylie rocking Charlotte.

"She gave me Nathan."

"And Charlotte."

His face crumpled.

"I've spent six years waking up beside my best friend."

He covered his face.

"I don't know how to wake up without her."

Nobody answered. The silence was terrifying. Finally, Daniel looked back at the theatre doors.

"I still remember the first morning I woke up beside her."

A faint smile touched his lips.

"She was asleep."

"I remember thinking..."

His voice disappeared. Joseph squeezed his shoulder.

"What?"

Daniel closed his eyes.

"If I get to wake up beside that woman every morning for the rest of my life..."

He struggled to finish.

"...I'll be the luckiest man alive."

He opened his eyes.

"They can't take that away from me."

Nathan stirred against Joseph's shoulder.

"Daddy?"

Daniel quickly wiped his face.

"Where's Mummy?"

"Mummy's with the doctors, mate."

"Is she sick?"

Daniel couldn't answer. Joseph stepped in.

"The doctors are helping Mummy."

Nathan looked at Daniel's tears. Without a word, he reached out. Daniel gathered his son into his arms.

"It's okay, Daddy."

Those four innocent words shattered what little composure Daniel had left. He held his son tightly and cried openly in the middle of the hospital corridor while everyone who loved Julia silently prayed she'd come back through those theatre doors.

* * * * * * * *

Forty-three minutes.

Daniel had counted every one.

No one spoke anymore.

Nathan had fallen asleep curled against Mary's shoulder. Charlotte slept peacefully in Kylie's arms, occasionally letting out the tiny sighs only newborns seemed capable of.

The only sound was the steady ticking of the clock above the nurses' station. Every few minutes, Daniel looked towards the operating theatre. The red light was still on. Still operating. Still fighting.

The theatre doors finally opened.

Everyone was on their feet before the obstetrician had taken two steps into the corridor. Daniel's heart slammed against his ribs.

The doctor's surgical cap was gone. Sweat beaded his forehead, and faint spots of blood stained the sleeves of his gown. Daniel knew immediately. This wasn't over.

"Mr. Moore?"

Daniel nodded.

"How is she?" His voice barely worked. "Please..."

The doctor drew a slow breath.

"Your wife suffered a severe postpartum haemorrhage after your daughter was born. She's lost just over three litres of blood."

Daniel's face drained of colour.

Three litres.

"We've given blood transfusions and medication, but the bleeding hasn't responded as we'd hoped."

Daniel swallowed.

"What does that mean?"

"We've had to take her back into theatre. We've identified the source of the bleeding, and we're trying to stop it."

"Can you?"

"We believe so."

Believe.

Not know.

Believe.

"But..." Daniel whispered.

The doctor's expression softened.

"She's still bleeding."

The words punched the air from Daniel's lungs. Mary covered her mouth. Joseph stepped closer.

"Is she going to be okay?"

The doctor didn't answer immediately.

"She's critically ill."

Silence settled over the corridor.

"Our priority right now is saving Julia's life."

Daniel closed his eyes.

Saving her life.

The doctor continued.

"Her blood pressure dropped dangerously low. She lost enough blood that her organs were beginning to struggle."

Joseph swore quietly.

“We’ve stabilised her somewhat, but she’s not out of danger.”

Daniel forced himself to look at the doctor.

“What else?”

“If we’re unable to stop the bleeding...”

“No.”

“...we may have to perform an emergency hysterectomy.”

Daniel stared.

“A hysterectomy?”

“It may be the only way to save her life.”

Daniel didn’t hesitate.

“Do it.”

The doctor blinked.

“If that’s what saves her...”

His voice broke.

“...do it.”

He looked towards Charlotte.

“We waited five years for her.”

He looked back at the doctor.

“I don’t need any more children.”

His eyes filled.

“I need my wife.”

The doctor nodded.

“We’ll do everything we can.”

Daniel stepped forward.

“I don’t care what you have to do.”

Another tear slid down his cheek.

“I just need her to come home.”

The doctor met his gaze.

"That's exactly what we're trying to do."

Daniel searched his face.

"Tell me the truth."

The doctor held his eyes.

"I honestly don't know if she'll survive this."

The words shattered what little hope Daniel had left. His legs gave way. Joseph caught him before he hit the floor.

As Daniel broke down in his brother-in-law's arms, the doctor quietly added the only comfort he could honestly give.

"But I can promise you this."

Daniel looked up through tears.

"She has an extraordinary team fighting for her."

The doctor glanced back towards the operating theatre.

