EXCLUSIVE

BONUS Epilogue

FOR

The Playboy's Surrender

HE LIVED FOR FREEDOM.
UNTIL HE FOUND HER.
NOW, HE'LL GIVE HER EVERYTHING.

ALISON REID

Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

The Playboy's Surrender

by Alison Reid

Twenty Years Later…

Jack let himself into the London apartment just after six.

The penthouse was unusually quiet.

Olivia had taken Ethan shopping for a new suit for a school formal, which meant several hours of peace and—if he was lucky—minimal damage to his credit card. If Olivia had anything to say about it, she'd come home having spent half of what he'd expected.

Sixteen years later, Jack still hadn't managed to cure her of the belief that most things cost too much and that nobody needed a watch worth more than a small car.

He loosened his tie as he crossed the living room.

Then stopped.

Seventeen-year-old Jessica was curled up in the window seat overlooking Hyde Park, completely absorbed in a book.

Not unusual.

What was unusual was the book. The faded green hardback looked painfully familiar. Jack recognised it instantly.

"Where did you get that?"

Jessica glanced up.

"Oh. Hi, Dad."

She held up the book.

"It was in Mum's study."

Jack smiled despite himself.

"Little Women."

"Yeah."

She turned it around.

"The pages are practically falling out."

"That's because your mother has read it about fifty times."

Jessica laughed.

Then her expression changed.

"There's something written in the front."

Jack felt his chest tighten before she even showed him. The inscription. He hadn't seen it in years.

Jessica opened the cover and read aloud.

"Happy birthday, Liv.

No diamonds. Just words—like the ones that shaped you. Maybe someday, we'll write a few of our own."

Silence settled between them.

Jessica looked up.

"Dad?"

"Hmm?"

"What did you mean by no diamonds?"

Jack laughed.

"That birthday I gave your mother a diamond bracelet worth a small fortune and she gave it back to me."

Jessica stared at him. Actually stared.

Like he'd suddenly grown a second head.

"She what?"

“She gave it back.”

“Why?”

Jack dropped onto the opposite end of the window seat and loosened his cufflinks.

“Because she’s your mother.”

“That doesn’t explain anything.”

“It explains everything.”

Jessica shook her head.

“No woman gives back diamonds.”

“Your mother does.”

“But… why?”

Jack smiled, remembering.

“She told me she appreciated the thought, but that I didn’t need to spend that much money on her.”

Jessica looked horrified.

“That’s insane.”

“That’s exactly what I thought.”

“What happened to the bracelet?”

“It’s in the safe.”

Jessica blinked.

“You kept it?”

“Of course I kept it. Your mother wore it once.”

Jessica laughed.

“Mum really gave back a bracelet worth a fortune?”

“She did.”

“Wow.”

Jack leaned back against the window frame.

"That book is what I gave her instead. A first edition of Little Women."

Jessica looked down at the battered book in her hands.

"This one?"

"Yes. That one. And she appreciated it more than the diamonds."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

Jessica opened the cover again, running her fingers over the inscription.

"So you bought her a ridiculously expensive bracelet and she preferred a book?"

"Correct."

"And you still married her?"

Jack barked out a laugh.

"Of course I did. Every woman I met before your mother was interested in what I could give her. Your mother was different."

Jessica studied him for a moment.

Then her gaze dropped back to the inscription.

The teasing faded from her expression.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"How did you and Mum actually meet?"

Jack went still.

Outside, the evening sun cast long golden shadows across Hyde Park.

Of all the questions he'd expected when he walked through the door, that wasn't one of them.

Jessica tucked her legs beneath her and closed the book.

"Well?"

Jack looked at the worn cover.

At the faded corners Olivia had carried halfway around the world.

At the book he'd once found abandoned on a bed when he thought he'd lost her forever.

A slow smile touched his mouth.

"We met because your mother was in love with somebody else."

Jessica's eyes widened.

"What?"

"Mm-hmm."

"What?"

Jack nodded.

"That's usually the reaction."

"Dad!"

He laughed.

