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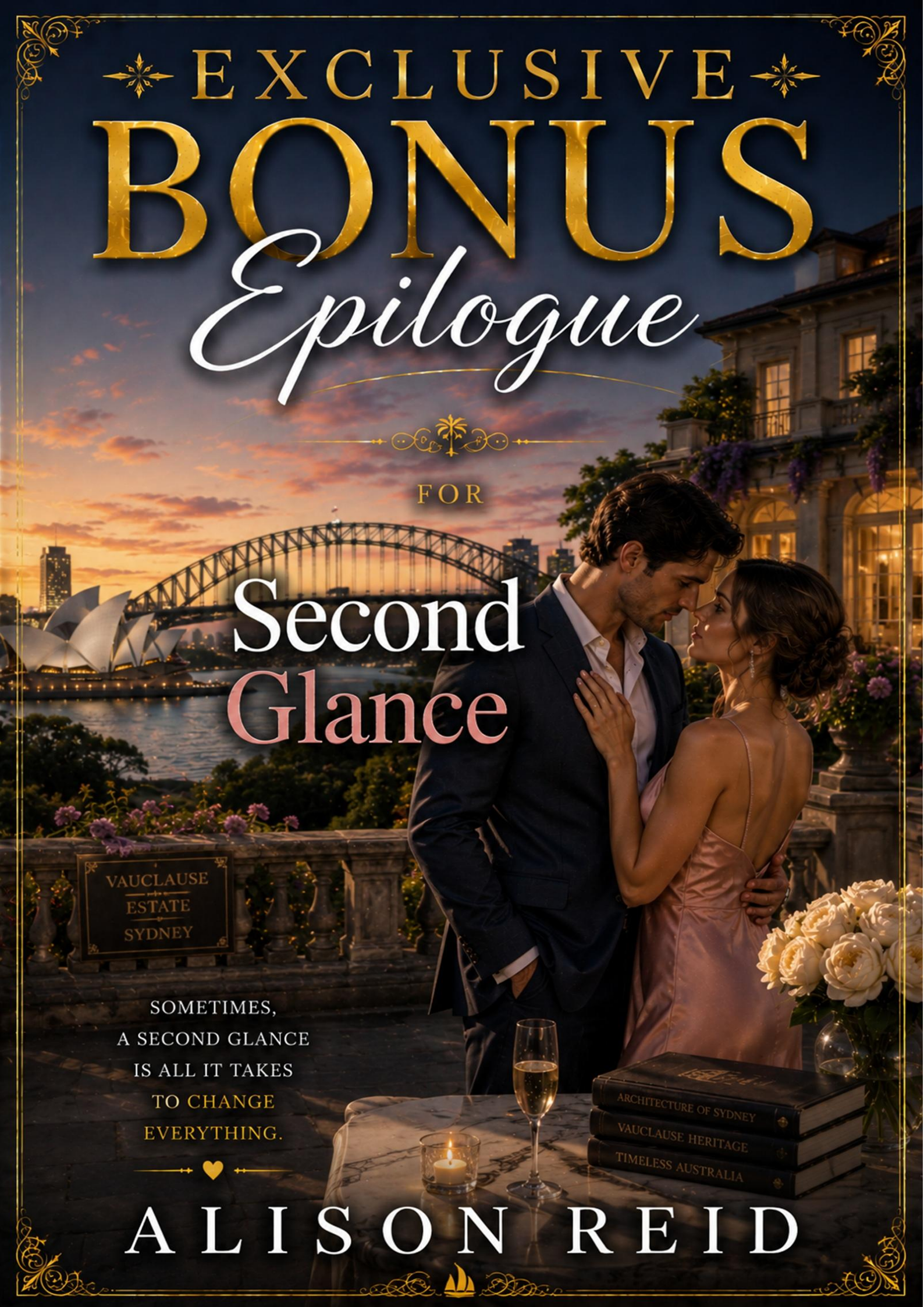
FOR

# Second Glance




SOMETIMES,
A SECOND GLANCE
IS ALL IT TAKES
TO CHANGE
EVERYTHING.

ALISON REID

*Exclusive Bonus Epilogue*

# Second Glance

by Alison Reid

*Twenty Years Later…*

The Roberts house in Bellevue Hill was loud.

Not the elegant, polished kind of loud that came with charity galas or legal celebrations Jackson had spent half his adult life attending. This was family loud. Music drifted through the open doors leading to the terrace, laughter echoed from the pool area, where Christopher was arguing with one of his cousins about football loudly enough for the entire house to hear.

Today's chaos had a reason.

Jessica.

The entire family had gathered to celebrate the engineering award she received the night before. After two decades of relentless hard work, brilliant projects, and groundbreaking designs, Jessica Roberts had officially been recognised as one of the top civil engineers in the country.