"And right now... your wife is fighting just as hard."

* * * * * * * *

The theatre doors closed again.

The red light remained illuminated.

Daniel sank into one of the plastic chairs, elbows resting on his knees, his hands clasped tightly together. He couldn't stop staring at the blood beneath his fingernails.

Julia's blood.

Hours ago, those same hands had been holding hers while they laughed over whether Charlotte looked more like her mother or her father.

Now...

He wasn't even sure she'd live long enough to meet her daughter properly. He lowered his head into his hands.

Please.

It wasn't directed at anyone in particular. Just...

Please.

Across the room, Kylie gently fed Charlotte from a tiny bottle one of the midwives had prepared. The baby was content. Peaceful. Daniel couldn't bring himself to look for long. Every time he did, he saw Julia smiling as she'd held Charlotte against her chest.

He heard her voice.

I think she's perfect.

His chest tightened until it hurt to breathe.

Mary quietly sat beside him. Neither of them spoke for several minutes before she reached over and took one of his hands.

"She loves you."

Daniel gave a humourless laugh.

"I know."

"No." Mary's voice was gentle. "I don't think you do."

He looked at her.

"You were the only man she ever loved. Long before you came to your senses."

He let out a shaky breath.

"I was an idiot."

"Yes," Mary said with a sad smile. "But she never stopped believing you'd find your way back to her."

Daniel looked down at his bloodstained hands.

"I don't deserve her."

“No one deserves a love like yours and Julia’s,” Mary said quietly. “You were just lucky enough to find each other.”

After a moment, she smiled through her tears.

“When Nathan was born, she cried because she’d never seen anyone look so proud.”

“I was.”

Mary laughed softly.

“No. You were terrified.”

Despite everything, a weak smile tugged at his lips.

“I thought I was going to break him.”

“You wouldn’t let anyone else hold him. You stayed awake for nearly forty-eight hours because you were convinced he’d stop breathing if you fell asleep.”

Daniel looked towards Charlotte sleeping peacefully in Kylie’s arms.

“I’d forgotten.”

“You haven’t changed.”

He watched his daughter for a long moment.

“So much depends on Julia.”

His voice was barely above a whisper.

“She holds this family together.”

Mary shook her head.

“No.”

Daniel frowned.

“You think she carries this family.”

She glanced towards Nathan asleep against Joseph’s shoulder.

“But she doesn’t carry it alone.”

She squeezed his hand.

“You carry it together.”

Daniel swallowed hard.

"I don't know how to do this without her."

"You won't have to."

He shook his head.

"If they walk through those doors and tell me she's gone..."

His voice broke.

"I've built companies. I've negotiated billion-dollar deals. I've stood in front of thousands of people without being nervous."

He looked at the theatre doors.

"But none of that matters."

Another tear rolled down his cheek.

"The worst day of my life won't be losing everything I've built."

He closed his eyes.

"It'll be walking out of this hospital without Julia."

A small hand slipped into his. Daniel looked down. Nathan had climbed off Joseph's lap without anyone noticing.

"Daddy?"

Daniel quickly wiped his eyes.

"Hey, mate."

Nathan climbed onto his lap.

"Is Mummy still with the doctors?"

"Yeah."

Nathan nodded thoughtfully.

"When I fell off my bike..."

Daniel smiled faintly.

"You remember that?"

"I had lots of blood."

"You did."

"But Mummy kissed my head."

Nathan looked towards the theatre.

"Who's going to kiss Mummy?"

Daniel's composure crumbled. Before he could answer, Joseph knelt beside them.

"The doctors are helping Mummy, buddy."

Nathan looked between Joseph and Daniel before reaching up and cupping Daniel's face with both little hands, exactly the way Julia always did.

"It'll be okay."

Daniel's breath caught. It was Julia's phrase. Nathan had learned it from her. He pulled his son into the tightest hug he could manage.

"I hope you're right, mate."

Nathan hugged him back.

"I prayed."

Daniel blinked.

"You did?"

Nathan nodded.

"I asked God to make Mummy better."

Daniel kissed the top of his son's head.

"I think that's the best thing anyone could do."

At that exact moment, the red light above the operating theatre switched off. Every conversation stopped. Every person stood. The doors slowly opened. The surgeon stepped into the corridor once again.

This time, there was something different about his expression.

Not relief.

But... hope.

Daniel's heart pounded so loudly he was certain everyone could hear it. He gently lifted Nathan from his lap and stood. His entire future rested on the next words the surgeon was about to speak.

