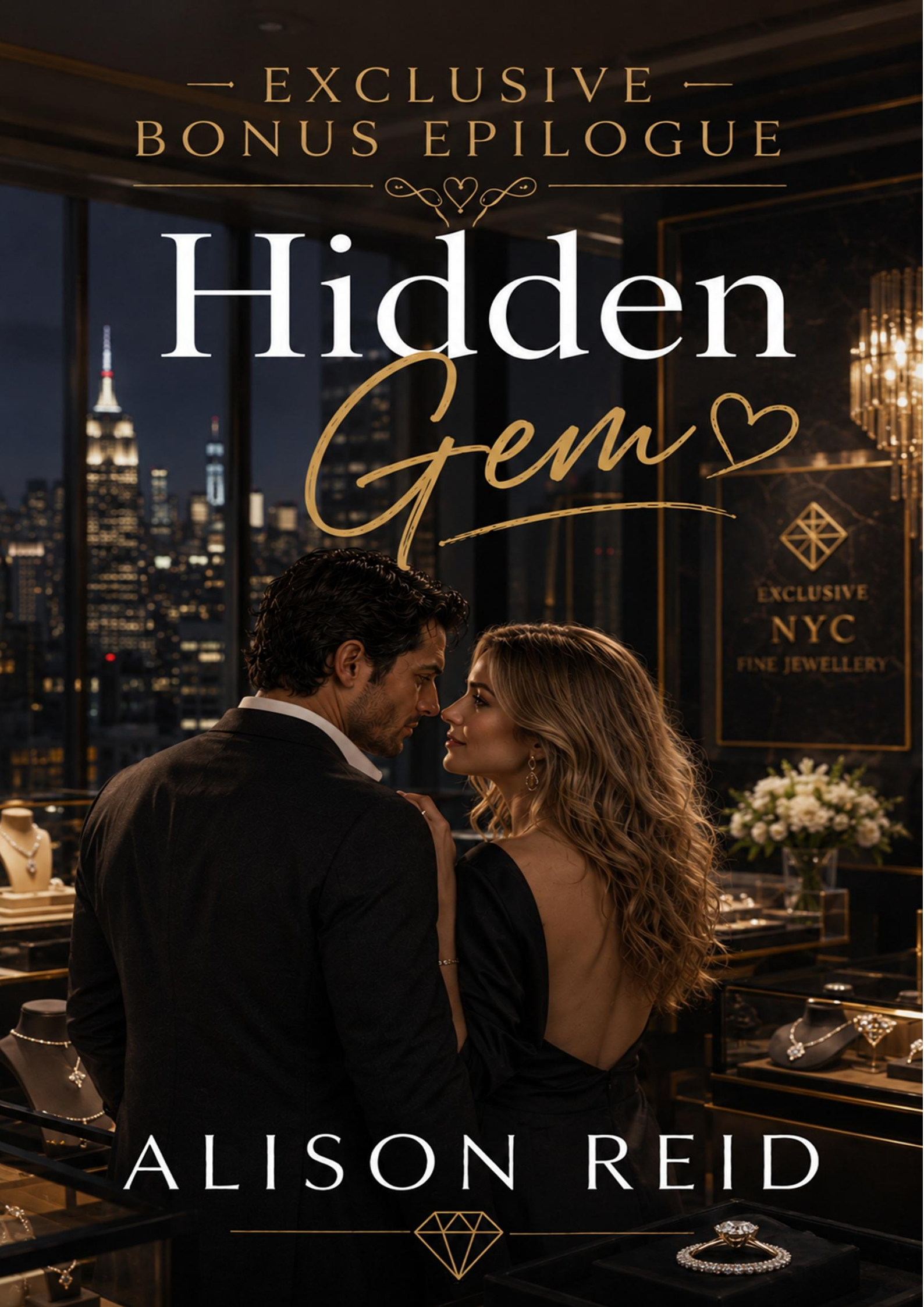
EXCLUSIVE
BONUS EPILOGUE

Hidden Gem



ALISON REID

Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Hidden Gem

by Alison Reid

Twenty Years Later…

Dominic strode through the marble lobby of Childs Incorporated, offering the receptionist a distracted nod as he made his way toward the executive elevators. His mind wasn't on the merger waiting upstairs. It was still at home.

He hadn't walked through the front door until midnight again. The image waiting for him had stayed with him all night.

Amanda had fallen asleep on the sofa, curled beneath the soft throw blanket she'd insisted made the room feel "homier." A novel rested open against her chest, her reading glasses slightly crooked on her nose, the table lamp still glowing softly beside her. She had been waiting for him again.

She always said she was just reading. But he knew better. She'd been trying to stay awake until he got home.

Quietly, he'd removed the book from her hands, marked her page with the ribbon bookmark, and carried her upstairs. Even asleep, she'd instinctively curled against him, murmuring his name before settling back into a peaceful sleep.

The memory squeezed painfully at his chest.

God, he loved that woman.

More than he'd ever thought it possible to love another human being.

