EXCLUSIVE

BONUS Epilogue

FOR

Mistaken Hearts

SOME MOMENTS CHANGE EVERYTHING. SOME HEARTS ARE NEVER MEANT TO LET GO. SOME LOVE IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR.

ALISON REID

Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Mistaken Hearts

by Alison Reid

Twenty-Five Years Later…

Soft spring sunshine spilled through the stained-glass windows of St. Patrick's Church, scattering ribbons of colour across polished timber pews. White roses and eucalyptus lined the aisle, their delicate fragrance drifting through the historic building.

Guests filled the church with excited conversation as they waited for the ceremony to begin.

Twenty-five years.

Somehow, a quarter of a century had passed since Ethan Hawthorn had first walked into a little flower shop convinced he'd found the woman who had destroyed his brother's life.

Instead...

He'd found the love of his own.

* * * * * * * *

Inside the bridal suite, laughter echoed around the room, warm and effortless.

Twenty-four-year-old Katy Hawthorn stood before the full-length mirror, her ivory wedding gown fitting as though it had been created just for her. Delicate lace shimmered beneath the soft light while her long dark hair

cascaded over one shoulder beneath an elegant veil. Her emerald eyes glistened with unshed tears as she stared at her reflection, still struggling to believe the woman in the mirror was really her.

Behind her, twenty-one-year-old Heidi carefully knelt to smooth the train one final time before stepping back to admire her work. Unlike her older sister's quiet, gentle nature, Heidi had inherited their father's confidence and their mother's quick wit. She was rarely serious for more than a few minutes and possessed an uncanny ability to make everyone around her laugh—even on the most emotional of days.

Tilting her head, she folded her arms across her pale blue bridesmaid dress and smiled approvingly.

"You look perfect," she whispered.

Katy gave a nervous laugh.

"Perfectly terrified."

Heidi rolled her eyes dramatically.

"That's normal. If you weren't nervous, I'd be questioning your life choices."

Katy laughed, some of the tension easing from her shoulders.

"You're supposed to make me feel better."

"I am making you feel better." Heidi grinned. "I'm distracting you."

"By reminding me I'm about to walk in front of two hundred people?"

"Exactly."

Katy shook her head, smiling despite herself.

"Mum was right."

Heidi raised an eyebrow.

"About?"

"That you'd never pass up an opportunity to tease me."

“She’s been saying that since I was five.” Heidi shrugged innocently. “It’s one of my better qualities.”

Katy reached over and squeezed her sister’s hand.

“I’m really glad you’re standing beside me today.”

Heidi’s playful smile softened instantly.

“There was never anywhere else I’d be.”

For a moment, neither sister spoke. They simply smiled at one another, sharing the quiet understanding that only sisters could.

Across the room, Ava carefully adjusted the tiny pearl earrings hanging from her daughter’s ears before smoothing an invisible crease from her gown.

“You’ve never looked more beautiful.”

Katy’s eyes filled.

“Thanks, Mum.”

A soft knock sounded at the door.

“I’ll get it,” Ava said.

She opened the door.

Twenty-five years had silvered a few strands at Ethan’s temples, but he was still every bit the commanding man she’d fallen in love with all those years ago. His tailored black tuxedo fit him as perfectly as ever, but the hardness that had once defined him had long since disappeared.

His eyes softened the moment they met hers.

Without saying a word, he stepped inside, slid one arm around her waist and kissed her gently.

“I love you.”

Ava smiled against his lips.

“I love you too.”

He rested his forehead against hers for a moment, stealing one more quiet second before the biggest moment of their daughter's life.

Then he looked up.

His gaze found Katy. And everything else disappeared. For a long moment he simply stared. The tiny baby he'd once carried around the penthouse...

The little girl who insisted on helping Ava arrange flowers...

The teenager who'd wrapped him completely around her finger...

She was gone. Standing before him was a bride.

His throat tightened.

"You look beautiful."

Katy laughed softly through her tears.

"You've already told me that."

"I know."

"So why are you saying it again?"

"Because I still can't believe you're old enough to get married."

She crossed the room and wrapped her arms around him.

"You've been saying that all morning."

"I've been trying to convince myself."

She rested her head against his chest.

"You'll always be my little girl."