The surgeon removed his mask as he walked toward them. His shoulders sagged with exhaustion. Daniel searched his face desperately. One look. One expression. Anything that would tell him whether his wife was alive. The surgeon stopped in front of him.

For a long moment, neither man spoke. Finally—

"We've stopped the bleeding."

Daniel's knees almost gave way. A shaky breath escaped him.

"Oh, thank God..."

Around him, Joseph closed his eyes in relief. Mary burst into tears. Frederick wrapped an arm around his wife while Kylie hugged Charlotte a little tighter. For the first time in hours, the corridor felt like it could breathe again.

Daniel looked at the surgeon.

"So... she's okay?"

The surgeon's expression remained serious.

"I didn't say that."

The hope that had just bloomed inside Daniel faltered.

"We were able to control the haemorrhage."

He continued carefully.

"Unfortunately, Julia had already lost a significant amount of blood before we could stop it."

Daniel's stomach tightened again.

"How much?"

"Just over four litres."

Mary gasped softly. The surgeon nodded.

“She’s received multiple blood transfusions and blood products.”

Daniel swallowed.

“Did you...”

He couldn’t finish. The surgeon understood.

“We did have to perform the hysterectomy.”

Daniel lowered his head for a moment. A strange mixture of grief and gratitude washed over him. Julia would never carry another child. But she was alive. He looked back at the surgeon.

“She would’ve made that decision herself.”

His voice was firm despite the tears.

“Thank you.”

The surgeon gave a small nod.

“Our priority was saving her life.”

“You did.”

Daniel’s voice cracked.

“You saved my wife.”

The surgeon was quiet for a moment before continuing.

“She’s currently in the Intensive Care Unit.”

Daniel frowned.

“ICU?”

“She’s still ventilated.”

His heart lurched.

“She’s... she’s on a breathing machine?”

“Yes.”

The words echoed painfully.

“The anaesthetic is still keeping her asleep, and at this stage we’re not planning to wake her immediately.”

Daniel stared.

"Why?"

"Her body has been through an enormous amount of trauma."

The surgeon folded his arms.

"Right now, her heart is working hard, her blood pressure still requires medication to support it, and we want to give her body the best possible chance to recover."

"So, she's in a coma?"

"No."

The surgeon shook his head.

"She's in a medically induced sleep. That's very different."

Daniel nodded slowly, trying to absorb everything.

"When will she wake up?"

"We honestly don't know."

The answer hurt.

"It may be tomorrow."

"It may take longer."

"We'll reduce the medication when we believe it's safe."

Daniel rubbed both hands over his face.

"Can I see her?"

The surgeon hesitated.

"For a few minutes."

Daniel looked up immediately.

"Please."

"Before you go in..."

The surgeon's voice became gentler.

"...I need to prepare you."

Daniel's stomach dropped.

"Julia won't look like herself."

He nodded silently.

"She'll have a breathing tube."

"Multiple IV lines."

"Arterial monitoring."

"There'll be a lot of machines."

Daniel's chest tightened.

"But she'll be alive?"

The surgeon met his eyes.

"Yes."

The single word almost undid him. The surgeon placed a hand on Daniel's shoulder.

"I've delivered a lot of babies over the years."

He smiled faintly.

"But I don't often see a husband love his wife the way you love Julia."

Daniel couldn't answer.

"I watched you refusing to let go of her hand while we were trying to save her."

The surgeon smiled sadly.

"She knew you were there."

A tear slipped down Daniel's cheek.

"I promised I'd never leave her."

"You didn't."

The surgeon glanced toward Charlotte.

"I think your wife would want you to meet your daughter properly before you come upstairs."

Daniel turned. Kylie stepped forward and carefully placed the tiny sleeping bundle into his arms. Charlotte yawned without opening her eyes. Daniel looked down at her for what felt like the first time. Not through panic. Not through terror. Just...

As her father.

"Hi, sweetheart," he whispered.

"You've caused quite a stir."

Charlotte stretched one tiny hand from the blanket. Daniel instinctively offered his finger. She wrapped her impossibly small fingers around it. His breath caught.

"You have your mother's grip."

His eyes filled again.

"I need you to know something."

His voice trembled.

"Your mum..."

He looked toward the ICU doors.

"...she is the bravest person I've ever known."

He gently kissed Charlotte's forehead.

"And she's going to meet you."

He looked up at the surgeon.

"Because she has to."

His voice was filled with quiet determination.

"I've waited six years to watch Julia become the mother of my children."

He smiled through his tears.

