



The Temporary Wife

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Category: Romance

Description: When single dad Colby Marshall faces the unthinkable, his ex threatening to take sole custody of their son, he knows he'll do anything to protect his family. Even if it means asking the one woman who's always been off-limits to marry him in a last-ditch effort to prove stability: his best friend, Gianna Stapleton.

Gianna's been Colby's rock for years through heartbreak, bad breakups, and late-night calls that were almost something more. But she's also fiercely independent, with no plans to settle down. Saying yes to a fake marriage wasn't in her plans, but the moment she slips that ring on her finger, the line between friendship and forever starts to blur.

As their carefully constructed facade becomes something far too real, they'll have to decide if the risk is worth it and if their hearts can survive falling for the one person they were never supposed to lose.

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CHAPTER 1

Colby

The papers landed on my workbench like a slap to the face.

I'd been running my hand along the grain of a custom dining table, checking for imperfections, when my phone buzzed. Lyla's name flashed across the screen, and I'd made the mistake of answering. She didn't waste time with pleasantries.

"Check your email, Colby. I'm done playing games."

The line went dead before I could ask what the hell she meant. I wiped sawdust from my hands and pulled up my email, squinting at the screen through my protective eyewear. The subject line made my blood run cold: Petition for Modification of Custody Agreement.

My fingers trembled as I scrolled through the legal document. Words jumped out at me like accusations: unstable environment, inconsistent caregiving, lack of proper family structure. Lyla wanted full custody of Luca.

She wanted to take my son away from me.

I sank onto the wooden stool I'd built three years ago. The same week Lyla had walked out, leaving Luca behind so she could find herself. My chest tightened, making it hard to breathe.

Six years old.

Luca was only six years old, and she wanted to rip him away from the only stable home he'd ever known.

The workshop door creaked open, and afternoon sunlight streamed in. "Dad?"

Luca stood in the doorway, his dark hair sticking up in twelve different directions, just like mine did when I forgot to comb it. He wore his favorite Spider-Man shirt, the one with a small hole near the left shoulder that I kept meaning to throw away but couldn't bring myself to touch. Lyla would have replaced it months ago.

"Hey, buddy." I forced a smile and minimized the email screen. "Just working on Mrs. Henderson's table. What's up?"

He shuffled closer, his mismatched socks—one blue, one green—sliding across the concrete floor. "What time am I going to Miss Kay's?"

Shit. I'd completely forgotten about dinner with my best friend and confidant, Gianna. We'd planned to try that new Italian place downtown, just the two of us for once. Luca was supposed to stay with my neighbor, Kay Redman, but I'd been so consumed with work and then the custody papers that everything else had fled my mind.

"Yeah, I forgot," I said, ruffling his hair. "Did you finish your homework?"

"Yep. Math was easy. Reading . . ." He scrunched up his face. "There were big words."

"We'll work on those tonight." I glanced at the clock on the wall. Seven-thirty. Gianna had probably been waiting at the restaurant for an hour. "Go wash up for

dinner. I'll make us some mac and cheese."

Luca brightened. "The kind with the little hot dogs?"

"The kind with the little hot dogs," I said gleefully.

He raced back toward the door, which led into our kitchen, and I was alone again with the weight of Lyla's ultimatum. I read through the petition once more, my anger building with each page. She claimed I worked too many hours, that Luca spent too much time with "inappropriate caregivers"—a not-so-subtle dig at Mrs. Redman and Gianna. She painted me as an absent father who prioritized his business over his son.

It was all bullshit, but I knew how these things worked. Lyla had money, connections, and the natural advantage of being Luca's mother. What did I have? A woodworking business that required long hours, a support system she could dismiss as inadequate, and a track record of failed relationships.

My phone rang again. Gianna's name appeared on the screen, and guilt twisted in my stomach.

"Hey," I answered, trying to sound normal.

"Colby Marshall, you stood me up." Her voice carried that teasing tone she used when she was half-annoyed, half-worried. "I ordered appetizers and everything. The waiter kept giving me pitying looks."

"I'm sorry, G. Something came up."

The silence stretched between us. Gianna knew me too well. She could hear the strain in my voice, the careful way I was choosing my words.

“I’m coming over,” she said.

“You don’t have to?—”

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“I’m already in my car.”

The line went dead. That was Gianna for you. She was stubborn as hell when she thought someone needed her help. It was one of the things I loved about her, even when it drove me crazy.