And nobody in this house could have been prouder. Especially Jackson.

Jessica stood near the outdoor dining table holding a glass of champagne while Mary fussed over the catering arrangements for at least the tenth time. The late afternoon Sydney sun caught in Jessica's auburn hair, turning it molten gold as laughter danced across her face.

At forty-three, she was breathtaking. Not because she was flawless, but because she was fully herself now.

Confident. Brilliant. Warm. Strong.

The shy eighteen-year-old girl who once hid behind oversized jumpers and self-doubt had grown into a woman who commanded rooms without even trying. And Jackson still looked at her like she hung the moon.

"Mate," Terry muttered beside him near the barbecue, "you've been staring at your wife for twenty straight years."

Jackson didn't even glance away from Jessica. "And?"

Terry barked out a laugh. "You're hopeless."

"Dad's creepy obsessed with Mum," Christopher added as he walked past carrying a plate of food.

Jackson finally looked at his seventeen-year-old son with complete offence. "I beg your pardon?"

Christopher grinned, tall and broad-shouldered like his father but with Jessica's green eyes. "You literally follow her around with your eyes like a security camera."

"That's because your mother is stunning."

"Oh my God," Christopher groaned. "See? This is exactly what I mean."

Terry nearly choked laughing while Jackson smirked unapologetically.

Across the terrace, Jessica glanced over at the sound of laughter and immediately caught Jackson watching her. Her smile softened instantly.

Even now, after twenty years of marriage, the look in his eyes still had the power to make her heart stumble.

"Jessica!"

Phyllis appeared carrying another bottle of champagne, her husband Nathan right behind her. "We need another speech."

Jessica laughed immediately. "Absolutely not."

"Yes," Phyllis insisted dramatically. "You just won one of the most prestigious engineering awards in Australia. We are celebrating properly."

"I already gave a speech last night," Jessica protested.

"And now we want another one because we're emotional," Phyllis declared.

Mary appeared beside them, dabbing suspiciously emotional eyes with a napkin. "I still remember when you came back from Perth at twenty-three."

Jessica smiled softly. "So do I."

John stepped forward then, pride written all over his face as he wrapped an arm around Jessica's shoulders.

"Your father would've been unbelievably proud of you, sweetheart."

Emotion climbed unexpectedly into Jessica's throat. Even after all these years, hearing that still meant everything. Jackson crossed the terrace immediately the second he saw her eyes glass over. Always noticing. Always there. His hand settled instinctively against the small of her back as he looked down at her.

"You okay?"

Jessica smiled up at him softly. "Yeah."

But Jackson still brushed his thumb gently against her waist like he needed the physical reassurance.

Phyllis sighed dramatically toward Nathan. "See? This is why nobody else measures up. These two ruined romance for the rest of us."

Nathan chuckled. "I learned years ago not to compete with Jackson when it comes to romance."

"Smart man," Terry muttered.

Jessica rolled her eyes affectionately. "You all talk about us like we're ridiculous."

"You are ridiculous," Christopher informed her.

Jessica looked up at her husband. Time had added silver at his temples and a little more gravity to his features, but if anything, age had only made him more handsome. Taller than nearly everyone around him, broad-shouldered in a crisp navy shirt with the sleeves rolled to his forearms, Jackson still carried the same commanding presence that used to make courtrooms fall silent.

He looked down at her and smiled.

Nathan caught Jackson staring and snorted. "Mate, you're doing it again."

Christopher looked between them with long-suffering embarrassment. "Dad literally watches Mum like she's going to vanish."

Jackson didn't even look remotely ashamed. "Your mother walks into a room and I forget how to think properly."

"Oh my God," Christopher groaned.

Nathan burst out laughing while Jessica shook her head, smiling into her champagne.

"Still smooth after all these years," she murmured.

Jackson's gaze never left her. "Only for you."

Before Jessica could answer, movement near the back garden caught her attention.

Kylie.

Their fifteen-year-old daughter slipped quietly through the side gate and headed straight for the house. Jessica frowned immediately. Something was wrong.

Kylie normally entered a room like sunlight. Maybe quieter than Christopher, more thoughtful and observant, but always warm. Today her shoulders were hunched, her head lowered beneath the curtain of auburn hair that looked painfully like Jessica's own at that age.

Jessica set her champagne down.

"I'll be back," she murmured softly.

She followed Kylie inside and found her halfway up the staircase, moving far too quickly.

"Kylie?"

Her daughter froze. Jessica's stomach dropped instantly. Kylie had been crying.

"Honey, what happened?"

"Nothing." Kylie's voice cracked. "I'm fine."

Jessica knew that tone. Knew it too well.

"Kylie—"

"I said I'm fine."

Then she disappeared into her bedroom and shut the door. Not slammed. Just closed quietly. Somehow that was worse. Jessica stood frozen at the end of the hall, worry twisting painfully in her chest.