She had taken the shattered pieces Sofia had left behind and, with endless patience, somehow convinced him that trust wasn't weakness. She'd become his wife, his best friend, his safe place.

And for the past two months...

He hadn't been there for her.

This merger had consumed every waking moment. Endless negotiations. Conference calls across multiple time zones. Contract revisions. Late-night strategy meetings. It was the biggest acquisition Childs Incorporated had ever attempted, and every decision seemed to land on his desk.

He kept telling himself it was temporary. Just one more week. Just one more meeting. Just one more crisis. But those weeks had stretched into a month, then another.

Amanda had never complained. Not once.

She simply smiled when he rushed out before sunrise, kissed him goodbye, and told him not to work too hard. She left meals in the refrigerator that were usually still there the following morning. She'd stopped asking what time he'd be home because the answer was almost always the same.

Late.

Too late.

She was trying so hard to understand. Yet he was beginning to notice the little things. The tiredness around her beautiful green eyes. The disappointment she tried to hide whenever another evening together disappeared beneath another business emergency. The empty seat across from her at dinner. The book she never seemed to finish because she kept falling asleep waiting for him.

He hated what this merger was doing to them. Not because Amanda had said anything. Because she hadn't. She loved him enough to shoulder the

loneliness in silence. And somehow, that made him feel even worse. His thoughts drifted to the weekend.

He'd deliberately worked from home, convincing himself it would make up for the endless late nights at the office. At least they would be under the same roof. At least Amanda wouldn't be alone.

But even that hadn't felt right.

Every time he stepped out of his home office for a coffee or a quick break, Amanda seemed to be doing something she had never done before.

She'd be smiling at a text message, only for the smile to disappear as she quickly locked her phone when she noticed him.

Or she'd be sitting on the sofa with her laptop open. The moment he walked into the room, she'd close the screen before he could see what she was looking at.

It wasn't like her. Amanda had never hidden anything from him. If anything, she was the complete opposite. She was forever turning her laptop towards him with an excited smile.

"Look at this recipe I found."

"What do you think of this holiday?"

"Come and watch this video."

She'd always wanted to share everything with him, no matter how insignificant. Now...

She was hiding things. At least, that's how it felt. The change was subtle. Most people probably wouldn't have noticed it. He had. Because he noticed everything about Amanda.

He knew every smile, every habit, every little quirk that made her who she was. And over the past few days, those little habits had changed. It unnerved him far more than he was willing to admit. He told himself there was probably

a perfectly reasonable explanation. Amanda had never given him a reason to doubt her.

Not once.

But the uneasy feeling settling in the pit of his stomach refused to leave. Amanda was a beautiful woman. She always had been. Over the years, more than one man had quietly told him just how lucky he was. Most had done it respectfully, but the message had always been the same.

Don't take her for granted.

If anything, Amanda had become even more beautiful with age. The carefree twenty-four-year-old he'd first hired had grown into an elegant, confident woman who seemed to turn heads without even trying. She never noticed the lingering glances or the second looks from other men.

Dominic did. He noticed every single one. His mind drifted back to the charity gala they'd attended a month earlier. Amanda's father had introduced her to an old family friend, a wealthy businessman he'd known for years. When the orchestra began playing, the man had politely asked Amanda if he could borrow her for one dance.

Dominic hadn't thought anything of it.

Amanda loved dancing, and he'd been tied up speaking with board members about the merger anyway.

From across the ballroom, he'd watched them glide across the polished floor. Amanda laughed at something the older man had said, her emerald-green gown shimmering beneath the crystal chandeliers.

When the dance ended, the businessman had escorted her straight back to Dominic. He'd smiled as he placed Amanda's hand back into Dominic's. Then he'd looked Dominic straight in the eye.

"You'd better treat this one right, Dominic," he'd said quietly. "Or someone might decide to steal her from you."

At the time, Dominic had laughed politely, dismissing it as nothing more than harmless banter. Now...

The words echoed in his mind with unsettling clarity. For the first time in years, they didn't sound like a joke. They sounded like a warning.

He trusted Amanda. With his life. She had never given him a single reason not to. Not once in all the years they'd been together had she ever lied to him, manipulated him, or broken his trust. She had loved him with a quiet, unwavering devotion that still humbled him every day.

No...

Amanda wasn't the one he doubted. It was himself. That was what frightened him. He knew he'd been neglecting her. He'd buried himself in contracts, conference calls, and endless negotiations, convincing himself it was only temporary. That once the merger was complete, everything would go back to normal.

But life didn't pause while he chased another business deal. Amanda was still coming home to an empty house most nights. Still eating dinner alone. Still falling asleep with a book in her hands while she waited for him.

She never complained. She never demanded more of him. She simply loved him enough to accept whatever time he could give her. And somehow, that made the guilt even heavier.

Lately, it had begun to play on his mind more and more.

He found himself wondering if he was slowly becoming the husband he'd always promised Amanda he would never be.

A man who loved his wife... but expected her to settle for whatever pieces of him were left after work was finished.