"I know."

"And if he hurts you..."

"Dad."

"I'm just making sure he understands."

"Dad."

He smiled.

"He does."

Theo appeared in the doorway, looking every bit the handsome nineteen-year-old in his perfectly tailored tuxedo. Standing well over six feet tall, he had inherited Ethan's dark hair and commanding presence, but there was an easy warmth about him that belonged entirely to Ava. Quick with a smile and fiercely protective of his family, Theo had grown into the kind of young man Ethan couldn't have been prouder of. He possessed his father's determination but his mother's compassion—a combination Ethan often thought made him a far better man than he'd ever been at the same age.

"Dad..."

Ethan looked over. Theo offered a small smile.

"It's time."

The room fell quiet.

The laughter that had filled the bridal suite only moments before faded into an almost reverent silence.

Beside him, Ava slipped her hand into his, her fingers intertwining with his as naturally as they had for nearly twenty-five years.

"You ready?" she asked softly.

Ethan drew in a slow breath.

He looked first at his wife. The woman who had changed everything.

Twenty-five years later, she was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. There were a few delicate lines around her emerald eyes now—earned through years of laughter, tears and countless smiles—but to him they only made her more beautiful. She still had the remarkable ability to calm him with nothing more than a touch.

His gaze shifted to Katy.

She'd always been Ava's little shadow, happiest arranging flowers beside her mother, believing there was good in everyone she met.

Then Heidi.

She caught him looking and immediately rolled her eyes, making him smile. Some things never changed. She'd been making the family laugh since she could talk.

Finally, Theo.

Somewhere between following Ethan around in tiny suits and becoming a man people naturally looked up to, his little boy had quietly grown into someone Ethan admired.

Not so long ago, the three of them had been running barefoot through the gardens at home, arguing over whose turn it was to help their mother plant flowers or begging him to push them higher on the swings.

Now one daughter was about to become someone's wife. Another stood proudly beside her. And his little boy wasn't a boy anymore.

Where had the years gone?

Ethan swallowed against the lump tightening in his throat.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

* * * * * * * *

The first gentle notes of the string quartet drifted through the church, silencing the excited conversations almost instantly.

One by one, every guest rose to their feet.

At the front of the church, Eric turned.

The confident smile he'd worn all morning disappeared the moment he saw Katy standing at the end of the aisle.

His eyes glistened. He'd seen her dress. He'd helped choose the flowers. He'd imagined this moment a hundred times.

Nothing had prepared him for how breathtaking she looked walking towards him.

Beside him, Liam leaned over with a grin.

"Don't you dare cry before she gets here."

Eric laughed softly, quickly blinking away the moisture gathering in his eyes.

"I'm trying."

At the back of the church, Ethan offered Katy his arm. She slipped her hand through it, taking a slow, steadying breath.

"You nervous?" he asked quietly.

She smiled without taking her eyes off the altar.

"A little."

"You don't have to do this."

She turned to look at him, amused.

"Dad..."

"I'm serious."

She laughed.

"I love him."

"I know."

"So let me go."

He looked at her for a long moment. There she was. His little girl. The tiny baby who used to fall asleep on his chest after midnight feeds. The determined five-year-old who insisted on wearing fairy wings to kindergarten because she was "practising."

The teenager who'd sat beside him during difficult days, somehow always knowing exactly when he needed one of her hugs.

Now she stood beside him as a woman ready to begin a new chapter.

His throat tightened.

"I suppose I have to."

She smiled and kissed his cheek.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being the best dad I could ever have wished for."

Ethan blinked hard.

"I should be thanking you."

The church doors opened wider. The music swelled. Together, father and daughter stepped into the aisle. The guests smiled as they passed, many discreetly wiping away tears.

Ava watched from the front row, her own eyes glistening with pride. Beside her, Heidi reached across and quietly squeezed her mother's hand.

Slowly, Ethan and Katy made their way towards the altar. With every step, memories flooded his mind. First birthdays. School concerts. Family holidays. Teaching her to ride a bicycle. Late-night talks after heartbreaks.

Watching her grow into a woman who possessed her mother's kindness and a quiet strength entirely her own.

