

EPILOGUE

Carly untangled her hair from Noah's grabby little fingers and seated him on the porch rug by his beloved stacking cups. He promptly rolled toward the red one and gummed it. Gram's house looked amazing on the outside. The grand old lady shone with the grandeur of new windows and carefully chosen historic shades of paint.

The South Carolina summer had given way to a beautiful October, and motorboats rumbled past on their way to shrimp pots and pleasure cruises. The perfect day added to Carly's sense of contentment. It would only get better once Lucas was off work and turned his slow smile her way. She fanned her face at the thought.

"Carly!" Isabelle rushed toward her ahead of the gaggle of the rest of the family following. Her blue eyes sparkled in her flushed face.

Carly waved. "You were gone a while."

Her sisters had maintained tight lips before their errand, but Carly suspected it had something to do with the upcoming wedding. Thirty days, two hours, and nineteen minutes until Lucas slipped another ring on her finger, and she changed her name to Bennett. Neither of them had wanted a long

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engagement, and Pastor Beckett had quickly arranged their marriage counseling sessions. They'd set the date for November 2.

Isabelle tugged her to her feet as a van pulled into the driveway. "We've got a surprise for you."

The doors to the van spilled open, and a woman carrying an armload of white dresses emerged. Carly gaped at the display of frothy lace and satin. "Wedding dresses?"

She hadn't had the bandwidth to enter the furor of normal wedding plans and had turned the reins over to Emily and Amelia to plan a small, intimate ceremony. With such a short time to plan, she'd decided to buy a dress off the rack.

Isabelle's smile grew even wider. "None of us were okay with you not having the most wonderful dress imaginable. We nearly lost each other, and this is a celebration for all of us. Lainey has a friend with an exclusive shop in Savannah. We met her there today and picked out twenty dresses for you to try. Hannah promised to make any alterations immediately."

Amelia and Emily reached her, and Amelia scooped up the baby while Emily held the door open for the women approaching with the dresses. When Carly stepped into the foyer, her grandmother and aunt smiled and beckoned her from the music room. She headed toward them and found they'd fashioned a makeshift dressing room of sheets in one corner of the music room. Candles flickered and spilled the scent of gardenias into the space, and they'd set out displays of jewelry and hair accessories. A wraparound mirror was in the far corner.

Gram's flowered shirt swished as she spun and pointed out the jewelry. "Whichever pieces work best with the dress will be yours, sugar. They aren't on loan. We want you to have them."

Carly recognized some of Gram's best pieces, and she suspected the other, more expensive pieces belonged to Aunt Elizabeth. Their generosity touched her heart. Gram's jewelry had been gifts from Grandpa and were precious to her. She suspected the same was true of Aunt Elizabeth's lovely necklaces and earrings sparkling with diamonds, rubies, and sapphires.

"I-I can't believe you've done all this."

In the next few minutes, the room finished its transformation into an exclusive bridal shop. Gowns hung from portable racks, veils drifted along the backs of the sofas and chairs, and crinolines lay heaped in a corner. They'd even brought in shoes. In the controlled chaos, Lainey appeared with little Erica to introduce the owner, Hannah. She handed the baby to Isabelle who put her on the floor with Noah and his stacking cups.

Carly barely had time to thank her for the huge effort before Emily grabbed her and thrust her into the dressing space with orders to disrobe and put on the undergarments laid out inside. Carly couldn't wait to see what her sisters had picked out for her. The first dress Emily brought in to drop over Carly's head was an off-the-shoulder ballgown with multiple layers of tulle. She breathed in the scent of new satin and lace as her sister spread out the train in front of the mirror.

Amelia tipped her head. "You're gorgeous in it."

Carly recognized the reservation in her sister's tone. "But?"

"But it's not you. Too fussy, I think. Maybe something not so poofy."

That had been Carly's reaction too. Emily brought another and another, and the rest of the family critiqued each one. While every gown had elements she liked, it wasn't until gown

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number seventeen swished over her head and she stepped to the mirror that she felt she'd found the right one. Even her grandmother gasped.

The strapless bodice and dress skimmed over her until it reached her hips where it changed to folds of soft cameo lace. She especially loved the pale blue silk lining shimmering through the white lace. "I think this is the one."

Hannah smiled. "That's one of my favorites. It's a Claire Pettibone. The vintage sweetheart design suits you."

Carly touched her throat. "What about hair and jewelry?"

"I've been looking around at your options," Emily said. "Aunt Elizabeth's platinum and pearl choker would look amazing with it. And Gram has these stunning diamond and platinum earrings. Let's try them with the dress. I think a loose bun with flowers in your hair would look amazing."

In moments the look was complete. Carly stared at her reflection and touched the magnificent choker around her neck. Both items were top quality and worth a lot of money. Vintage jewelry was always hard to price because a lot depended on what buyers were willing to pay. The pearls were flawless and the platinum square resting at the base of her neck was ornate and beautiful.

"I couldn't be more proud," her aunt said. "I wore it at my wedding as well."