"I'm not letting this be how our story ends."

The surgeon nodded.

"I think she'd argue that neither is she."

A nurse stepped into the corridor.

"Mr. Moore?"

Daniel looked up.

"We're ready for you."

He looked once more at his daughter before carefully handing her back to Kylie.

Then, with trembling legs and a heart full of hope and fear in equal measure, Daniel followed the nurse toward the Intensive Care Unit to see the love of his life.

For the first time since Charlotte had been born...

He knew Julia was still alive.

Now he just needed her to come back to him.

* * * * * * * *

The ICU doors slid open with a quiet hiss.

The sounds hit Daniel first. A steady cardiac monitor. The rhythmic hiss of a ventilator. Infusion pumps quietly clicking every few seconds.

The intensive care unit was strangely peaceful. Soft lighting replaced the harsh brightness of the operating theatres, and nurses moved with calm efficiency between the rooms.

A nurse stopped outside one of the glass doors.

"She's in here."

Daniel looked through the window. His heart stopped. Julia lay almost motionless beneath crisp white blankets.

A breathing tube was secured across her cheeks with white tape. Her chest rose and fell in a perfect rhythm, the ventilator breathing for her. IV lines

disappeared into her neck and both arms. A monitor tracked every heartbeat. Her skin was almost translucent. She looked...

Fragile.

Not like the woman who had been laughing with him only hours earlier.

"So much equipment..." he whispered.

The nurse nodded.

"It looks frightening."

"It is."

She rested a reassuring hand on his arm.

"Most of it is monitoring. The ventilator is helping her breathe while the medications support her blood pressure."

Daniel barely heard her.

"Can I touch her?"

"Of course."

He walked into the room as though afraid to disturb the silence. Beep. Hiss. Click. He reached the bedside. For a long moment, he simply stood there. Only hours ago, she'd been laughing because Charlotte had grabbed his finger. Now...

He found her hand beneath the blanket. It was cool. Not cold. Just...

Cool.

He wrapped both hands around it.

"Hi, sweetheart."

"I'm here."

The ventilator answered with another mechanical breath. Daniel smiled weakly.

"I know."

He brushed a loose strand of hair from her forehead.

“You’ve scared about twenty years off my life today.”

His voice broke.

“I thought I was going to lose you.”

He rested his forehead against hers.

“I wasn’t ready.”

“I’ll never be ready.”

He closed his eyes.

“I’ve loved you for ten years.”

A faint smile touched his lips.

“I’ve only been lucky enough to call you mine for six.”

“I love waking up beside you.”

“I even love that you steal the blankets and somehow become an octopus in your sleep.”

Another shaky laugh escaped him.

“You still deny it.”

His thumb stroked gently across her knuckles.

“I love that you sing while you cook.”

“I love that you still hold my hand whenever we cross a road.”

“I love waking up to your smile.”

His composure crumbled.

“I should’ve worked less.”

“I should’ve danced with you more.”

“You were right.”

“You always said life was happening while I was making plans.”

He looked at her wedding ring before lifting her hand to his lips.

“I don’t care that we can’t have any more babies.”

“We’ve already been blessed with more than we ever deserved.”

A tear fell onto her hand.

"I've got Nathan."

"I've got Charlotte."

"But I still need you."

His voice dropped to a whisper.

"My best friend."

"The woman who made me believe I could be a husband..."

"...and a father."

He squeezed her hand.

"So, listen to me, Mrs Moore."

Determination steadied his voice.

"I am not raising our children without you."

"Nathan still needs his mum."

"Charlotte hasn't even had the chance to know you."

He kissed her forehead.

"And I..."

His voice cracked.

"...I still have a lifetime left to love you."

The room fell silent except for the steady rhythm of the machines. Daniel sat beside her, never letting go of her hand.

Minutes passed. Perhaps longer. A soft knock broke the silence. The ICU nurse smiled gently.

"Mr Moore?"

He looked up.

"Your son wants to come and kiss his mummy goodnight."

Daniel looked back at Julia and smiled.

"I think she'd like that very much."

* * * * * * * *

The ICU nurse returned a few moments later, Nathan's small hand tucked securely in hers.

Joseph followed behind, his arm draped around Kylie, who cradled Charlotte against her shoulder. Mary and Frederick remained quietly outside, giving the family a moment alone.

Nathan's eyes widened as he stepped into the room.

"So many machines," he whispered.

Daniel knelt beside him.

"They're helping Mummy get better."