He was turning fifty in just a few weeks. Amanda was six years younger. The age difference had never bothered either of them, but lately, it had found its way into his thoughts more often than he cared to admit. It wasn't as though he'd let himself go.

Far from it.

Whenever his schedule allowed, he still ran before sunrise, pounding out miles through the quiet streets while the city slept. He still made time for the gym whenever he could, refusing to surrender to the complacency that so often accompanied success. Years of discipline had kept him fit, his broad shoulders and athletic build much the same as they had been when Amanda had first walked into his office all those years ago.

But turning fifty had a way of making a man question things he'd never questioned before.

He caught himself wondering whether Amanda ever noticed the silver beginning to creep into his dark hair. Whether she still looked at him the way she once had.

Or whether one day she'd wake up and realise she deserved someone younger... someone who had more time to give her than board meetings, mergers and conference calls.

The thought was ridiculous. Amanda had never cared about his age. She'd never cared about his money either. She'd simply loved him.

Yet the more guilt he carried over neglecting her, the easier it became to entertain thoughts that would normally never cross his mind.

For the first time in years, Dominic found himself wondering whether loving Amanda was enough... if he wasn't giving her the life she deserved.

* * * * * * * *

That afternoon, Dominic made a decision. Enough was enough. He stepped out of his office and looked at his executive assistant.

"I'm leaving on time today."

She blinked in surprise. "Sir, we still have the merger documents from London, and Mr. Chambers is expecting—"

"I don't care." His tone wasn't sharp, just firm. "Whatever needs to be done can wait until tomorrow."

She studied him for a moment before smiling. "Yes, Mr. Childs."

Dominic glanced back into his office, where stacks of files covered his desk. For once... they could wait. His wife couldn't. He grabbed his jacket, ignored the vibrating phone in his pocket, and walked out of Childs Incorporated before anyone could stop him. The drive home was strangely peaceful.

For the first time in weeks, he wasn't mentally drafting emails or rehearsing negotiation points. He was simply looking forward to spending an evening with Amanda. Maybe they'd order takeaway. Watch a movie. Sit on the terrace with a bottle of wine. Anything.

He just wanted to be with her.

* * * * * * * *

Forty-five minutes later, he walked through the front door.

Laughter drifted from the family room.

His nineteen-year-old son, Ethan, and seventeen-year-old daughter, Kymberly, were sprawled across opposite ends of the sofa, engaged in what sounded like a very serious debate.

“I’m telling you,” Ethan insisted, holding up his phone, “there is no way Dad would survive one of those reality survival shows. He’d spend the entire time trying to organise everyone into departments.”

Kymberly burst into laughter.

“No, he’d fire the host for poor planning before the first commercial break.”

“Exactly!”

“And then he’d somehow invoice the television network.”

The siblings dissolved into another fit of laughter. Dominic stopped in the doorway and folded his arms.

“I sincerely hope you’re discussing someone else.”

Both teenagers looked up.

“Dad!”

Ethan stood first, giving him a quick hug before Kymberly followed, wrapping her arms around him.

“It’s nice to see you home before bedtime,” Ethan teased.

Dominic winced.

“I deserved that.”

He looked around the room.

“Where’s your mother?”

The two teenagers exchanged a glance before answering in perfect unison.

“Out.”

Dominic frowned.

“Do you know when she’ll be back?”

Kymberly shrugged.

“She said she wouldn’t be home for dinner. She was having dinner with a friend.”

Something tightened in Dominic's chest.

"A friend?" he repeated.

Neither of them seemed to notice the change in his expression.

"Yeah," Ethan said casually. "She looked really happy when she left."

Dominic forced a smile.

"Right..."

But as he loosened his tie, one thought refused to leave him. Amanda never missed family dinners. Not unless she had a very good reason. Trying to ignore the uneasy feeling in his stomach, Dominic pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped Amanda's name.

The phone rang.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

It rolled over to voicemail.

He frowned. Amanda almost always answered his calls. Especially lately, when they had barely seen each other. He slipped the phone back into his pocket, telling himself not to read anything into it. She was probably talking to her friend.

Five minutes later, his phone vibrated.

Amanda ❤️

Relief washed through him as he answered immediately.

"Hey."

"Hi, sweetheart." Amanda's voice was bright, but slightly breathless. "Sorry, I couldn't answer before."

Before Dominic could reply, he heard a man's voice somewhere in the background.

"...Amanda, do you think—"

The voice cut off abruptly, as though someone had realised she was on the phone.

Amanda laughed softly at something out of Dominic's earshot before returning her attention to him.

"Sorry about that."

Dominic tried to keep his voice casual.

"Everything okay?"

"Of course." There was a brief pause. "I just wanted to call you back."

He hesitated.

"Kymberly said you weren't coming home for dinner."

"That's right." She sounded almost... distracted. "I'm having dinner with a friend tonight. I should be home later."

Another muffled male voice drifted through the phone.

"Amanda..."

She covered the receiver for a second.

"Just a minute."