I slipped my phone into my pocket and headed into the house. Luca had already set the table, complete with paper napkins folded into uneven triangles. The sight made my chestache. This was our life. Simple, imperfect, but filled with love. How could Lyla claim it wasn’t enough?

The macaroni boiled on the stove when Gianna’s car pulled into the driveway. Through the kitchen window, I watched her climb out of her beat-up Honda, her long chestnut hair catching the porch light. She wore one of those flowing dresses she favored, something soft and green that made her hazel eyes look like forest pools.

She let herself in without knocking. She’d been doing that for years and Luca launched himself at her before she could close the door.

“Miss G! Dad’s making mac and cheese with hot dogs!”

“Lucky you,” she said, hugging him tight. Over his head, her eyes found mine, and I saw the concern there. She studied my face the way she studied her flower arrangements, looking for what was out of place.

“Go wash your hands,” I told Luca. “That hug probably got you dirty.”

He giggled and raced toward the bathroom. Gianna stepped closer, close enough that I could smell her perfume. It was light and floral and always reminded me of her shop.

“What’s wrong?” she asked quietly.

For a moment, I considered lying. Telling her it was just work stress or a headache. But the weight of the custody papers felt like a boulder on my chest, and I needed to tell someone. Gianna had been my anchor through every crisis since Lyla left. She’d held me together when I didn’t think I could make it through another day. She was the one I called when my world imploded the first time.

“Lyla’s filing for full custody,” I said.

The color drained from her face. “What?”

I pulled out my phone and showed her the email. She read in silence, her expression growing darker with each paragraph. When she finished, she looked up at me with fire in her eyes.

“This is insane. You’re an amazing father, Colby. Luca adores you.”

“Tell that to the judge.”

“I will if I have to.” She set my phone down on the counter with more force than necessary. “What does your lawyer say?”

“I haven’t called him yet. I just got the papers an hour ago.”

Gianna started pacing. Three steps to the refrigerator, three steps back to the stove. It was her thinking pace, the same one she did when she was designing a particularly

complex floral arrangement.

“There has to be something we can do,” she muttered. “Some way to prove she’s wrong about the instability claim.”

“Like what? I do work long hours. Luca does spend time with babysitters. I’m a single dad trying to keep a business afloat and raise a kid. Those are facts.”

She stopped pacing and turned to face me. “But you’re not really single, are you? I mean, I’m here all the time. I help with homework, I take him to soccer practice when you’re busy, I cook dinner at least three nights a week.”

“Yeah, but you’re not . . .” I trailed off, an idea forming in the back of my mind. A crazy, desperate idea that I should have dismissed immediately.

“I’m not what?”

I stared at her, really looked at her. Gianna Stapleton, my best friend for the past four years. The woman who’d picked up the pieces when my marriage fell apart. The woman who made Luca laugh when he was missing his mom. The woman who’d been there for every milestone, every crisis, every ordinary Tuesday night when I needed someone to talk to.

The woman I’d been half in love with for longer than I cared to admit.

“You’re not my wife,” I said quietly, hating the words as soon as they left my mouth.

She blinked. “What?”

“Dad! Miss G! I’m ready for dinner!” Luca’s voice carried into the kitchen.

“Almost done, buddy,” I said, never taking my eyes off Gianna. “But what if you were?”

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“What if I were what?”

“My wife,” I said softly.

The words hung in the air between us like a challenge. Gianna’s mouth opened, then closed. She shook her head slowly.

“Colby, you can’t be serious.”

“Why not? Think about it, G. You’re already here all the time. You already help with Luca. You already know our routines, our lives. If we were married, Lyla couldn’t claim he doesn’t have a stable family structure.”

“You’re talking about a fake marriage.”

“I’m talking about survival.” I stepped closer, close enough to see the flecks of green in her hazel eyes. “I can’t lose him, Gianna. I can’t lose my son.”

Her face softened, and for a moment, I thought she might actually consider it. Then she shook her head again, more firmly this time.

“This is crazy, Colby. Marriage isn’t something you just . . . fake. It’s a legal commitment. It’s?—”

“It’s a piece of paper that could save my family.”

Luca came into the kitchen, with his hands on his hips, looking between us with a of

curiosity and annoyance. “Are you guys talking about grown-up stuff?”

“Yes, sweetheart,” Gianna said, her voice gentle. “Very grown-up stuff.”

