EXCLUSIVE

BONUS Epilogue

FOR

Shadows of the Past

SOME SCARS FADE WITH TIME. OTHERS LEAVE SHADOWS THAT NEVER DO.

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Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Shadows of the Past

by Alison Reid

Five Years Later…

"Daniel Collins!"

Nathan's voice echoed across the estate.

Amanda looked up from her place beneath the oak tree and immediately pressed her lips together to hide a smile.

Across the lawn, their six-year-old son sprinted past at full speed, covered from head to toe in mud. His dark hair stuck up in every direction, and his boots left brown footprints in his wake.

Behind him charged Nathan. Or rather, attempted to charge.

"You get back here this instant!"

Daniel shrieked with laughter.

"No!"

"Daniel!"

"You can't catch me!"

Amanda set aside her embroidery and watched her husband—the powerful businessman feared throughout Colorado—lose a race against a child. Again.

Daniel darted around a fountain.

Nathan followed.

A moment later, he slipped.

Amanda gasped.

Nathan windmilled his arms dramatically before somehow regaining his balance.

From the veranda, Rosa laughed so hard she nearly dropped the basket of laundry she was carrying.

"Careful, Mr Collins!" she called. "Wouldn't want a three-year-old to embarrass you."

"He already is," Sean replied from beside her.

Nathan shot them both a dark look before continuing the pursuit.

"Traitors," he muttered.

Daniel raced toward the stables.

Nathan groaned.

"Not the horses."

"Last one there is old!" Daniel shouted.

"I am not old!"

Amanda laughed outright.

The sound carried across the lawn, and Nathan stopped long enough to glance at her.

The sight stole his breath, just as it always had. Five years of marriage had changed many things. Amanda no longer looked over her shoulder waiting for danger. The sadness that had once lived in her eyes had faded. She smiled easily now. Laughed often. Loved without fear.

And every time Nathan looked at her, he was reminded of how close he had come to losing her forever.

"Daddy!"

Nathan blinked.

Daniel had stopped running and was now standing beside the paddock fence.

“What?”

The boy grinned.

“You’re looking at mummy again.”

Nathan narrowed his eyes.

“Yes I was.”

“Again?”

“Again.”

Daniel sighed dramatically.

“You always do that.”

Amanda laughed harder.

Nathan crossed the remaining distance and finally scooped his son into his arms.

“I caught you.”

Daniel squirmed.

“Only because I let you.”

“Of course you did.”

They made their way back toward Amanda together.

Nathan dropped onto the blanket beside her with an exaggerated groan.

“I’m too old for this.”

“You're thirty-seven.”

“Exactly.”

Amanda rolled her eyes.

Daniel immediately climbed into her lap, smearing muddy handprints across her dress. Neither of them cared.

Nathan rested a hand against Amanda’s swollen stomach, his expression softening instantly.

“How are my girls today?”

Amanda laughed and covered his hand with hers.

“We're doing well.”

The baby kicked beneath his palm, and Nathan’s entire face lit up. Daniel immediately pressed his ear against Amanda’s stomach.

“Do you think it's a boy or a girl?”

Nathan exchanged a glance with Amanda.

“I think it's a girl.”

“I hope it's a boy,” Daniel announced.

“Do you?” Amanda asked.

Daniel nodded seriously.

“Then we can race horses together.”

Nathan chuckled.

“I'll be happy either way.”

Amanda raised an eyebrow.

“That’s not what you told Rosa yesterday.”

Nathan groaned.

“Rosa has become entirely too interested in my private conversations.”

“Meaning?” Amanda asked, smiling.

He rubbed the back of his neck.

“Meaning... if I was allowed one wish, I'd like a little girl.”

Amanda's smile softened.

“A girl?”

Nathan nodded.

“Daniel already has you wrapped around his finger.” He glanced down at her stomach. “I'd like to know what it feels like to have a daughter wrapped around mine.”

Amanda laughed.

“I suspect she'd have you completely helpless.”

“She would.”

“Good.”

Nathan pressed a kiss to her temple.

“But truly, Amanda, I don't care. Boy or girl, healthy is all that matters.”

His hand remained over her stomach, gentle and protective.

After everything they had lost—everything they had survived—that was the only thing either of them truly wished for.

In just a few weeks, they would meet the newest member of their family. Nathan couldn't wait.

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The sun dipped lower on the horizon, bathing the estate in gold. Amanda started to slowly rose from the blanket.

“I think it's time to go inside.”

Daniel groaned dramatically.

“Do we have to?”

“Yes,” Amanda and Nathan said in unison.

Daniel scowled.

Nathan laughed, scooped his son into his arms, and stood. Then he extended a hand toward Amanda.

She took it. The moment she reached her feet, she froze. A warm rush spread down her legs. Amanda blinked.

Nathan frowned.

Amanda looked down. Then back up at him.

“Oh.”

Nathan's eyes widened.

“Oh?”

“My water just broke.”