Dominic stared silently at the floor. She'd never done that before. When she came back, her voice was warm as ever.

"I'll see you tonight, okay?"

"Okay."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

The line disconnected. Dominic lowered the phone slowly. He trusted Amanda completely. He truly did. But as he stood alone in the kitchen, he couldn't stop replaying the unfamiliar man's voice echoing through the call.

For the first time in years...

A tiny seed of doubt lodged itself in the back of his mind. Not because Amanda had given him a reason to distrust her. But because he feared he had finally given her a reason to stop waiting for him.

* * * * * * * *

Amanda didn't get home until after nine.

Dominic had spent the evening in his study, trying to work, but the same paragraph had been sitting on his computer screen for nearly twenty minutes. He'd read it over and over without taking in a single word.

The front door opened. A moment later, he heard Amanda's familiar footsteps crossing the foyer. She appeared in the doorway, her smile immediately warming the room.

"There you are," she said softly.

Dominic pushed his chair back from his desk.

"There I am."

She walked over to him, slipping off her coat as she crossed the room.

"You should have told me you were coming home early," she said. "I would've rearranged my plans."

He managed a small smile.

"I wanted to surprise you."

"I'm sorry I wasn't here."

Before he could answer, Amanda reached him. As naturally as breathing, she rolled his office chair away from the desk before settling sideways onto his lap, exactly as she had done hundreds of times over the years. She slid one arm around his neck and leaned forward, pressing a lingering kiss against his lips.

"I missed you," she whispered.

Dominic closed his eyes for a moment.

God...

He'd missed her too.

His arms wrapped instinctively around her waist, pulling her tightly against his chest as though he was afraid that if he let go, she'd disappear.

Amanda smiled against his shoulder.

"That's quite the welcome home."

He buried his face against her neck, breathing in the familiar scent of her perfume.

"You have no idea."

She stroked the back of his hair, her fingers gently combing through the dark strands that were beginning to show flecks of silver.

"You've been working too hard," she murmured.

"I know."

"You don't have to carry the whole company on your shoulders."

He let out a quiet laugh.

"Apparently I do."

Amanda pulled back just enough to look into his eyes.

"No," she said gently. "You don't."

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Dominic simply held her. She'd been gone for only a few hours. Yet after everything that had been running through his mind all day, having her in his arms again eased a tension he hadn't realised he'd been carrying.

Even so...

A tiny voice in the back of his mind reminded him that she'd been out all evening. With someone she'd never mentioned before. He hated himself for even thinking it.

Because the woman sitting in his lap, smiling at him with nothing but love in her eyes, had never once given him a reason to doubt her.

* * * * * * * *

The following weekend was even worse than the last.

Dominic had promised himself he wasn't going to overthink things. He trusted Amanda. He wasn't going to let his imagination run wild. Then Saturday happened.

They'd spent most of the morning at home, each catching up on work. Dominic was reviewing merger documents in his study while Amanda sat in the family room with her laptop.

It should have felt normal. Instead, everything felt... different. Her phone rang. Dominic barely looked up, expecting Amanda to answer it where she was. Instead, she picked up the phone and quietly left the room.

He frowned. Amanda never did that. Not with him.

A few moments later, he heard her laughing from somewhere down the hallway. It wasn't forced. It was genuine. Warm. The sound made something uncomfortable twist inside him.

When she returned a few minutes later, she slipped her phone face down onto the coffee table.

As soon as she noticed him looking up from his paperwork, she casually picked it up again and slid it into the pocket of her cardigan.

An hour later, he wandered into the family room to make himself another coffee. Amanda was typing away on her laptop. The moment she realised he was standing beside her, she smiled.

"Need a coffee?"

"Please."

As she stood, she quietly lowered the laptop screen until it clicked shut. Dominic stopped walking. She'd done it again. A month ago, she would have turned the screen towards him.

"Look at this."

"Can I get your opinion?"

"Tell me what you think."

Now...

The screen disappeared before he even had a chance to glance at it. It happened again that afternoon. Her phone buzzed. She looked at the screen, smiled to herself, then stood.

"I'll just be a minute."

Another phone call. Another conversation in another room. By Sunday evening, Dominic realised something that made his stomach sink. This wasn't a one-off. It was becoming a pattern. She was hiding her phone. Closing her laptop. Leaving the room to answer calls. Laughing with someone he never saw. None of those things, on their own, meant anything.

Together...

They were beginning to mean everything.

He hated himself for noticing. He hated himself even more for caring. Because Amanda had never once betrayed his trust. But the more he watched her quietly guard little pieces of her life, the more the fear he'd been trying so hard to suppress began to take hold.

For the first time since he had known Amanda... Dominic was starting to worry.

* * * * * * * *

Monday morning found Dominic sitting behind the enormous mahogany desk in his office.

The merger documents lay spread before him. Contracts. Financial projections. Risk assessments. Normally, he'd have analysed every page with ruthless efficiency. Today, he hadn't absorbed a single sentence.

