WIFE IN NAME ONLY

BY ALISON REID

# EXCLUSIVE *Bonus* EPILOGUE

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The ballroom glittered beneath thousands of crystal lights, gold and ivory roses cascading from towering centrepieces while a live orchestra played softly near the dance floor. Manhattan shimmered beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, the skyline sparkling like scattered diamonds against the dark velvet sky.

Their anniversary party was excessive. Hudson had insisted on that.

"Eighteen years deserves something unforgettable," he'd told Renee while personally approving every detail like a hostile corporate takeover.

Their children had rolled their eyes appropriately.

Now sixteen-year-old Charlotte Waterford lounged dramatically across one of the velvet sofas on the terrace, her champagne-coloured gown pooled around her like liquid silk. She had Renee's elegance but Hudson's sharp blue eyes—dangerous in combination.

Beside her, fourteen-year-old Henry leaned back in his chair, already taller than most adults, dark-haired and quietly observant in the exact same way his father had once been.

"Okay," Charlotte announced, stealing another chocolate-covered strawberry from the dessert tray, "I need the real story."

Renee looked up from her wine with amusement. "The real story?"

"Yes," Charlotte said. "Not the polished magazine version Dad gives reporters where he says you were 'mutually aligned in vision and values.'"

Henry snorted into his drink. Across the ballroom, Hudson glanced over suspiciously, as though he sensed he was being discussed.

"He actually said that?" Renee asked.

"Word for word," Charlotte confirmed. "It sounded like a shareholder presentation."

"It was accurate," Hudson said smoothly as he approached, one hand sliding possessively around Renee's waist before he kissed her temple.

Even after eighteen years, the touch looked instinctive. Necessary. Charlotte gagged theatrically.

"See? This. You two are disgustingly in love. Nobody believes you started as a normal couple."

Hudson lifted a brow.

"We didn't."

That got their full attention immediately. Henry straightened.

"Wait. What?"

Renee laughed softly.

"Your father just enjoys causing drama."

"I learned from the best."

Hudson's fingers tightened slightly against her hip. Charlotte narrowed her eyes.

"No, seriously. How did you fall in love?"

For a moment, neither Renee nor Hudson answered. The orchestra swelled softly in the background while guests moved across the dance floor beyond them. Eighteen years of marriage sat quietly between them now—not cold and hollow like the beginning, but rich with history. With survival. With hard-earned devotion.

Renee glanced up at Hudson.

"You tell it."

Hudson looked almost offended.

"Why me?"

"Because your version is always unintentionally ridiculous."

Henry leaned forward immediately.

"This should be good."

Hudson exhaled slowly, though there was amusement in his eyes now.

"Fine. Your mother was twenty-five. Brilliant. Terrifying. Entirely too good at finance."

Renee smiled into her wine.

"And completely in love with your father," Charlotte guessed instantly.

Hudson looked down at Renee.

"Painfully so, apparently."

"You knew?" Henry asked.

"Not at first," Renee admitted. "Your father was emotionally unavailable enough to qualify as a natural disaster."

Charlotte burst out laughing. Hudson looked unimpressed.

"I was focused."

"You were impossible," Renee corrected gently.

His expression softened instantly at her voice, the shift so automatic their children noticed it immediately.

"There," Charlotte said, pointing dramatically. "That thing Dad does with his face when Mum talks. That's what I'm talking about."

Hudson ignored her completely. Henry frowned thoughtfully.

"So how did you actually get together?"

Renee hesitated. Hudson answered quietly.

"Your great-grandfather arranged our marriage."

Silence. Charlotte blinked.

"I'm sorry—what?"

"It was supposed to protect the company after he died," Renee explained carefully. "And protect me."

"You had an arranged marriage?" Henry asked, horrified, and fascinated at once.

Hudson nodded once. "Your mother agreed because she loved her grandfather."

"And because I was an idiot," Renee added dryly.

Charlotte stared between them. "But… you love each other."

"Now we do," Hudson said.

The quiet certainty in his voice made Renee glance at him again. Even after all these years, there were moments when the way he looked at her still stole the breath from her lungs.

Henry frowned.

"Wait. You didn't love each other at first?"

Renee nearly choked on her wine. Hudson looked dead serious.

"Your mother loved me. I was simply too arrogant to notice."

Charlotte gasped dramatically.

"Dad."

"It's true," Renee admitted softly. "I thought he barely tolerated me."

Hudson gave a low scoff.

"I was obsessed with you."

"You ignored me for six months."

"I was trying not to want you."

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard," Charlotte informed him.