A few moments later, Jackson appeared at the top of the stairs. His expression shifted immediately when he saw her face.

"What happened?"

Jessica swallowed hard. "I don't know."

But even as she said it, she already suspected.

Jackson frowned and moved toward Kylie's bedroom door, knocking gently.

"Kyles?"

Silence.

Then a muffled, "Go away."

Jackson exchanged a glance with Jessica before trying again, softer this time.

"Sweetheart, open the door."

Another long silence. Finally the lock clicked. Kylie stood there in shorts and a T-shirt, mascara smudged beneath green eyes full of humiliation. Jessica's chest physically hurt looking at her.

Jackson stepped inside carefully. "Talk to me."

Kylie folded her arms tightly around herself. "It's stupid."

"If it made you cry, it's not stupid," Jessica said gently.

Kylie stared at the floor for several seconds before speaking.

"I heard Noah talking to his friends at the pool."

Jessica felt herself go cold.

"He said…" Kylie's voice cracked again. "He said I'm nice, but I'm not really the kind of girl boys notice. That I'm too tall and too athletic. Like that's a problem."

Silence filled the room. Jessica stopped breathing. Because suddenly she wasn't looking at her daughter anymore. She was eighteen years old again, shattered outside a kitchen doorway. Beside her, Jackson went completely still.

Kylie laughed weakly through tears. "Which is pathetic because I didn't even know I liked him that much until he said it."

Jessica instinctively stepped forward, but Kylie wiped at her face quickly and shook her head.

"You wouldn't understand."

Jackson answered immediately. Quietly.

"Actually… we would."

Kylie looked at him sceptically.

Jackson sat slowly on the edge of the bed, leaning forward with his forearms resting on his knees. His voice was calm, but Jessica heard the emotion underneath instantly.

“When I was younger,” he said carefully, “I said something cruel about someone. Thoughtless. I didn’t realise how badly words like that could hurt someone until much later.”

Kylie blinked at him. Jessica’s heart started pounding. Jackson lifted his eyes toward his wife, and in that moment she saw it clearly. The guilt he had carried all these years.

Not faded.

Not forgotten.

Still there. Still heavy.

Kylie looked between them in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

Jessica slowly sat beside her daughter on the bed, reaching for her hand. Jackson’s jaw tightened slightly.

“When I was eighteen, I overheard your father say something very similar about me.”

Kylie’s eyes widened in horror.

“What?”

Jessica gave a small, sad smile. “Your father and I didn’t start out as some perfect love story.”

Jackson looked physically pained now.

“I called your mother plain,” he admitted roughly. “And unattractive.”

Kylie stared at him like the world had tilted off its axis.

“You said that about Mum?”

“Yes.”

The honesty in his voice filled the room.

“No excuses. I was arrogant and immature, and I hurt her badly.”

Jessica watched him carefully as he continued.

"I didn't even know she heard me at first. But by the time I realised what I'd done…" His throat worked hard. "I would've done anything to take it back."

Kylie looked at her mother. "And you forgave him?"

Jessica's gaze shifted toward Jackson automatically. Twenty years later and he still looked at her like she was the centre of his world.

Still reached for her hand in crowds.

Still kissed her every morning.

Still looked devastated whenever she was hurting.

And suddenly she thought about every single way he had spent decades loving her loudly.

Consistently.

Completely.

"I did because," Jessica said softly, "he has spent the rest of his life proving I should."

Jackson's eyes closed briefly, like the words physically hit him. Kylie looked emotional again, though differently now.

"But how did you get over hearing something like that?"

Jessica brushed a strand of hair from her daughter's face gently.

"You realise eventually that someone else's inability to see your worth doesn't define your worth."

Jackson nodded immediately. "Exactly."

"And," Jessica added dryly, glancing at her husband, "sometimes boys are idiots."

Kylie laughed unexpectedly through her tears.

"Dad definitely was." She looked at her mother. "You're gorgeous, Mum."

Jessica smiled softly. "Thank you, sweetheart."

Jackson accepted that without argument. "I absolutely agree with that."

A knock sounded at the door before Christopher poked his head inside.

"What's going on?"

Jessica quietly explained what had happened. Christopher's expression darkened immediately as he looked at his sister.

"Do you want me to go sort him out?" he asked darkly.

"Christopher," Jessica warned.

"What? I'll just talk to him."

Jackson almost smiled despite the heaviness in the room. "Son, violence is not the answer."

Christopher folded his arms. "Interesting parenting strategy considering you look two seconds away from hiring a sniper."

Kylie burst into laughter. Even Jackson choked on a laugh at that, and just like that, the tension in the room finally eased.

Jessica held out her hand toward her daughter. "Come on, sweetheart. Do you want to come downstairs?"