He found himself staring at the same paragraph for the fourth time before realising he had no idea what he'd just read. His thoughts kept drifting back to Amanda. The phone calls. The hidden messages. The laptop snapping shut every time he walked into the room. He rubbed a hand over his face.

What the hell was happening?

A knock sounded at his office door. His secretary poked her head inside.

"Your mother is here to see you."

Dominic looked up.

"Send her in."

A moment later Diane walked into the office carrying two coffees.

"Thought you looked like you could use one," she said, placing one on his desk.

"Thanks, Mum."

She studied him for a moment before sitting opposite him.

"You look dreadful."

"I've looked better."

"I'd say." She tilted her head. "What's wrong?"

Dominic didn't answer immediately. Instead, he stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Manhattan. Finally, he spoke.

"I think I'm losing Amanda."

Diane's heart lurched. She kept her expression perfectly neutral.

"What makes you say that?"

He let out a humourless laugh.

"I've spent the last two months buried in this merger."

"You have."

"I haven't been home before midnight most nights."

"I know."

"I've missed dinners... weekends... I barely know what day it is anymore."

Diane listened quietly. Dominic leaned back in his chair, exhaustion etched across his face.

"She deserves better than what I've been giving her."

"Has Amanda said that?"

"No."

"Has she complained?"

"Not once."

Diane folded her hands in her lap.

"Then why do you think you're losing her?"

He hesitated.

"Because she's changed."

Diane's stomach tightened.

"How?"

"She hides her phone." He looked down at his desk. "She leaves the room to answer calls." He swallowed. "She closes her laptop whenever I walk in." His voice became quieter. "She had dinner with a friend she'd never mentioned before. And when she called me back..." He stopped. "There was a man in the background."

Silence filled the office. Diane understood exactly what he had heard. She also knew precisely who that man had been.

The event planner.

Every instinct as a mother screamed at her to tell him the truth. To end his misery. But Amanda had looked her straight in the eye.

"Promise me, Diane. No matter what Dominic says, you can't tell him. This has to be a surprise."

She had promised. And Diane never broke her promises. Instead, she leaned forward.

"Dominic..." He looked at her. "Do you trust your wife?"

His answer came without hesitation.

"With my life."

"Has she ever given you a reason not to?"

"Never."

"Then why are you convincing yourself she's suddenly become someone else?"

He looked away.

"Because people don't leave perfect husbands." His voice cracked with quiet honesty. "They leave husbands who stop coming home. They leave husbands who miss every dinner. They leave husbands who make work more important than their marriage."

Diane's heart broke for him.

"My son..." She reached across the desk and rested her hand over his. "You've made mistakes these past months."

He nodded.

"I know."

"But making mistakes doesn't mean you've lost your wife."

He looked at her, hope and fear warring in his blue eyes.

"What if I've realised it too late?"

Diane squeezed his hand.

"If I know Amanda as well as I think I do..." She smiled gently, choosing every word with care. "...she loves you far too much to give up without telling you there was a problem first."

It wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the whole truth. Dominic let out a long breath.

"I hope you're right."

"So do I," Diane whispered.

Inside, she silently prayed Amanda's surprise would be worth every moment of anguish her son was putting himself through.

* * * * * * * *

Saturday arrived.

His fiftieth birthday was only two days away. It should have been a milestone he was looking forward to. Instead, it felt like a countdown to something he wasn't ready to face. His mind drifted back to Friday morning. He'd been leaving before dawn yet again, already dressed in his suit as he reached for his briefcase.

Amanda had followed him into the foyer.

"Dominic."

He turned to find her standing with her arms folded. Her expression was serious. Not angry. Determined.

"Tomorrow night," she said firmly, "we're going to dinner."

He smiled tiredly.

"I'll see what—"

"No." The single word stopped him. "We're going to dinner." She stepped closer until she was standing directly in front of him. "I don't care about the

merger." Her emerald eyes never left his. "We have to talk on Saturday." She paused for emphasis. "No excuses."

For several seconds, he simply stared at her. His heart slowly began to sink.

We have to talk.

Three simple words. Words he'd heard before. Words that never seemed to end well. She'd never spoken to him like that.

Never.

Amanda had always been patient. Understanding. Supportive. Now she was insisting they talk. No excuses. His first thought hit him with such force it almost stole his breath.

She's leaving me.

He forced himself to smile.

"Okay."

"I'll make the reservation," Amanda replied, her tone softening as she reached up and straightened his tie. Then she leaned forward and kissed him.

"Have a good day."

"You too."

He watched her standing in the doorway as he drove away.

* * * * * * * *

For the rest of the day, those four words echoed relentlessly through his mind.

We have to talk.

Every time his phone rang...

Every time he looked at a contract...

Every time he closed his eyes...

The same thought returned. Not because Amanda had ever given him a reason to doubt her. But because he'd spent the last months giving her every reason to doubt him.

* * * * * * * *

By Saturday morning, he'd convinced himself that dinner wasn't a date.

It was goodbye.