"Your mother started working at one of my island resorts in the South Pacific because she thought she was in love with the boy next door."

Jessica looked scandalised.

"Mum did not."

"She absolutely did."

"No way."

"Way."

Jessica stared at him for another second before scrambling closer.

"Start from the beginning."

Jack looked out across London for a moment.

Then he smiled.

And for the first time in years, he found himself thinking about a faded sunflower dress, a shy girl sitting alone on a beach, and the exact moment his life had changed forever.

But before he could say a word, the apartment door opened.

"Don't be ridiculous, Ethan. He was not," Olivia said, laughing as she stepped inside.

"He was, Mum," Ethan said firmly, following behind her carrying several shopping bags. "If I hadn't been there, that guy would've swept you straight off to his apartment."

Olivia stopped dead and stared at her fourteen-year-old son in horror.

"Ethan James Alden!"

"What?" Ethan asked innocently. "It's true. He was practically undressing you with his eyes."

Jack rose slowly from the window seat.

"Excuse me?"

Ethan glanced over.

"Oh. Hi, Dad."

He dumped the shopping bags on the sofa and flopped down beside them.

"Mum got propositioned. Again."

Jack blinked.

"Again?"

"He is being ridiculous," Olivia muttered.

Jessica sat bolt upright.

"Again?"

"Oh, this just keeps getting better."

"It really doesn't," Olivia said.

"It really does," Jessica disagreed.

Jack folded his arms across his chest.

"Who propositioned my wife?"

"Nobody propositioned me," Olivia protested.

Ethan snorted.

"Mum, he literally asked if you wanted to have dinner with him in Paris."

"He was joking."

"He was absolutely not joking."

Jessica looked delighted.

"Paris?"

"Paris," Ethan confirmed.

Jack's expression darkened.

"Interesting."

Olivia pointed a finger at both children.

"Not one word."

"Dad's doing the face," Ethan observed.

"What face?" Olivia asked.

"The jealous face."

"I do not have a jealous face," Jack said.

All three of them looked at him.

"You definitely have a jealous face," Jessica said.

"It's actually kind of scary," Ethan added.

Jack looked at his wife. Olivia was trying—and failing—not to laugh.

Traitor.

"I leave you alone for one afternoon," he said dryly.

Olivia crossed the room, slipped her arms around his waist, and kissed his cheek.

"Poor thing."

"You were being propositioned."

"I bought a suit with our son."

"Apparently both things happened."

Jessica groaned.

"Can we please get back to the part where Mum was in love with somebody else when she met Dad?"

Olivia froze. Slowly, she turned toward Jack.

Jack smiled.

"Oh yes," he said. "We were just getting to that."

"Mum was in love with someone else?" Ethan asked, laughing. "Dad must've hated that."

Olivia dropped onto the sofa.

"I didn't know your father then."

"Tell us, Dad," Jessica demanded.

Jack settled into the armchair opposite them.

"I first saw your mother making doe eyes at a surf instructor."

Olivia pointed at him.

"I was not making doe eyes."

"You absolutely were."

"I was twenty-three."

"You were hopeless."

Jessica grinned.

"Oh, this is amazing."

Olivia groaned.

"It gets worse."

"It does," Jack agreed. "The surf instructor didn't even notice she existed."

Olivia folded her arms.

"Thank you for bringing that up."

"It's relevant to the story."

"It really isn't."

“It is,” Jack said. “Because your mother spent years in love with him.”

“And he didn’t even notice I existed,” Olivia muttered.

Jack’s expression softened.

“His loss.”

Olivia tried not to smile.

Jessica noticed.

“So what happened?”

“I offered to help her make him notice her.”

Ethan immediately burst out laughing.

“No, you didn’t.”

“I did.”

“Dad, that’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Jessica nodded.

“Seriously. Why would you do that?”

Jack sighed.

“In my defence, it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“It was a terrible idea,” Jessica said.

“It was.”

“Possibly your worst.”

“Almost certainly.”

Ethan shook his head.

“That can’t be true.”

“What can’t?”

“That Mum was struggling to get attention from some random guy.”