Nathan nodded solemnly. His gaze travelled across the room before finally settling on Julia. For the first time since arriving at the hospital, he looked frightened.

"Mummy doesn't look like Mummy."

Daniel felt another piece of his heart break.

"No, buddy."

He lifted Nathan into his arms so he could see her properly.

"The doctors had to give Mummy lots of medicine to help her body rest."

Nathan looked at the breathing tube.

"Why's that in her mouth?"

"So the machine can help her breathe while she sleeps."

Nathan was quiet for several seconds.

"Does it hurt?"

Daniel looked toward the nurse. She smiled gently.

"No, sweetheart. She's asleep, so she can't feel it."

Nathan accepted that answer with the uncomplicated trust only children possessed. He looked back at Julia.

"When will she wake up?"

Daniel swallowed.

"We're waiting for that too."

Nathan nodded as if that made perfect sense. He reached into the pocket of his little jumper.

"I made something."

Daniel frowned.

"When?"

"While Aunty Kylie was feeding Charlotte."

Nathan carefully unfolded a slightly crumpled piece of paper. It was a child's drawing. Four stick figures stood beneath a bright yellow sun. One tall figure held hands with another. Between them stood Nathan. Next to him was a tiny baby with yellow hair that somehow managed to stick straight up. Above them, in uneven letters, Nathan had written:

MY FAMILY

Daniel's vision blurred. Nathan pointed proudly.

"That's you."

He tapped the tallest figure.

"That's Mummy."

Then himself.

"And that's me."

Finally, the tiny baby.

"And Charlotte."

Daniel smiled through his tears.

"I think Mummy's going to love this."

Nathan looked uncertain.

"But she has to wake up first."

Daniel pulled him into a hug.

"She does."

Nathan wriggled free and walked carefully to Julia's bedside. The ICU nurse quietly lowered one of the bed rails. Nathan stood on tiptoe.

"Can I kiss her?"

Daniel nodded.

"Very gently."

Nathan leaned over the blankets and pressed the softest kiss imaginable onto Julia's forehead.

"Hi, Mummy."

His little voice was almost lost beneath the quiet hum of the ventilator.

"I met Charlotte."

He smiled proudly.

"She's little."

Joseph let out a watery laugh behind them. Nathan continued talking as though Julia might answer at any second.

"I told her I'm her big brother."

"And I'll protect her."

Daniel looked away, blinking hard. Nathan gently rested his drawing on the pillow beside Julia.

"I drew us."

"So when you wake up..."

He smiled.

"...you can see Charlotte."

He reached for Julia's hand. His tiny fingers disappeared beneath hers.

“I love you, Mummy.”

The room fell completely silent. Even the nurses seemed to pause. Nathan frowned suddenly.

“Daddy?”

Daniel immediately stepped closer.

“What is it?”

“I think...”

Nathan looked at Julia’s hand.

“...she squeezed me.”

Everyone froze. The ICU nurse immediately glanced at the monitor. Daniel stared at Julia’s motionless face.

“Did she?”

Nathan nodded confidently.

“I felt it.”

The nurse stepped forward and gently examined Julia’s hand. After a moment she smiled.

“It may have been a reflex.”

Daniel’s heart sank slightly.

“But...”

She looked at him kindly.

“...hearing is often the last sense to disappear under sedation.”

She looked back at Julia.

“We always encourage families to keep talking.”

Nathan beamed.

“I knew she’d hear me.”

Daniel leaned over and kissed Julia’s forehead again.

“You hear that?”

His voice was thick with emotion.

"Our little boy's already looking after all of us."

Joseph quietly wiped his eyes.

Daniel smiled faintly as he looked at Nathan, still holding Julia's hand with complete faith.

"He's got your heart, Jules."

Just then, Charlotte stirred in Kylie's arms with a tiny cry. Nathan looked over and grinned.

"Charlotte wants Mummy too."

Daniel walked over and gently lifted his newborn daughter into his arms. He carried her back to Julia's bedside, supporting her tiny head with one hand.

"Look who's here."

Charlotte yawned, blissfully unaware of the machines surrounding her. Daniel carefully lowered her close enough that her tiny hand rested against Julia's forearm.

The newborn's fingers instinctively curled around the sleeve of Julia's hospital gown. Daniel smiled through fresh tears.

"Your whole world is here, sweetheart."

He looked at his sleeping wife.

"And we'll all be waiting..."

He kissed her forehead one more time.

"...for you to come back to us."

* * * * * * * *

The night passed without Daniel noticing.

Darkness beyond the ICU windows slowly gave way to the pale light of dawn. He never left Julia's bedside.