Kylie hesitated for a second before finally taking her mother's hand.

Together, the four of them headed downstairs.

* * * * * * * *

Jackson stood alone on the terrace long after everyone else had gone to bed.

The house was finally quiet. Soft wind stirred through the gardens, carrying the scent of jasmine and chlorine from the pool. Sydney glittered in the distance beyond the trees, but Jackson barely noticed any of it.

His mind was still upstairs in Kylie's bedroom. Still hearing her cry.

Not really the kind of girl boys notice.

The words hit him differently now than they would have twenty-five years ago. Because now he knew exactly what careless cruelty could do to someone. How deeply it could cut. How long it could stay.

"You're brooding."

Jessica's voice drifted softly through the darkness behind him.

Jackson turned as she stepped barefoot onto the terrace wearing one of his old dress shirts. Her auburn hair fell loose around her shoulders, slightly messy from sleep, and even after all these years the sight of her still hit him square in the chest.

His wife.

His greatest regret.

His greatest love.

Always both somehow.

Jessica walked toward him slowly, stopping beside the railing.

"Kylie finally fell asleep," she murmured.

Jackson nodded once. "Christopher?"

"Still threatening murder."

That earned the faintest huff of laughter from him.

Jessica glanced sideways at her husband. "You scared him tonight."

Jackson's jaw tightened immediately because he knew exactly who she meant.

Noah.

Good.

"He hurt our daughter."

"He's fifteen."

"He made her cry."

Jessica studied him quietly for several seconds.

"You know," she said softly, "when Kylie said you'd never understand… I think that might've been the first time I realised you still carry it."

Jackson looked away toward the city lights.

"How could I not?"

The honesty in his voice made something ache inside her.

For years after they married, Jackson had apologised endlessly for what he said when they were younger. Sometimes directly. Sometimes in quieter ways.

Through devotion.

Through protectiveness.

Through the way he never let a day pass without making her feel beautiful.

But tonight felt different. Tonight she had finally seen the twenty something version of him buried underneath the polished lawyer and devoted father.

The young man who realised too late that he'd wounded the girl he loved. Jessica stepped closer until their shoulders brushed.

"You were young," she said gently.

Jackson gave a humourless laugh. "I was an ass."

She smiled slightly because at least that part was true.

"You weren't cruel on purpose."

"No," he admitted roughly. "Which almost makes it worse."

Jessica stayed quiet.

Jackson dragged a hand through his hair before speaking again.

"You know what the worst part is?" he asked quietly.

"What?"

"When Kylie cried today…" His voice roughened. "All I could think was thank God you still loved me enough to stay."

"Oh, Jackson," she whispered.

He leaned his forehead against hers.

"I would destroy anyone who made her feel small," he admitted hoarsely. "And I hate knowing I was once the reason you felt that way."

Jessica wrapped both arms around him then, holding him tightly against her.

"You were also the reason I eventually learned what real love looked like."

Jackson shut his eyes. She felt the tension in him finally crack slightly as her fingers slid through his hair.

"You know what Christopher asked me earlier?" she murmured.

Jackson opened his eyes. "What?"

"He asked if I ever regretted forgiving you."

Jackson visibly stilled. Jessica smiled softly.

"I told him forgiving you was the easiest decision I ever made."

His throat worked hard.

"And do you know what our son said?"

"What?"

"He said, 'Yeah… Dad's kind of obsessed with you.'"

A surprised laugh escaped Jackson.

Jessica grinned. "Christopher also said you look at me like a man who won the lottery."

"I do."

The answer came instantly. Without hesitation.

Jessica's heart squeezed painfully.

Twenty years later and he still said things like that with complete sincerity. Still looked at her like she was magic.

Jackson's hands settled at her waist as his gaze moved slowly across her face.

"You know something?" he murmured.

"What?"

"You were never plain."

Emotion climbed unexpectedly into her throat.

"You were the most beautiful girl in every room. I just wasn't mature enough to recognise it yet."

Jessica blinked rapidly as tears filled her eyes.

"Jackson—"

"No," he said softly. "I need you to hear this."

His thumb brushed gently beneath her eye.

"I have loved you for most of my life, Jessica Roberts. Even before I understood what that meant." His voice lowered further. "And there has never been a single day since that I haven't thanked God you gave me a second chance."

Jessica kissed him before he could say another word.

Slowly.

Tenderly.

With twenty-five years of history between them. When they finally pulled apart, Jackson rested his forehead against hers again.

Inside the house, Christopher suddenly yelled:

"Dad! Mum! Kylie stole my charger again!"

Jessica burst into laughter.

Jackson groaned dramatically toward the sky. "Romance dies the second you have teenagers."

Jessica smiled against his mouth. "Not ours."

And judging by the way Jackson kissed her again beneath the soft Sydney night sky, she was absolutely right.

## — The End —

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