Hudson pointed at her.

"And yet you inherited my attitude."

Henry looked at Renee carefully.

"So, when did you know he loved you?"

Before Hudson could answer, the terrace doors slid open behind them. Marcus Blackwell walked out first with a whiskey in hand, Jasmine beside him in a shimmering navy gown while Vivian and Greg followed behind them. Marcus glanced around the group suspiciously.

"What is this meeting about?" he asked dryly. "Because if it's an intervention, I'd like legal representation."

Henry grinned.

"I just asked Dad when he realised he loved Mum."

Vivian immediately snorted.

"After she left his sorry arse."

Renee nearly choked on her champagne. Hudson looked deeply offended.

"Vivian."

"Oh please," Vivian said, waving a dismissive hand. "You were unbearable back then. Moody. Brooding. Wandering around Manhattan looking like a billionaire funeral director."

Charlotte burst into laughter.

"Ah, now we're getting the real story."

Marcus took a slow sip of whiskey, eyes glittering with amusement. "What was that guy's name again? The one circling Renee after she left you?"

Hudson's jaw visibly tightened. Jasmine laughed immediately.

"Oh no."

Vivian snapped her fingers.

"Dr Elias Chen."

Marcus pointed dramatically.

"That's right. The surgeon."

"Mum," Charlotte gasped, delighted, "you could've been a doctor's wife."

Renee smiled innocently over the rim of her glass.

"Apparently."

Hudson stared at his wife.

"You enjoyed this entirely too much."

"Oh, she absolutely did," Vivian informed the children happily. "Your mother suddenly started glowing after she moved out. New wardrobe. Sleeping again. Smiling. Then this gorgeous surgeon started sending flowers to her office."

Henry looked horrified.

"Dad let Mum date another guy?"

"Let?"

Renee repeated sweetly.

Hudson murmured something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like, "I was trying not to commit a felony."

Marcus started laughing so hard he nearly spilled his drink. Charlotte looked between them eagerly.

"Wait, wait. Dad was jealous?"

Hudson gave her a flat look.

"Violently."

Renee folded her arms.

"Funny. At the time you pretended not to care."

"Because I was an idiot," Hudson admitted.

Vivian nodded immediately.

"Catastrophically stupid."

Greg finally spoke up from beside her.

"In fairness, he did look dead inside for about two straight months."

"That bad?"

Henry asked. Marcus barked out a laugh.

"Your father showed up at my apartment at midnight once because Elias Chen had taken your mother to dinner."

Hudson closed his eyes briefly.

"Marcus."

"No, no," Charlotte said excitedly. "Continue immediately."

Marcus grinned maliciously.

"He walked into my apartment, poured himself a drink, and said—and I quote—'I can't believe she said yes to him.'"

Jasmine covered her mouth laughing. Renee looked delighted.

"You never told me that."

"There are many things I hoped would die with Marcus," Hudson groaned.

"But they didn't," Marcus said cheerfully.

Henry looked at his father carefully now.

"You really thought Mum would leave you?"

Hudson gave a short, humourless laugh.

"I didn't think. She did."

Vivian lifted her champagne immediately.

"She divorced him."

Henry and Charlotte turned to Renee so fast it was almost violent.

"What?" they said together.

Renee tried not to laugh at their horrified expressions.

"I did," she confirmed calmly.

Charlotte looked scandalised.

"You divorced Dad?"

"Technically annulled," Vivian corrected helpfully. "Your mother dumped him spectacularly."

Hudson narrowed his eyes.

"You take entirely too much joy in one of the darkest periods of my life."

"Because you deserved it," Vivian replied without hesitation.

Marcus nodded.

"Fully deserved."

Henry stared at his father.

"Dad… Mum divorced you and you still got her back?"

Hudson looked at Renee, his expression softening in that way it only ever did for her.

"It was the worst few months of my life," he said quietly. "Until I married her again."

Charlotte blinked rapidly.

"Again?"

"Oh, the second wedding was much better," Jasmine said immediately. "There was actual love involved that time instead of corporate trauma."

Renee laughed softly as Hudson slid his arm around her waist.

"The first wedding barely counted," he said. "Your mother deserved a real one."

Charlotte looked deeply invested now.

"Wait. So, Dad married you twice?"

Renee smiled.

"The second time he cried during the vows."

Hudson looked betrayed.

"Renee."

Marcus nearly choked on his whiskey laughing. Henry looked stunned.

"You cried?"

"He absolutely cried," Vivian confirmed happily. "Your father looked like someone had cracked open his ribs in public."