Saturday seemed determined to drag. Amanda spent most of the day out. She'd kissed him goodbye after breakfast, telling him she had "a few things to organise," before disappearing out the front door. He'd wanted to ask what those things were. Instead, he'd simply smiled and told her to have a good day.

The house had never felt so empty. Dominic tried to work. He answered emails. Reviewed contracts. Even joined two conference calls. He couldn't remember a single thing that had been discussed. Every hour he found himself glancing at the clock.

Every time headlights swept across the front windows, his heart jumped before sinking again when the car drove past.

By late afternoon, he'd worked himself into such a state that he was beginning to feel physically ill.

He couldn't eat. Coffee sat untouched on his desk. The knot in his stomach had tightened with every passing hour. At some point, he'd started rehearsing what he was going to say. Not to negotiate another billion-dollar merger. To beg his wife not to leave him.

Amanda... I'm sorry.

I've been a terrible husband lately.

I'll fix this.

I'll step back from work.

I'll cancel the merger if I have to.

Just... please don't leave me.

The words played over and over in his head. By the time he heard the front door open just after five, his heart was pounding so hard he could hear it.

"Dominic?" Amanda called.

"I'm in the study."

She appeared in the doorway moments later, smiling.

"I'm just going to get ready."

He nodded, unable to trust himself to speak. Then she disappeared upstairs.

Forty minutes later, he heard the bedroom door open. His eyes lifted instinctively toward the sound.

His breath caught.

Amanda stood there in an elegant midnight-blue dress that flowed effortlessly around her figure. Her honey-blonde hair, usually worn simply, fell in soft waves over her shoulders. Diamond earrings caught the light every time she moved, and the delicate silver necklace he'd given her on their tenth anniversary rested against her skin.

She looked...

Stunning.

More beautiful than she'd looked on their wedding day. For a moment, Dominic simply stared at her. She smiled shyly.

"What?"

He swallowed.

"You look..."

He couldn't even find the words. Amanda laughed softly.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

She walked over, smoothing an imaginary crease from his jacket before straightening his tie with the familiar tenderness she'd shown him for years.

"You don't look too bad yourself, Mr. Childs."

But Dominic barely heard her. One thought echoed relentlessly through his mind.

She's beautiful.

Any man would fall in love with her.

And then, without invitation, another thought followed.

Some other man is going to take her from me.

It hit him so hard he had to look away. Not because he believed Amanda wanted someone else. Because he suddenly couldn't understand why she'd stay with a husband who was never home.

A husband who'd spent the last months choosing conference rooms over candlelit dinners. Board meetings over breakfast together. Work...

Over her.

For the first time in his life, Dominic Childs—the man who negotiated billion-dollar deals without flinching—was terrified of the conversation waiting for him over dinner.

* * * * * * * *

The journey passed in almost complete silence.

The soft hum of the limousine's engine was the only sound as Manhattan drifted past the tinted windows.

Amanda seemed perfectly relaxed. Dominic wasn't. His heart had been pounding ever since they'd left the house. Every mile brought them closer to

the conversation he was convinced would end his marriage. He couldn't take it any longer.

"Amanda..."

She turned toward him.

"Yes?"

Without thinking, he reached across the seat and took both of her hands in his. His grip was tighter than he intended.

"I love you." The words escaped almost desperately. "I love you more than the company. More than the merger. More than anything."

Amanda looked at him for several seconds before the most beautiful smile spread across her face. A smile he'd fallen in love with twenty years ago.

"I know," she said softly.

Two simple words. Yet they completely disarmed him. That wasn't the smile of a woman about to leave her husband. There was no sadness. No guilt. No hesitation. Only warmth. Only love.

Amanda squeezed his hands gently.

"I know you love me."

Dominic stared at her, momentarily thrown completely off balance. If she was about to end their marriage... why was she looking at him like that?

The limousine slowed.

He glanced through the window.

Instead of pulling up outside one of Manhattan's finest restaurants, the driver turned beneath an elegant stone archway before stopping in front of one of the city's most exclusive event venues—a beautifully restored historic mansion overlooking the river.

Dominic frowned.

"This isn't a restaurant."

Amanda's smile grew.

"No," she agreed. "It isn't."

Before he could ask another question, the chauffeur opened his door. Amanda stepped out first, then turned and held out her hand.

"Come with me."

Completely bewildered, Dominic accepted it. As they climbed the wide stone steps toward the grand entrance, he noticed something else. There wasn't another car in sight.

No diners. No guests arriving. The entire venue appeared to have been reserved. His confusion only deepened.

"Amanda..."

She looked over her shoulder with a mysterious smile.

"Trust me."

He did. He always would. Even if he had absolutely no idea what was waiting behind those enormous oak doors. Amanda gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Ready?"

Dominic looked at her in confusion.

"For what?"

She simply smiled and nodded towards the enormous double doors.

The moment they stepped inside—

"SURPRISE!"

The shout echoed around the magnificent ballroom. Dominic froze. The room was filled with people. Not clients. Not business associates. People who genuinely cared about him.