“Is it boring?” he asked, wrinkling his nose.

“Very boring,” I confirmed, forcing a smile. “Let’s eat.”

Dinner passed in a blur of Luca’s chatter about his day at school and Gianna’s careful glances in my direction. He told us about recess and art class and how Tommy Morrison brought a lizard for show-and-tell. Normal six-year-old concerns that made the adult crisis swirling around him seem even more unfair.

Gianna helped clear the table while I loaded the dishwasher, our movements synchronized from years of shared evenings like this one. After Luca was tucked into bed with his favorite book, Gianna and I sat on the front porch swing I’d built last summer. The night was cool for October, and she pulled her cardigan tighter around her shoulders.

“You weren’t serious about the marriage thing,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

I was quiet for a long moment, listening to the creak of the swing chains and the distant sound of traffic on Main Street. “What if I was?”

“Colby . . .”

“I know it sounds insane. But think about it practically. We already act like a family half the time. Luca loves you. You love him. It wouldn’t be that different from what we’re doing now.”

“Except for the part where we’d be lying to everyone.”

“Would we be?” I turned to face her, searching her expression in the dim porch light. “You’re already the most important woman in Luca’s life. You’re already the person I turn to when everything falls apart. You’re already?—”

“Stop.” She held up a hand. “Just stop. This isn’t fair, Colby. You’re asking me to turn my entire life upside down because your ex-wife is being vindictive.”

“I’m asking you to help me protect my son.”

The words came out sharper than I’d intended, and I saw her flinch. Immediately, I regretted the tone, but I couldn’t take it back. The desperation was bleeding through, raw and ugly.

Gianna stood and walked to the porch railing, her back to me. “What happens when the custody case is over? What happens when you don’t need a fake wife anymore?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “We’d figure it out.”

“And if you meet someone? If you want to get married for real?”

The question hit me like a punch to the gut. The truth was, I couldn’t imagine wanting anyone but her. But I couldn’t say that. Not now, not when I was already asking too much.

“That’s not something I’m worried about right now.”

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She laughed, but there was no humor in it. “Of course it’s not. Because this isn’t about love, is it? This is about convenience. About solving a problem.”

“That’s not?—”

“It is.” She turned back to face me, and I saw tears glittering in her eyes. “You’re asking me to pretend to be your wife so you can win a custody battle. What happens to me in all of this, Colby? What happens to my heart when I have to pretend to love you and then go back to being just friends?”

Her words hit me like a physical blow. I’d been so focused on my own panic, my own desperation to keep Luca, that I hadn’t considered what this would cost her. Gianna, who’d been hurt before. Gianna, who guarded her heart like a fortress because she’d learned early that people left.

I stood and crossed to her, reaching for her hands. She let me take them, but she didn’t look at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “You’re right. I wasn’t thinking about what I was asking you to sacrifice.”

“I know you’re scared,” she whispered. “I know you’re desperate. But I can’t be your temporary wife, Colby. I can’t pretend to be in love with you when . . .”

She trailed off, and my heart stopped. “When what?”

She pulled her hands free and stepped back. “When it would hurt too much to

pretend.”

Before I could process what she’d said, before I could ask what she meant, she was walking toward her car. I followed her down the porch steps, my mind reeling.

“Gianna, wait.”

She paused with her hand on the car door. “Call your lawyer tomorrow. Fight this the right way. You’re a good father, Colby. Any judge will see that.”

“And if they don’t? If I lose him?”

She looked at me for a long moment, something unreadable flickering across her face. “I need to think about this, Colby. This isn’t something you just decide on a Tuesday night.”

“I know. I’m sorry for springing it on you like this.”

“Call your lawyer tomorrow either way,” she said, getting into her car. “You need to know what you’re really up against.”

I watched her drive away, then walked back into my house. The silence felt heavier now, pressing down on my shoulders like a weight I couldn’t shake. I made my way to the living room and sank onto the couch, my eyes drawn to the family photos scattered across the side table.

There was one from last Christmas: Luca sitting on my lap, both of us grinning at the camera while Gianna made faces in the background to make him laugh. We looked like a family. We looked complete.

I picked up the frame, running my thumb along the edge. Luca’s gap-toothed smile

stared back at me, so trusting, so innocent. He had no idea his world might be about to change forever. No idea that his mother wanted to take him away from everything he'd ever known.