A nurse convinced him to drink a coffee around three in the morning. Another persuaded him to eat half a sandwich. He remembered neither.

Only Julia.

Every few minutes he reached for her hand or glanced at the monitor, reassuring himself her heart was still beating.

Still here.

Joseph had taken Nathan home. Mary and Frederick had promised to return first thing in the morning, while Kylie had taken Charlotte back to the maternity ward.

Daniel had kissed his daughter. Then come straight back. Exactly where he belonged. Beside Julia.

His shirt was creased. Dark stubble shadowed his jaw. He hadn't slept for more than thirty hours. He didn't care.

The ICU consultant arrived just after seven. A middle-aged woman with kind eyes and a calm voice.

"Good morning, Mr Moore."

Daniel stood.

"Morning."

"You've been here all night."

"I'm not leaving."

"I didn't expect you would."

She reviewed Julia's monitors, then nodded.

"She's much more stable than she was overnight."

Daniel's heart lifted.

"She is?"

"Yes."

He let out a slow breath.

"Does that mean..."

"We're going to begin reducing her sedation."

His breath caught.

"Now?"

She smiled.

"Now."

Daniel stared at her.

"She could wake up?"

"She may. Or she may simply become more responsive. Everyone wakes differently after major surgery and significant blood loss."

Daniel nodded.

"I understand."

"When she wakes, she'll probably be frightened."

"Because of the breathing tube?"

"Exactly."

"So, what do I do?"

"Talk to her. Hold her hand. Remind her she's safe."

Daniel managed a faint smile.

"I've had plenty of practice talking to her."

The doctor laughed softly.

"I suspected as much."

She adjusted one of the infusion pumps.

"It may take an hour. It may take several."

"I'll wait."

"I know you will."

After she left, silence settled over the room once more. Daniel pulled his chair closer and took Julia's hand.

"Morning, beautiful."

His thumb brushed gently across her knuckles.

"They're going to wake you up."

A small smile touched his lips.

"I've been waiting all night to tell you about Charlotte."

"She's perfect."

"She's got your nose... and your stubborn streak."

He laughed quietly.

"Nathan says he's going to protect her."

His smile faded.

"I was scared, Jules."

"So scared."

"I thought I was going to have to tell our children about the incredible woman who should've been here to raise them."

His shoulders trembled.

"You waited five years for Charlotte."

"You deserved to hold her."

"You deserved every tomorrow we promised each other."

A tear slipped onto the blanket.

"I wasn't ready to say goodbye."

"I'm still not."

The ventilator continued its steady rhythm. Then...

Something shifted beneath his fingers. Daniel froze. He slowly lifted his head. Julia's fingers had moved. Just enough to curl weakly around one of his. His heart stopped.

"Julia?"

He leaned closer.

"Sweetheart?"

Her eyelids fluttered. Once. Then again. Daniel shot to his feet, his chair crashing to the floor.

"Nurse!"

His voice echoed through the ICU. The nurse hurried in.

"What happened?"

"I think..."

He looked back at Julia.

"I think she's waking up."

The nurse smiled as Julia's eyelids fluttered again.

"I think you're right."

Daniel looked at the woman he'd loved for ten years. For the first time since she'd been rushed into surgery...

Hope no longer felt like something he was desperately clinging to.

It felt real.

* * * * * * * *

Within seconds, the room filled with people.

The ICU consultant returned with two nurses and a respiratory therapist. Daniel instinctively stepped back, though he refused to let go of Julia's hand. The consultant smiled reassuringly.

"She's doing exactly what we hoped."

Julia's eyelids fluttered again. A faint crease appeared between her brows. She looked uncomfortable.

“Julia,” the doctor said gently, stepping beside the bed. “My name is Dr. Harris. You’re in the Intensive Care Unit.”

Another slow flutter of her eyes.

“Can you hear me?”

Daniel watched her desperately.

“Come on, sweetheart.”

Her lashes lifted. Just a fraction. Then fell again.

“That’s it,” the doctor encouraged. “You’re doing beautifully.”

A few moments later they opened again. This time...

They stayed open. Only barely. Her eyes wandered aimlessly around the room, unable to focus. Daniel felt his knees weaken. Those beautiful brown eyes. He had never been so happy to see them.

“Julia...”

Her gaze drifted slowly. The ceiling. The lights. The machines. Then...

It found him. For several seconds she simply stared. Confused. Disoriented. Daniel stepped closer until she could see him clearly.

“Hey.”