The ballroom had been transformed with elegant navy, silver and gold decorations. Crystal chandeliers sparkled overhead, while photographs from

every stage of his life covered one wall. Another displayed pictures of him and Amanda—from awkward young newlyweds to proud parents, right through to family holidays and countless candid moments that he hadn't even realised had been captured.

At the centre of the room stood a huge illuminated **50**.

For several long seconds, Dominic couldn't move. He simply stared. Amanda hadn't been hiding anything from him. She'd been doing this. A lump formed in his throat.

The first people to reach him were Diane and Henry. Diane threw her arms around her son without hesitation.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart."

Dominic hugged her tightly, emotion threatening to overwhelm him.

"You knew..."

Diane smiled innocently.

"I might have known a little."

Henry laughed as he stepped forward, extending his hand before pulling Dominic into a warm embrace instead.

"Happy fiftieth, son."

"Thank you," Dominic managed, his voice thick with emotion.

Before he had a chance to gather himself, two familiar voices called out.

"Dad!"

Ethan and Kymberly hurried across the ballroom together. Ethan reached him first, wrapping his father in a bear hug.

"Happy birthday, old man."

Dominic laughed through the emotion.

"Old man?"

"You've officially reached the half-century club."

"Watch it."

Kymberly rolled her eyes at her brother before hugging Dominic just as tightly.

"Happy birthday, Dad." She kissed his cheek. "We've been planning this for months."

Dominic looked from one child to the other in disbelief.

"You two knew as well?"

"Everyone did," Ethan admitted with a grin. "You were literally the only person who didn't."

Dominic slowly turned. Everywhere he looked were familiar faces. Long-time employees. Friends. Neighbours. Business colleagues who had become family over the years. People he'd mentored. People whose lives had intertwined with his in ways he'd never truly appreciated.

All smiling. All there...

For him.

His gaze finally settled on Amanda. She stood a few feet away, watching him with tears glistening in her beautiful green eyes. A smile spread across her face.

"Happy birthday, my love."

At that moment, Dominic understood everything. The phone calls. The secret meetings. The hidden laptop. The whispered conversations. The mysterious dinners. Every single one had been for him. And he'd spent the last two weeks convincing himself she was planning to leave.

Instead, she had spent months planning the most unforgettable birthday of his life. Dominic's eyes found Amanda again. She was still standing where he'd left her, watching him with that beautiful smile that had first stolen his heart all those years ago.

Without thinking, he crossed the room. She barely had time to say his name before he swept her into his arms.

"Oh!"

He lifted her clean off the floor as though she weighed nothing, spinning her in a slow circle. Amanda burst into laughter, the sound bright and infectious.

"Dominic!"

He laughed too, relief and joy pouring out of him all at once.

"I thought..." His voice cracked. "God, Amanda..."

She wrapped both arms around his neck as he continued to hold her.

"Put me down," she laughed. "Everyone's watching."

"I don't care."

"Dominic..." Another laugh escaped her. "You're embarrassing our children."

"I don't care." He hugged her even tighter. "I thought I'd lost you."

Amanda's laughter faded. She pulled back just enough to search his face.

"What?"

He looked at her with tears threatening to spill.

"I thought... all the phone calls... the meetings... the laptop..." He shook his head. "I thought you were leaving me."

For a heartbeat she simply stared at him. Then understanding flooded her face.

"Oh, sweetheart." She cupped his face in both hands. "You silly man."

He gave a weak, embarrassed laugh.

"I know."

She smiled with such tenderness it almost brought him to his knees.

"I've spent months planning your fiftieth birthday."

"And I spent two weeks convincing myself I was about to lose the love of my life."

Amanda leaned forward and kissed him softly.

"When are you going to realise?"

"Realise what?"

"That there isn't another man in this world I'd rather spend my life with." She smiled. "Now..." She tapped his chest with one finger. "Will you finally put me down?"

Dominic grinned.

"Eventually."

"Dominic..." She laughed again. "I'm serious."

Only then did he gently lower her back onto her feet, refusing to let go of her hand. Not after coming so close to believing, he had already lost her.

Still holding Amanda's hand, Dominic slowly walked further into the ballroom. Every few steps another familiar face greeted him. Some he'd worked beside for decades. Others had become lifelong friends. Every one of them had come to celebrate him.

He was overwhelmed.

Henry appeared at his side again, handing him a glass of champagne.

"Quite the surprise," Henry said with a grin.

Dominic laughed, still trying to process everything.

"You knew all along."

Henry raised an eyebrow.

"I've known for months."

"You all lied to me."

"We preferred the term 'carefully protecting the surprise.'"

Dominic shook his head before pulling the older man into another hug.

"Thank you."

Henry patted him firmly on the back.

"No, son." He nodded towards Amanda, who was laughing with Diane across the room. "Thank her. She's the one who reminded all of us just how much you're loved."

Dominic looked across the ballroom. Amanda caught his eye and smiled. His heart swelled. A familiar arm landed across his shoulders.

"Still recovering?"

Ethan.

Dominic chuckled.

"A little."