My throat tightened. I couldn't let that happen. I wouldn't let Lyla destroy what we'd built here, this imperfect but loving home where Luca felt safe and wanted.

I have to fight for him, I thought, my grip tightening on the picture frame. For us.

CHAPTER 2

Gianna

I stood in the back room of Blossom & Vine, staring at a half-finished arrangement of autumn chrysanthemums and wondering how I'd managed to mess up something so simple. The bronze and gold blooms should have complemented each other perfectly, but instead they looked chaotic, unbalanced like my thoughts after last night's conversation with Colby.

What if you were my wife?

The words had been echoing in my head since I'd driven away from his house twelve hours ago. I'd barely slept, tossing and turning while my mind replayed every moment of our conversation. The desperation in his steel-gray eyes. The way his voice had cracked when he'd said he couldn't lose Luca. The impossible request that had made my heart race for all the wrong reasons.

The bell above the front door chimed, and I heard footsteps on the old hardwood floors. I glanced at the clock. It was eight-thirty in the morning. We weren't officially open until nine, but I'd unlocked the door when I'd arrived at seven, too restless to stay home.

“We’re not quite open yet,” I called out, not looking up from the stubborn arrangement.

“Good thing I’m not here as a customer.”

I recognized the voice immediately. Summer Redman, my closest friend besides Colby, and conveniently the daughter-in-law of Kay Redman who often watched Luca. Summer ran the bakery three doors down and had a talent for showing up exactly when I needed to talk.

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“You look like hell,” she said, appearing in the doorway with two cups of coffee and a knowing expression.

“Thanks. Really what every woman wants to hear first thing in the morning.”

She handed me one of the cups and leaned against my workbench. “Colby called Cory at six this morning.”

Cory was Summer’s husband. The small-town gossip network ran more efficiently than any phone tree ever invented.

“Oh?” I tried to sound casual, but Summer saw right through me.

“He asked if Cory knew any good family lawyers. Said he had a custody issue.” Her dark eyes studied my face carefully. “You want to tell me why you look like you haven’t slept, and why Colby Marshall is suddenly in need of legal counsel?”

I sipped my coffee—perfectly made, as always—and debated how much to share. Summer had been my friend ever since I’d moved to Millbrook and opened the shop. She’d been the first person to welcome me, showing up with homemade cookies and an offer to help me paint the walls. But this felt too big, too complicated to put into words. She’s also the one who introduced me to Colby.

“Lyla’s trying to get full custody of Luca,” I said finally.

Summer’s eyebrows shot up. “What? That’s insane. Colby’s a great father.”

“I know. But apparently she thinks he’s providing an unstable environment. Too many hours at work, relying too heavily on babysitters.” I couldn’t keep the bitterness out of my voice. “She’s probably been planning this for months.”

“Damn.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to say more. Summer was perceptive. If I gave her too much information, she’d piece together exactly what Colby had asked me to do. And I wasn’t ready to hear someone else tell me how crazy it was.

“You care about that little boy,” Summer said quietly.

“Of course I do. He’s—” I stopped, my throat tightening unexpectedly. “He’s like my own son, Summer. I’ve been there for every scraped knee, every bedtime story, every school event when Colby couldn’t make it. The thought of Lyla taking him away . . .”

“Hey.” Summer set down her coffee and put a hand on my shoulder. “It’s going to be okay. Colby has rights. Any judge will see how much that boy loves his father.”

I wanted to believe her, but I’d seen enough custody battles to know that logic didn’t always win. Lyla had advantages. Money, the assumption that mothers were naturally better caregivers, and a lawyer who probably specialized in making good fathers look inadequate.

The bell chimed again, and this time I heard lighter footsteps. A child’s footsteps.

“Miss G?” Luca’s voice carried through the shop, tentative and hopeful.

My heart clenched. “Back here, sweetheart.”

He appeared in the doorway, still in his pajamas with a jacket thrown over them. His

dark hair stuck up at odd angles, and he clutched his backpack in one hand.

“Luca, honey, what are you doing here? Where’s your dad?”

“He’s talking on the phone with someone important. He’s using his serious voice.” Luca’s gray eyes—so much like Colby’s—were wide with the kind of worry children get when they sense adult stress but don’t understand it. “I got scared.”

Summer and I exchanged glances. She squeezed my shoulder once more and picked up her coffee. “I’ll let you two talk,” she said quietly. “But call me later, okay?”