His voice trembled with emotion.

“Hi, beautiful.”

Recognition slowly replaced the confusion. A tear escaped the corner of Julia’s eye. Daniel immediately wiped it away.

“No.”

He smiled through tears of his own.

“No crying.”

“You’ve done enough of that for one day.”

Julia tried to smile. The breathing tube prevented it. Instead, panic suddenly flashed across her face. Her eyes widened. She tried to lift a hand toward her mouth. The nurse gently stopped her.

"It's okay."

The doctor leaned into her line of sight.

"Julia, you have a breathing tube helping you breathe."

"You've been very sick."

"You've had major surgery."

Daniel saw the fear in her eyes. He squeezed her hand.

"Look at me."

She did.

"Just me."

Her breathing quickened against the ventilator. The machine began beeping.

You're okay."

He stroked her hair.

"You're safe."

"I'm right here."

Her eyes never left his. The panic eased. Slowly. Little by little. The doctor smiled.

"Excellent."

She looked at Daniel.

"Keep talking."

He nodded.

"You scared me."

Julia's eyes filled again.

"You really scared me."

He laughed softly, wiping another tear from her cheek.

"I thought you were trying to get out of changing nappies."

The tiniest hint of amusement appeared in her eyes.

"There she is."

He kissed her forehead gently.

"I've missed you."

Julia blinked slowly. Then looked around the room. Searching. Daniel knew immediately.

"You're looking for the babies."

She looked back at him. He smiled.

"Nathan's okay."

Another blink.

"And Charlotte..."

His entire face softened.

"...she's perfect."

Julia closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them again, relief washed across her face.

"They're both fine."

"They're waiting to meet their mum."

Fresh tears slipped down her cheeks. The ICU consultant checked the monitor.

"Very good."

She looked at Julia.

"If you can hear me, blink twice."

Julia did.

"Excellent."

"If you're in pain, blink once."

A single blink.

"We'll fix that."

The nurse adjusted one of the medication pumps. Within moments, Julia's expression relaxed. Daniel never let go of her hand. The consultant smiled.

"Julia, because you're awake and following commands, we'd like to remove the breathing tube."

Daniel looked at her hopefully.

"Can she?"

"We're going to see."

The consultant turned back to Julia.

"I need you to take some nice deep breaths for me."

Julia obeyed. The ventilator showed her breathing effort increasing.

"Excellent."

"Again."

Another deep breath. The doctor nodded with satisfaction.

"I think you're ready."

Daniel stepped back reluctantly as the respiratory therapist moved beside the bed. The consultant looked at Julia.

"I'm going to count to three. When the tube comes out, you'll cough. That's completely normal."

Julia blinked her understanding.

"One."

Daniel held his breath.

"Two."

He silently prayed.

"Three."

The tube slid free. Julia coughed immediately, her whole body shaking with the effort. The nurse gently supported her shoulders.

"That's it."

"Breathe."

Another cough. Then another. Finally...

Julia took her first completely independent breath. Daniel covered his mouth. He hadn't realised he'd been holding his own breath. Julia looked at him immediately. Her voice was nothing more than a whisper.

"...Hi."

That single word completely destroyed him. Daniel laughed and cried at the same time. He leaned over the bed, cradling her face with trembling hands.

"Hi."

His forehead rested against hers.

"You have no idea..."

His voice broke.

"...how much I love hearing your voice."

Julia lifted a weak hand to his cheek.

"I..."

Her voice was hoarse.

"...love..."

She paused to catch another breath.

"...you."

Daniel closed his eyes.

"You don't have to say anything else."

"I know."

She shook her head faintly.

"I need..."

He smiled.

"What?"

Another tiny breath.

"...kiss."

A watery laugh escaped him.

"Doctor?"

He looked toward the consultant.

"Is my wife medically allowed to boss me around already?"

The consultant laughed.

"I think one gentle kiss is excellent medicine."

Daniel smiled back at Julia.

"I've learned not to argue with doctors."

He leaned down and kissed her with all the tenderness of a man who had spent the longest night of his life believing he would never have the chance again. When he pulled away, Julia rested her forehead against his.

"What..." She whispered weakly. "...did we..."

Daniel smiled through fresh tears.

"A daughter."

He watched her eyes light up.

"You gave us a beautiful little girl."

Julia smiled for the first time.

"A girl..."

Daniel nodded.

"Charlotte."

Another tear rolled down Julia's cheek.

"Our Charlotte."

Daniel kissed her forehead once more.