Gram slipped her arm around Carly's waist. "Your grandpa gave me those earrings for our tenth wedding anniversary, and you look stunning in that dress. Your true beauty shines from the inside out." Her voice trembled. "I'm so proud of you." She glanced around the room at her other granddaughters. "I'm

proud of all of you. You each moved past the heartaches keeping you apart these past months, and now, you've given your sister a wonderful day she won't ever forget. Thank you."

Carly sniffled and reached for a tissue. "Thank you doesn't begin to cover how I feel. My heart is about to burst with gratitude. Not just for the amazing day today, but for the way our family has grown—not just in numbers but in love and support. I never dreamed I could be this happy."

Emily hugged her. "You took care of us all when we were too selfish and blind to appreciate it. You deserve the best life with Lucas, Carly."

Amelia began to pin up Carly's hair. "I know we caused you grief, and we didn't deserve your forgiveness, but I'm so glad you gave it. Lucas better treasure you like we do or he'll answer to us."

Noah began to fuss, and Isabelle scooped him up. "Stop it or you'll have me crying too. I have the best family in the world. Somebody better start dinner or we're going to starve tonight."

"Elizabeth and I will handle that while you young'uns finish up here," Gram said.



Lucas and Ryan did a final walk-through to make sure everything was ready. The yard between the two homes had been transformed. Emily and Amelia had arranged white outdoor sofas and chairs as a lounging area in the Bennett yard while the large tent for the ceremony occupied Gram's backyard.

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The interior of the tent was like a greenhouse with flowers everywhere, and he smiled at friends and family as he glanced around. Carly would be thrilled her Grandma Sofia had made it. He and Ryan found Vince on the other side of the tent waiting with Pastor Bennett. Lucas shook their hands and thanked them all.

Vince elbowed him. “You ready for this, bro? The old ball and chain.”

Lucas grinned and shook his head. “No ball and chain here. I wasn’t sure the day would ever get here. And you’d better not let Nellie hear you talking like that.”

Ryan clapped his hand on Lucas’s shoulder. “I wish Mom and Dad were here to see this though.”

Lucas’s grin slid away. “Me too. But somehow today, I feel like we’re part of something bigger. A family who chose us. Both of us.” And he’d be forever grateful.

“That they did.”

Lucas lifted a brow. “You think Mary had that in mind all those years ago when she brought over lasagna and casseroles? It could have been her secret plan to marry off her granddaughters to us.”

“I wouldn’t put it past her.” Ryan reached up and adjusted Lucas’s blue bowtie. “You clean up pretty well.”

“Keeping it that way might be tricky.” Emily had picked out a white tux for Lucas to wear, and he had vowed to stay away from food and drink until the ceremony was over. Keeping it clean while getting ready in Mary’s under-construction house had been a challenge. “You sure you’re okay with all of us staying for now?” Lucas had signed over their grand old lady to his brother.

“I’m getting used to having everyone around. I’ve forgotten what solitude feels like.”

“I’ve discovered solitude isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Once the house is done, they’ll move home and Carly and I will look for our own place, but feel free to kick us out if you can’t stand it.” He tugged on the neck of his shirt.

“Not going to happen.” Ryan’s fingers closed around Lucas’s forearm. “You’re up, bro.” Vince nodded and moved off to escort Amelia to the altar. Flushed and smiling, Emily arrived a few moments later. The women wore navy knee-length dresses. Baby squeals made everyone turn and look. Isabelle appeared with Noah in one arm and Erica in the other. Both babies had rose petals in their fists that they refused to release onto the white paper runner, and murmurs of laughter rose from the smiling guests when they tried to eat them instead.

He drank in the sight of his new son in his little blue outfit. He wanted to honor Eric’s memory, but Noah was his now. The little guy had stolen his heart even before Carly did. Just a few more minutes and she would be his wife. *Wife*. He wasn’t naive enough to think they’d never have challenges, but he’d have Carly by his side as they weathered them together. She’d changed the trajectory of his life and dreams in so many ways. He’d been lonely and hadn’t even realized it.

The music paused and the wedding march pounded out the familiar beginning. He straightened and stared down the aisle as Carly moved into view. She came alone, walking with her head high and her gaze fixed on him. She was so beautiful he couldn’t figure out how to draw air into his lungs. Her curls gathered at the nape of her neck and tiny white flowers had been woven into her dark hair. A multistrand pearl choker was

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around her neck, and the lace over a pale blue shimmer of fabric was different from the white gown he'd expected and yet so perfect for his bride.

She paused long enough to hug her grandmother and whisper something in her ear before finishing the last few steps to take his hand. He kept possession of her hand as they faced Pastor Bennett. The pastor had barely started his charge to them when the babies both began to cry in unison. Lainey started to get up from the front row, but Carly shook her head and scooped Erica out of Isabelle's arms while he took Noah. The little guy was instantly entranced by Lucas's tie, and Erica quieted when her fingers touched Carly's necklace.

Family. Even as they started their lives together, it was all important. Not just the two of them, but all of them. One unit, one heart, all of them connected—just like it should be.



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