After she left, I knelt down to Luca’s eye level. He’d walked the three blocks from his house to my shop, something he’d done dozens of times before when he was worried or excited about something. Colby had taught him the route and made him promise to only use it in emergencies.

“Dad’s not in trouble,” I said carefully. “He’s dealing with some complicated grown-up stuff. Did he know you were coming here?”

Luca shook his head, suddenly looking guilty. “I left him a note. He was talking really quiet and making worried faces, and I was scared.”

The serious voice. I knew exactly what he meant, the controlled tone Colby used when he was trying not to lose his temper. He’d probably been talking to his lawyer, getting the full scope of what he was up against.

“Okay, let’s call him and let him know you’re safe.” I reached for my phone, but Luca caught my hand.

“Miss G? Are you sad too?”

The innocent question hit me like a physical blow. “Why would you think I’m sad, sweetheart?”

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“You have that face like when you mess up the flowers and have to start over. And you look tired like Dad does when he has too much work.”

I closed my eyes, marveling at how perceptive children could be. They might not understand the details, but they always picked up on the emotional undercurrents.

“Sometimes grown-ups worry about things,” I said carefully. “But that doesn’t mean anything bad is going to happen to you.”

“Is Dad worried about me?”

“Your dad loves you more than anything in the whole world. Sometimes when people love someone that much, they worry about keeping them safe and happy.”

Luca nodded solemnly, accepting this explanation the way six-year-olds did. “Can we make Dad feel better? Maybe with cookies?”

Despite everything, I smiled. In Luca’s world, most problems could be solved with cookies or hugs or maybe a really good story. If only adult life were that simple.

“I think cookies are an excellent idea,” I said. “But first, let’s call your dad so he doesn’t worry about where you are.”

Colby answered on the first ring, relief flooding his voice when I told him Luca was safe with me. “Jesus, I found his note, but . . . thank you. I’ll be right there.”

“Take your time. We’re going to go upstairs and make cookies.”

“Can I talk to him?”

I handed the phone to Luca, who immediately launched into an explanation about how he’d remembered to look both ways and use the crosswalks, just like Dad had taught him. I listened to his side of the conversation, hearing Colby’s patient responses through the phone.

“Dad wants to know if you need anything from the store for the cookies,” Luca said, covering the phone with his small hand.

“Tell him we have everything we need.”

After they hung up, I locked my shop up and took Luca upstairs to my apartment. We spent the next twenty minutes mixing dough and talking about normal six-year-old things. Like his upcoming soccer game, whether dinosaurs could swim, and his theory that vegetables tasted better when you dipped them in ranch dressing. I let myself get lost in his chatter, grateful for the distraction from the turmoil in my head.

When Colby arrived, I could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his hands had clenched into fists at his sides. But his face transformed when he saw Luca standing on a step stool, carefully dropping chocolate chips into cookie dough.

“Looks like you’ve been busy,” he said, ruffling his son’s hair.

“Miss G let me crack the eggs, and I only got a little bit of shell in the bowl,” Luca announced proudly. “We fished it out with more eggshell which is funny.” He giggled.

“Good job, buddy.” Colby’s eyes met mine over Luca’s head, and I saw gratitude there along with the worry. “Thank you,” he mouthed.

We spent the next hour baking cookies and letting Luca tell us elaborate stories about the adventures of Cookie Monster and Big Bird. Normal domestic activities that felt both comforting and heartbreaking, given what we were facing.

When it was time to go, Luca hugged me tight around the waist. “Thanks for making cookies with me, Miss G. And for not being sad anymore.”

“Thank you for helping me feel better, sweetheart.”

After they left, I sat alone in my apartment surrounded by the smell of fresh cookies and the weight of an impossible decision. Colby’s request echoed in my mind, along with Summer’s words about how much I cared for Luca.

I walked back down to my shop, turned the closed sign to open and tried not to think about the customers I may have missed. Instead, I tried to focus on the chrysanthemum arrangement, but my hands shook as I reached for the stems. Three years. That’s how long I’d been in love with Colby Marshall, though I’d never admitted it to anyone, not even myself, most of the time.

It had started the night his world fell apart. November third, to be exact. I remembered because it was the same day I’d gotten the call that my own father had remarried without telling me, making it clear once again that I wasn’t really part of anyone’s family. I’d been wallowing in my apartment with a bottle of wine and a terrible romantic comedy when my phone rang at midnight.