"Welcome back, sweetheart. I've been waiting for you."

Julia smiled weakly, her fingers tightening around his hand.

"I'm sorry..."

Daniel shook his head immediately.

"No. No apologies."

He brushed another tear from her cheek.

"You brought our little girl into the world. You fought your way back to us."

His voice cracked.

"That's all that matters."

Julia closed her eyes for a moment, exhausted. When she opened them again, they found his.

"I want to meet her."

Daniel smiled, relief and love shining through every line of his face.

"You will."

He kissed her gently.

"She's been waiting for you too."

* * * * * * * *

The first rays of sunlight crept through the bedroom curtains.

Daniel opened his eyes. For a long moment, he didn't move. He simply looked at the woman sleeping beside him. Julia lay curled towards him, one hand tucked beneath her cheek, her dark hair spilling across the pillow.

Peaceful. Healthy. Alive. A smile tugged at his lips. Three months had passed since the longest night of his life.

Three months since he'd stood outside an operating theatre convinced he was about to lose everything. Some mornings he still woke in a panic. Just for a second. Then he'd see Julia beside him. And everything would be right again.

As though she sensed him watching, her eyes slowly opened.

"Morning."

Her voice was still thick with sleep.

"Morning, beautiful."

She smiled.

"What?"

He reached across and gently brushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Nothing."

She narrowed her eyes playfully.

"You've got that look."

"What look?"

"The one where you're thinking too much."

He laughed quietly.

"I was just making sure you were still here."

The teasing disappeared from her face. She understood immediately. She reached for his hand, intertwining her fingers with his.

"I'm still here."

Emotion tightened his throat.

"I know."

He leaned forward and kissed her gently.

"And every morning I wake up beside you..." He rested his forehead against hers. "...feels like a gift."

A tiny cry drifted through the baby monitor. Julia smiled.

"I think someone's awake."

Daniel grinned.

"I'll get her."

He slipped out of bed and quietly crossed the hallway. Charlotte was lying in her cot, waving tiny fists into the air. The moment she saw him, her face lit up.

"There she is."

He lifted her into his arms.

"Daddy's girl."

Charlotte responded with a happy squeal before immediately grabbing a fistful of his T-shirt. Daniel laughed.

"Strong grip. Just like your mum."

A bedroom door burst open down the hall.

"Daddy!"

Nathan came charging towards him in superman pyjamas.

"Can we make pancakes?"

Daniel laughed.

"It's seven o'clock."

"I know."

Nathan beamed.

"I'm hungry."

Julia appeared in the hallway, smiling as she watched her three favourite people. Nathan immediately ran to her instead.

"Mummy!"

He wrapped both arms around her waist. Julia hugged him tightly before kissing the top of his head.

"Good morning, my big boy."

Nathan looked up at her.

"Can I help make pancakes?"

"You can help eat them."

"I can help stir!"

Daniel smiled.

"I think that's code for making a mess."

"It is not!"

"It absolutely is."

Nathan giggled. Charlotte let out another happy squeal. Daniel looked around at his family. Nathan laughing. Charlotte wriggling happily in his arms. Julia smiling at all of them.

Ordinary. Beautiful. Everything he'd prayed for.

He crossed the room until he stood beside Julia. Without a word, he slipped his free hand into hers. She looked up at him.

"What?"

He smiled.

"Nothing."

She laughed.

"Liar."

He kissed her softly.

"I just wanted to remind myself..."

He looked at Nathan dancing impatiently towards the kitchen. Then at the tiny baby in his arms. Finally, back into Julia's eyes.

"...that this is real."

Julia rested her forehead against his.

"It is."

She squeezed his hand.

"And we're going to have a very long, very ordinary life together."

Daniel smiled.

"I've never wanted ordinary so much."

Nathan groaned dramatically.

"Are you two kissing again?"

Julia laughed.

"We are."

"Eww."

Daniel chuckled.

"Get used to it, mate."

Nathan rolled his eyes with all the exaggerated drama a five-year-old could manage before marching towards the kitchen.

"Fine."

"But I'm getting the first pancake."

Daniel and Julia laughed together. The sound filled the house. It was the most beautiful sound Daniel had ever heard. He looked once more at the woman he'd loved for ten years and almost lost.

Then he followed his family into the kitchen, grateful beyond words for the ordinary life they'd been given. This time...

He intended to cherish every single moment.

—The End—

Ready for another happily-ever-after?

Discover more emotional, feel-good romances by Alison Reid on Amazon.

👉 **Browse my books on Amazon**