Olivia looked suspicious.

“Ethan.”

“I’m serious.”

“Don’t.”

“Every man who comes into contact with you falls in love with you.”

Olivia stared at him.

“Excuse me?”

Jessica snorted.

“Oh, Mum. It’s true.”

“It is not.”

“It absolutely is,” Jessica said. “Last week, Chloe’s dad practically asked you out.”

Olivia nearly choked.

“He did not.”

“He did.”

“He was being polite.”

“He asked if you’d ever get sick of Dad.”

Jack’s head snapped up.

“He what?”

Jessica immediately regretted speaking.

“Uh…”

Jack sat forward.

“Which friend?”

“Dad—”

“Jessica.”

She winced.

“Chloe.”

“Surname.”

“Dad!”

“Surname, Jessica.”

Ethan was laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes. Olivia buried her face in her hands.

"I am never leaving this apartment again."

"You're definitely not meeting Chloe's father again," Jack said.

"Jack!"

"What?" he asked innocently. "Apparently every man who comes into contact with my wife falls in love with her."

"That's not what he said."

"It's exactly what he said."

Ethan pointed at his father.

"See? Jealous face."

"There is no jealous face."

"There it is again," Jessica said.

And for the next ten minutes, nobody learned another thing about how Jack and Olivia met because all four of them were too busy arguing about whether Jack Alden was still possessive after sixteen years of marriage.

Finally, Jessica threw her hands up.

"Can we get back to the story?"

"Yes, please," Ethan agreed. "Did the surfer guy ever notice you, Mum?"

Jack sighed.

"Yes," he said grudgingly. "Eventually he did."

Jessica grinned.

"And?"

"And by then I'd realised I'd made a huge mistake."

Ethan let out a bark of laughter.

"I bet you had."

Jack shot him a look.

"Thank you for your sympathy."

"Anytime, Dad."

Olivia smiled and tucked her feet beneath her on the sofa.

"To be fair, by then I'd realised Wyatt was a bit of a jerk."

"A bit?" Jack repeated.

Olivia laughed.

"Okay, a lot."

"That's better."

Jessica looked between them.

"Wait. So Dad was helping you get another guy?"

"Yes."

"While secretly liking you?"

"Yes."

Jessica stared at her father.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Thank you," Ethan said. "I've been saying that."

Jack rubbed a hand over his face.

"You're all very supportive."

"Dad," Ethan said, shaking his head. "You literally helped Mum date your competition."

"I am aware of that."

"And then acted surprised when it backfired."

"I am also aware of that."

Olivia reached over and squeezed his hand.

"In his defence, he didn't know me very well yet."

Jack looked at her.

"No," he said softly. "If I'd known you better, I never would've risked it."

The room fell quiet for a moment. Jessica groaned dramatically.

"There they go."

"Being gross again," Ethan agreed.

Olivia laughed.

Jack didn't bother denying it. Jessica rolled her eyes.

"So you realised you liked each other, got together, and lived happily ever after. End of story."

Olivia and Jack exchanged a look.

"Not quite," Olivia said.

Jessica immediately sat up straighter.

"What do you mean, not quite?"

Olivia took a sip of water.

"I caught your father kissing another woman."

"Dad!"

Both Ethan and Jessica yelled it at exactly the same time. Jack looked personally offended.

"I was not kissing another woman."

"You absolutely were."

"I absolutely was not."

"You were standing on your balcony with a beautiful blonde's lips on yours."

Jessica pointed dramatically.

"That is kissing, Dad."

"She kissed me."

"Dad," Ethan said, shaking his head. "That's a really lame excuse."

Olivia smiled triumphantly.

"See?"

Jack looked around the room. Not a single ally.

"In my defence, I was attempting to remove her."

"With your mouth?" Jessica asked.

Olivia choked on a laugh. Jack closed his eyes.

"This family is impossible."

"What did you do, Mum?" Ethan asked.

Olivia's smile widened.

"I left."

Jack looked genuinely pained at the memory.

"Oh, she left."