Hudson sighed like a man abandoned by civilisation. Charlotte grinned wickedly.

"I need video footage immediately."

"There will be no footage," Hudson informed her.

"There's footage," Renee said innocently.

Hudson turned slowly toward his wife.

"You kept it?"

"Of course I kept it."

Marcus pointed at Hudson triumphantly.

"See? This is why she wins every argument."

"I know she wins every argument," Hudson sighed. "I married her twice."

Then Charlotte sighed dramatically.

"Okay, that's disgustingly romantic."

Henry nodded solemnly.

"You were down catastrophic."

"Completely," Marcus confirmed.

Hudson ignored all of them, his gaze never leaving Renee.

"And for the record," he added calmly, "your mother was never going to be anyone else's wife."

Renee lifted a brow.

"Confident."

Hudson stepped closer, one arm sliding around her waist again like second nature.

"No," he said softly against her temple. "Certain."

Vivian took a slow sip of champagne before casually informing Charlotte and Henry, "He was so in love with your mother he ran into a burning building for her."

Silence. Hudson closed his eyes briefly.

"Vivian."

Charlotte nearly spilled her drink. "I'm sorry—what?"

Henry stared at his father. "Dad ran into a fire?"

"It wasn't that dramatic," Hudson muttered.

"It was extremely dramatic," Marcus corrected immediately.

Vivian ignored him completely. "Your mother was trapped in her office on the eighteenth floor because your dad's psycho secretary wanted Renee gone. She locked Renee inside and set the door on fire with Renee still in there."

Charlotte's jaw dropped. Henry looked genuinely alarmed.

"What the hell?"

Hudson pinched the bridge of his nose like this conversation alone was shortening his lifespan.

"Dad had a psycho secretary?"

Charlotte asked, scandalised and fascinated.

"She was madly in love with your father," Renee said calmly.

"Mad is the operative word here," Vivian added.

Marcus barked out a laugh.

"The woman fully snapped after Hudson transferred her."

"She thought Renee stole him," Vivian explained dramatically.

Henry looked at his father.

"Did you attract chaos professionally or personally?"

"Yes," Greg answered before Hudson could.

Renee laughed softly against Hudson's shoulder.

Vivian continued happily, "Anyway, the fire alarms were disabled, and security wasn't answering Renee's calls. So, she called Hudson."

Hudson's expression darkened instantly at the memory.

"I was with Marcus at his apartment," he said quietly.

Marcus nodded. "One second we're laughing in my apartment, the next Hudson was halfway out the door trying to save her."

Renee's smile faded slightly. "I actually thought I was going to die that night," she admitted quietly.

The terrace went still. Hudson's arm tightened around her waist instinctively.

"He still has the scars on his hand," Marcus reminded the kids.

Charlotte blinked.

"Is that where that scar came from?"

Hudson looked down at his hand automatically. The faint pale line curved across his palm and disappeared beneath the sleeve of his jacket. He rarely even noticed it anymore. Charlotte stared at her father in open disbelief.

"You actually ran into a burning building?"

Hudson looked at her like the answer should have been obvious.

"Your mother was inside."

The simplicity of it made the entire group go quiet for half a second. Renee looked up at him, her expression softer now.

"I remember hearing him shouting my name in the hallway," she said quietly. "The smoke was everywhere by then."

Hudson's jaw tightened.

"The door to her office was half burned through," he said, voice low and controlled. "And all I could think was that I was too late."

Charlotte pressed a hand over her mouth. Henry looked completely locked in now.

"What happened?"

Marcus leaned back against the railing, grinning slightly.

"Your father kicked the door open and walked straight into the flames."

Hudson muttered, "That sounds more dramatic than it was."

"You literally carried her out unconscious," Vivian shot back.

Hudson looked down at Renee immediately.

"She inhaled too much smoke."

Charlotte looked between them in horror.

"This sounds like a movie."

"It felt like a horror film for me," Hudson said dryly.

But his arm tightened around Renee's waist instinctively, even now. Eighteen years later, and the memory still clearly lived under his skin.

Henry frowned thoughtfully.

"So that's when you knew you loved Mum?"

Hudson went still for a moment. Then he looked down at Renee with that same unbearable intensity that still made her heart trip after all these years.

"No," he said quietly. "I knew long before that."

Renee blinked softly. Hudson brushed his thumb against her hip.

"That's just the moment everyone else realised that I wasn't a complete idiot anymore."

Vivian laughed. "Yes, that was the day I realised he finally got his head out of his arse and could actually see what was directly in front of him."

"Vivian," Hudson warned.