The walk felt impossibly short. Too soon they reached Eric. For a moment, no one spoke. Eric looked at Katy as though she were the only person in the room.

Then Ethan gently took his daughter's hand. He looked directly into Eric's eyes. There was no threat in his expression. Only love. Only trust.

"Take care of her."

Eric nodded, his own voice thick with emotion.

"I will."

He glanced at Katy before looking back at Ethan.

"I'll spend the rest of my life making sure she knows how loved she is."

Ethan smiled.

"I know you will."

He leaned forward and kissed Katy's forehead.

"I love you."

"I love you too, Dad."

With one final squeeze of her hand, he placed it into Eric's. The celebrant smiled warmly.

"Who gives this woman to be married?"

Ethan looked towards Ava. She smiled through tears and stepped forward just enough for their eyes to meet.

Together they answered, "Her mother and I do."

Ethan stepped back to Ava's side. Without thinking, she slipped her fingers through his. He intertwined them with his own, gently rubbing his thumb across the back of her hand.

As Katy and Eric exchanged their vows, Ethan glanced sideways at his wife.

Twenty-five years earlier, they'd stood exactly where their daughter stood now, promising each other forever.

He'd thought he couldn't possibly love Ava any more than he did that day. Watching the family they'd created together, he realised just how wrong he'd been.

He quietly lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. Ava smiled without looking away from the ceremony.

"I love you," he whispered.

She gave his hand another gentle squeeze.

"I know."

Neither of them let go for the rest of the ceremony.

* * * * * * * *

Hours later, laughter and music filled the reception.

Fairy lights sparkled overhead while family and friends danced beneath the stars.

Liam laughed as Sally dragged him back onto the dance floor. Nearly nineteen years of marriage hadn't dulled the way they looked at each other.

Theo was teasing Heidi over something that had her threatening to throw a dinner roll at him.

Katy and Eric shared their first dance as husband and wife. Ethan watched them quietly.

"I remember when she took her first steps," he murmured.

Ava smiled.

"You cried."

"I did not."

"You absolutely did."

"I had something in my eye."

"You had tears in both eyes."

He laughed.

"I'll deny that until the day I die."

She leaned against him.

"You've become a terrible liar over the years."

"That's your fault."

"My fault?"

"You taught me honesty."

She looked up at him.

“And was it worth it?”

He didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he looked around the room. His daughters. His son. His brother, healthy and happy. Friends who had become family. A lifetime of memories. Then his gaze settled back on Ava.

“I spent the first part of my life believing success was measured by money.”

He gently tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“I built companies.”

She smiled.

“You did.”

“I made more money than I could ever spend.”

“You certainly did.”

“But none of it compares to this.”

He gestured towards the people they loved most.

“I thought building an empire would be my greatest achievement.”

He took both her hands in his.

“I was wrong.”

She felt tears gathering in her eyes.

“You gave me something no amount of money ever could.”

“A headache?” she teased.

He laughed.

“A family.”

His voice became softer.

“A home.”

Even softer.

“A reason to come home.”

She reached up and cupped his face.

“I was the lucky one.”

"No."

"You rescued me too, Ethan."

He kissed her forehead.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For walking into my life."

She smiled through tears.

"You kidnapped me."

"I invited you."

"You accused me of stealing half a million dollars."

"I was mistaken."

"You think?"

"I've apologised."

"Not enough."

"I'll spend the next twenty-five years making it up to you."

She laughed.

"I'll hold you to that."

He wrapped his arms around her as another slow song began. Around them, their family continued celebrating. Ahead of them, Katy and Eric danced together, beginning the next chapter of their lives.

Ethan rested his cheek against Ava's hair.

"I love you more today than I did twenty-five years ago."

She smiled.

"I didn't think that was possible."

"Neither did I."

"But every year..."

He kissed her gently.

"...I somehow fall in love with you all over again."

As they swayed together beneath a canopy of stars, Ethan realised something that would have seemed impossible all those years ago.

The greatest investment Ethan Hawthorn had ever made had never been measured in dollars or shares.

It had begun the moment he walked into a little flower shop... and met the remarkable woman waiting behind the counter.

Everything that truly mattered had grown from there..

— The End —

Ready for another happily-ever-after?

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

👉 **Browse my books on Amazon**