His son grinned.

"I've never seen you look so confused."

"I was."

"You actually thought Mum was leaving you?"

Dominic groaned.

"I may have..."

Ethan burst into laughter.

"Dad..." He shook his head. "You are the smartest businessman I know."

"Don't."

"You negotiate billion-dollar deals."

"I know."

"And Mum convinced you she was having an affair because she wouldn't let you see her laptop."

Dominic covered his face with one hand.

"When you say it out loud..."

"It sounds ridiculous."

"It really does."

Kymberly wandered over carrying two desserts.

"It was even funnier watching him panic all week." She handed one to Ethan before smiling at her father. "Mum nearly ruined the surprise about twenty times."

Dominic looked at her.

"She did?"

"Oh, constantly."

Kymberly laughed.

"She'd buy decorations, get emotional over old photos, then come home and see you looking miserable."

"There were days she wanted to tell you everything."

"But she kept saying..." Kymberly smiled affectionately.

"'He's only turning fifty once.'"

Dominic swallowed the lump in his throat. Across the room, Amanda was talking to Diane. Every few moments, though, she glanced towards him. Not to see whether people were enjoying themselves. Not to admire the decorations.

She was watching him. Watching his smile. Watching him laugh with their children. Watching him reconnect with people he'd been too busy to spend time with lately. This...

This was the reaction she'd spent months creating.

Drawn almost instinctively, Dominic wandered towards the display of photographs lining one wall of the ballroom. He stopped in front of the first one. A picture of him and Amanda on their honeymoon.

Next to it was another of Ethan as a newborn asleep on his chest. Then Kymberly's first day of school. Family holidays. Christmas mornings. Anniversary dinners. Beach walks. Camping trips. Birthdays. Dozens...

No.

Hundreds of moments.

Twenty years of marriage. Twenty years of a life Amanda had quietly built around him. He hadn't even known many of the photographs existed. He felt someone slip her hand into his.

Amanda.

"I borrowed pictures from everyone," she said softly.

"I wanted to remind you..." She looked up at him with that same smile she'd worn the day he'd married her. "...just how beautiful our life has been."

Dominic stared at the wall for another long moment. Then he looked back at his wife. The merger. The contracts. The endless meetings. None of them compared to what surrounded him now.

Not even close.

* * * * * * * *

By the time they finally arrived home, it was well after midnight.

The laughter, speeches and countless birthday wishes had left Dominic emotionally exhausted in the best possible way. He'd never felt so loved. As he climbed the stairs, he found Amanda already in their bedroom.

She stood barefoot in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, the lights of Manhattan glittering beyond the glass. The soft silk of her midnight-blue negligée shimmered in the moonlight, her honey-blonde hair falling freely down her back.

For a moment, he simply watched her. She was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Not because of the silk. Not because of the moonlight. Because she was Amanda. The woman who had taught him how to trust again. The woman who had given him a family. The woman who had spent months planning a celebration simply to make him smile.

Quietly, he crossed the room. Without saying a word, he slipped his arms around her waist from behind. Amanda leaned back against him immediately, as though she'd been waiting for him to do exactly that.

He gently moved her hair over one shoulder before lowering his lips to the curve of her neck, lingering there for several seconds.

"I love you," he whispered.

She smiled, closing her eyes.

"I know."

He chuckled softly against her skin before kissing her again.

"And..."

He tightened his arms around her.

"Thank you for tonight."

Amanda rested her hands over his where they were clasped around her waist.

"I wanted it to be perfect."

"It was."

"No," she corrected gently. "It wasn't." He frowned. "It was better."

He turned her slowly until she was facing him.

"I don't deserve you."

Her smile faded.

"Don't ever say that."

"It's true."

She shook her head.

"No, Dominic." She reached up and rested her palm against his cheek. "You spent two weeks believing I was going to leave you."

He looked away, embarrassed.

"I know."

"I've never seen you so frightened."

"I was terrified."

She studied him for a long moment before stepping closer.

"I married you because I love you."

"I know."

"I stayed because I love you."

"I know."

"And twenty years later..." She smiled through tears. "...I still look at you and see the man I fell in love with."

His throat tightened.

"I've neglected you."

"You've been busy."

"I've put work before us."

"For a little while."

"I should have been home."

Amanda took both his hands.

"Dominic..." She waited until he looked at her. "If I'd been unhappy... I would have told you. I would never have let you spend weeks wondering if I still loved you."

A tear escaped before he could stop it.

"I'm sorry."

She smiled softly.

"Then promise me something."

"Anything."

"The next time work starts taking over your life..." She intertwined her fingers with his. "...come home."

"I will."

"No matter how important the merger is."

He nodded.

"I promise."

Amanda rose onto her tiptoes and kissed him, slow and unhurried. When they finally pulled apart, she rested her forehead against his.

"Happy birthday, my love."

Dominic smiled as he held her in his arms. Twenty years ago, Amanda had saved him from a life without trust. Tonight... she had reminded him why coming home would always be the most important part of his day.

— The End —

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