For a heartbeat, nobody moved.

Daniel's mouth fell open.

“Mummy...”

Nathan stared at Amanda. Amanda stared at Nathan.

Rosa appeared in the doorway of the house and took one look at their faces.

“Oh, for heaven's sake,” she muttered. “The baby's coming.”

Chaos erupted instantly.

Daniel looked delighted.

Nathan looked as though someone had shot him.

And Amanda couldn't stop laughing.

* * * * * * * *

The next couple of hours were a blur of activity.

Rosa immediately took charge.

“Sean, get the doctor.”

“Already gone.”

“Good. Anna, boil water.”

“Already doing it.”

“Nathan, stop hovering.”

“I am not hovering.”

“You are pacing holes into my floor.”

Nathan stopped pacing. For approximately three seconds. Then he started again.

Amanda sat propped up in bed, one hand resting on her stomach as another contraction rolled through her. She breathed through it steadily.

Across the room, Daniel sat in a chair clutching his favourite toy horse. His eyes were enormous.

"Is Mummy dying?"

Amanda immediately shook her head.

"No, sweetheart."

"Then why is everyone running?"

No one seemed to have an answer for that. Rosa pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Because your father has convinced everyone the world is ending."

"It might be ending," Nathan muttered.

Amanda laughed despite herself. A contraction hit. She immediately stopped laughing.

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Several hours later, the house had fallen into an anxious hush.

The doctor had arrived.

Daniel had finally been persuaded to go to bed after extracting a solemn promise that someone would wake him when the baby arrived.

The candles burned low.

Outside, darkness blanketed the estate.

Inside, Nathan sat beside Amanda's bed holding her hand. He hadn't left her side for hours. His thumb brushed over her knuckles.

"You're doing beautifully."

Amanda shot him a look.

“You're not the one pushing.”

“Fair point.”

Another contraction hit.

Nathan wisely stopped talking.

The doctor moved closer.

“Almost there now, Mrs Collins.”

Amanda nodded.

Exhaustion tugged at every muscle in her body, but determination burned stronger. She had survived far worse than this. One final push. Then another.

And suddenly—

A cry shattered the silence. Tiny. Perfect. Beautiful.

The room froze. For one suspended heartbeat, nobody moved.

Then the doctor smiled.

“Congratulations.”

Relief slammed into Nathan so hard his knees nearly gave out.

The doctor carefully lifted the tiny bundle.

“You have a daughter.”

The words stole the air from Nathan's lungs.

A daughter.

For a moment he simply stared.

Amanda looked equally stunned. Then tears filled her eyes.

The doctor placed the baby gently against Amanda's chest. The tiny infant immediately settled against her mother.

Amanda let out a shaky laugh that dissolved into tears.

“Oh, sweetheart.”

Nathan moved closer. He looked down at the tiny face nestled against Amanda. Dark wisps of hair. Tiny fingers. Perfect little features. His daughter.

His throat tightened painfully.

Amanda looked up at him.

“Well?”

Nathan swallowed hard.

“She is absolutely beautiful.”

His voice cracked on the final word.

Amanda smiled.

“Would you like to hold her?”

Nathan looked genuinely terrified.

The doctor chuckled.

“Most fathers are.”

Very carefully, Amanda transferred the baby into his arms. Nathan held her as though she were made of spun glass. The baby yawned. His heart instantly surrendered.

“Well,” he whispered.

A tiny hand wrapped around one of his fingers. Nathan's eyes widened. Amanda burst out laughing.

“Oh dear.”

“What?”

“You lasted less than ten seconds.”

Nathan didn't even try to deny it. He stared down at his daughter. Completely captivated. Completely helpless. Exactly as Amanda had predicted.

The bedroom door suddenly flew open.

“Mummy!”

Daniel raced into the room wearing his nightclothes. He skidded to a halt beside the bed.

“Is the baby here?”

Nathan carefully turned so his son could see.

Daniel stared.

“A girl?”

“A girl,” Amanda confirmed.

His brow furrowed.

“But I wanted a brother.”

The room fell silent. Then the baby let out a tiny squeak. Daniel immediately smiled.

“Oh.”

He moved closer.

“She can still learn to ride horses.”

Nathan laughed.

“Yes.”

Daniel gently touched one tiny hand.

“What's her name?”

Amanda looked at Nathan. Nathan looked at Amanda. The answer had been decided months ago.

“Elena,” Amanda whispered softly.

The name settled over the room like a blessing. A tribute to the mother Amanda had lost. A promise for the future.

Nathan leaned down and kissed Amanda's forehead. Then he kissed his daughter's tiny head.

For so many years Amanda had believed she would never have this. A family. A home. A future free from fear. Yet here they were. Nathan beside her. Daniel grinning proudly. Little Elena sleeping peacefully in her father's arms.

And for the first time in her life, Amanda knew something with absolute certainty.

The shadows of the past no longer had any power over her.

She was finally, completely, home.

— The End —

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