"I got on a boat."

Jessica looked horrified.

"You left the country?"

"I left the island."

"Without talking to Dad?"

"Yes."

Ethan stared at his father.

"What did you do?"

Jack leaned back in his chair.

"For approximately three hours, I thought I'd lost her forever."

The laughter vanished. Even Olivia softened. Jessica blinked.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"He was miserable," Olivia admitted.

"I was heartbroken." Jack pointed at her. "You abandoned me."

Olivia laughed.

"That woman said she was your fiancée."

"Fiancée?" Jessica repeated.

"Yes." Olivia looked at the children. "She walked into reception and demanded to see your father. When the receptionist asked who she should announce, she said, 'Tell him his fiancée is here.'"

Ethan's mouth fell open. Jessica looked from her mother to her father.

"Dad."

Jack groaned.

"In my defence—"

"No," Jessica interrupted. "You don't get a defence."

"I do actually."

"You really don't."

Olivia folded her arms, looking far too pleased with herself.

"I thought your father didn't care about me as much as I cared about him."

Jack winced.

"Instead, I found out he apparently had a fiancée."

"An ex-fiancée," Jack corrected.

"A detail I was unaware of at the time."

Ethan stared at his father.

"You forgot to mention the fiancée?"

"I did not forget."

"You forgot."

"I was strategically avoiding the topic."

Jessica barked out a laugh.

"That sounds worse."

"It was worse," Olivia agreed.

Jack rubbed a hand over his face.

"I was planning to tell her."

"When?"

"Soon."

Olivia raised an eyebrow.

"Define soon."

"Before I proposed?"

The room went silent. Jessica dropped her head into her hands.

"Oh my God."

Ethan pointed at his father.

"You were going to propose before mentioning the fiancée?"

Jack considered it.

"When you put it like that, it does sound problematic."

"Problematic?" Jessica repeated. "Dad, that's insane."

Olivia smiled sweetly.

"Which is why I got on a boat."

"And left me to suffer," Jack muttered.

"You deserved to suffer."

"Harsh."

"Accurate."

The room fell silent for a beat. Then Ethan nodded solemnly.

"Yeah, Mum was right."

For the second time that evening, Jack found himself completely outnumbered.

"Well," he said, "I chased her down, found her, and begged for forgiveness."

"And I forgave him," Olivia said.

Jack reached for her hand automatically, his thumb brushing across her knuckles.

"I thank God every day that she did."

Olivia's eyes softened. Sixteen years later and he still looked at her like that. Ethan groaned loudly.

"There they go again."

Jessica immediately threw a cushion at him.

"Shh."

The cushion bounced off his shoulder.

"This is beautiful."

"It's gross," Ethan informed her.

"It's romantic."

"It's embarrassing."

Olivia laughed.

Jack rose from his chair and crossed the room. Without a word, he pulled Olivia into his arms. She smiled automatically, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"I love you," he said.

Her expression softened.

"I love you too."

Jack nodded, apparently satisfied. Then he looked at Jessica.

"However, from this moment forward, your friends' fathers are no longer permitted to speak to my wife."

"Jack!" Olivia laughed.

"That's fair," Ethan said.

"It is not fair," Olivia protested.

Jessica was grinning.

"Dad, are you seriously jealous of Chloe's father?"

"No."

"You are."

"I am exercising reasonable caution."

"Dad."

"He asked your mother if she'd ever get tired of me."

Olivia buried her face against his chest.

"I wish Jessica never told you that."

"Too late."

Jessica laughed. Ethan shook his head.

"Jealous face."

"There is no jealous face."

"There it is," both children said together.

The room erupted into laughter. Jack looked down at the woman in his arms. Sixteen years. Two children. A lifetime he never would have found if a shy girl in a sunflower dress hadn't wandered into his world.

Olivia looked up and caught him staring.

"What?"

Jack smiled.

"Just thinking about how lucky I got."

And somehow, after all these years, she was still the best thing that had ever happened to him.

— The End —

Ready for another happily-ever-after?

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

👉 **Browse my books on Amazon**