“Oh please,” she said dismissively. “Your mother had been in love with him for years. YEARS. Meanwhile this man was walking around acting like she was just exceptionally talented office furniture.”

Charlotte burst out laughing. Henry looked deeply offended on Renee’s behalf.

“Dad.”

Hudson sighed like a man carrying the burden of everyone else’s stupidity.

“I was aware your mother was attractive.”

Renee lifted a brow.

“How generous of you.”

Marcus nearly choked on his drink laughing. Vivian pointed aggressively at Hudson.

“Do not let him rewrite history. This man used to stare at Renee like she personally hung the moon and then spend the next twelve hours pretending he felt nothing.”

“That sounds emotionally exhausting,” Henry muttered.

“It was,” Renee confirmed sweetly.

Hudson looked down at her, completely unrepentant now.

“You enjoyed making me suffer once you realised.”

“Obviously.”

Charlotte looked delighted.

“Mum psychologically tortured Dad?”

“With elegance,” Jasmine corrected.

Greg nodded solemnly.

“It was genuinely impressive to watch.”

Hudson shook his head slowly.

"Your mother once ignored three of my phone calls because she wanted me to 'experience emotional consequences.'"

Renee smiled into her champagne.

"And did you?"

"I nearly bought another company out of stress."

Marcus pointed at him immediately.

"That part is true."

Henry stared.

"That's insane."

"No," Vivian said happily. "That's marriage."

"If that's the case, I don't want any part of it," Henry declared.

Hudson laughed then—a real laugh, deep and unguarded, the kind that still made Renee glance at him after all these years.

"Good luck, son," he said, sliding his arm more firmly around Renee's waist. "But if you ever find a woman as beautiful, smart, and wonderful as your mother…" His gaze dropped to Renee, softening instantly. "You won't have any say in it."

Renee's heart squeezed painfully at the quiet sincerity in his voice. Even now. Even after eighteen years. Charlotte looked personally affected by the statement.

"That," she announced emotionally, "might be the most romantic thing I've ever heard."

Marcus groaned.

"Great. Now her standards are impossible."

"As they should be," Jasmine replied.

Charlotte lifted her sparkling water with a dramatic flourish. "To Mum and Dad," she declared. "May they still be this disgustingly in love in another eighteen years."

Everyone raised their glasses.

"To Hudson and Renee."

"To surviving corporate trauma."

"To finally getting his head out of his arse," Vivian added.

Hudson sighed.

"You people are exhausting."

But he was smiling when he said it. Crystal clinked beneath the terrace lights while Manhattan glittered around them. Music drifted softly from the ballroom beyond the open doors, laughter warm against the night air. Renee looked around at the people surrounding them—the family they had built from something that had once begun as obligation, heartbreak, and silence.

Then she looked up at Hudson. At the man who had once feared love would weaken him. The man who now kissed her temple absentmindedly between conversations, like touching her had become as natural as breathing. He caught her looking.

"What?" he murmured softly.

Renee smiled.

"Nothing," she whispered. "I'm just glad you finally stopped being an idiot."

Hudson huffed a quiet laugh before lowering his forehead briefly against hers.

"I would've learned eventually," he said softly. "I love you, sweetheart."

The words still affected her. Eighteen years later, and they still did. Renee's fingers curled lightly against his jacket as she smiled up at him, warmth blooming quietly in her chest beneath the terrace lights and Manhattan skyline.

"I love you too," she whispered. "Happy anniversary."

Something softened in Hudson's expression then—something deep and unguarded that only existed for her.

"Happy anniversary, wife."

Charlotte groaned dramatically behind them.

"Okay, now they're being adorable on purpose."

"They absolutely know we're here," Henry agreed.

Marcus lifted his whiskey.

"Eighteen years later and he still looks at her like she personally invented oxygen."

Hudson didn't even glance away from Renee.

"She did."

Vivian clutched her chest theatrically.

"God. He got worse with age."

"Better," Jasmine corrected with a smile.

Renee laughed softly as Hudson pressed a slow kiss against her forehead, entirely unconcerned by the audience surrounding them. And standing there beneath the city lights, surrounded by family, laughter, and the life they had built together, Renee realised something.

The arranged marriage had never been the love story. This was. The years after. Choosing each other again and again.

The apologies.

The forgiveness.

The fire.

The second wedding.

The children.

The quiet touches.

The impossible devotion that had grown slowly until it became the centre of everything. Eighteen years later, Hudson Waterford still looked at her like losing her would destroy him.

And Renee knew, without question, she would love him for the rest of her life.

## — The End —

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