“G?” Colby’s voice had been broken, raw. “I’m sorry to call so late, but I didn’t know who else . . .”

I’d walked to his house in my pajamas and found him sitting on his kitchen floor, surrounded by empty beer bottles and wedding photos scattered like evidence of a crime scene. Lyla had told him she was leaving that afternoon. She’d been seeing

someone else for months, she said. Their marriage had been a mistake from the beginning.

I'd sat down beside him on that cold tile floor and let him lean against me while he talked about all his perceived failures. As a husband, as a provider, as a man. I'd stroked his hair and whispered reassurances, and somewhere in those dark hours before dawn, my heart had made a decision my head couldn't take back.

I'd fallen in love with my best friend's pain, with his strength, with the way he'd picked himself up the next morning and made pancakes for his son like his world hadn't collapsed twelve hours earlier. I'd fallen in love with his laugh when it finally returned weeks later, with his calloused hands that created beautiful things from raw wood, with the way he looked at Luca like the boy held the entire universe in his small body.

But Colby had been clear from the beginning. I was his friend, his support system, the safe harbor he could return to when the storms of single parenthood became too much. He'd dated other women over the years. Sarah, who'd lasted six months before he'd pulled away when she started talking about moving in together. Rebecca, the elementary school teacher who'd tried so hard to connect with Luca but had been gently pushed aside when things got too serious.

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I'd watched him keep everyone at arm's length, including me. Especially me. We'd had moments, glances that lasted too long, conversations that went deeper than friendship should allow, times when he'd touched my hand or shoulder and left my skin tingling for hours afterward. But he'd always pulled back, always maintained that careful distance.

Until last night, when desperation had made him bold enough to ask the impossible.

I abandoned the chrysanthemums and moved to the front of the shop, staring out at Main Street as the morning crowd began to emerge. Mrs. Patterson from the deli was setting up her sidewalk sign. The mailman was making his rounds, stopping to chat with Mr. Henderson about the weather. Normal small-town life continuing as if my world hadn't been turned upside down.

The truth was, I'd been dreaming about being part of Colby and Luca's family for so long that the fantasy had worn grooves in my heart. I knew exactly how Luca liked his sandwiches, cut diagonally, with the crusts removed. I knew he was afraid of thunderstorms but tried to be brave about it. I knew he saved his best artwork to show me first, that he asked for me specifically when he was sick, that he'd started calling me his "almost-mom" to his friends at school.

I knew Colby took his coffee black in the morning but with cream in the evening. I knew he hummed old country songs while he worked, that he read three chapters of a book every night before bed, that he checked on Luca at least twice after tucking him in. I knew the exact shade of gray his eyes turned when he was worried, and how his voice got rough when he was trying not to cry.

I knew them both so well that stepping into the role of wife and mother wouldn't require acting. It would just require making official what my heart had been doing for years.

But that's exactly what made it so dangerous.

The bell chimed again, and I turned to see my assistant manager, Miranda, arriving for her shift. She was a sweet college student who worked part-time to help pay for her education, and she had an uncanny ability to read my moods.

"You look like you haven't slept," she said, setting down her purse behind the counter. "Everything okay?"

"Just thinking about some big decisions," I said vaguely.

"The kind that keep you up all night?"

"The kind that could change everything."

Miranda studied my face with the wisdom of someone who'd grown up in a small town where everyone knew everyone else's business. "Does this have anything to do with Colby Marshall? Because I saw him at the hardware store yesterday, and he looked like a man with something heavy on his mind."

I shouldn't have been surprised that she'd connected the dots. Miranda had worked for me for two years, and she'd seen Colby and Luca in the shop countless times. She'd also seen the way I lit up whenever they walked through the door.

"What would you do," I asked carefully, "if someone you cared about asked you to do something that could either be the best decision of your life or completely destroy you?"

“Depends. Do you love them?”

The simple question hit me like a physical blow. “What?”

“Do you love them? Because if you do, really love them, then the risk might be worth it. But if you’re just trying to help, or if you think you can change them . . .” She shrugged. “That never ends well.”

I stared at her, this twenty-year-old who somehow had more clarity about love than I did at thirty-four. “What if they don’t love you back the same way?”

“What if they do, and you’re just too scared to find out?”

After Miranda took over the front of the shop, I escaped to my office and tried to lose myself in paperwork. Orders to process, invoices to pay, schedules to arrange. The mundane details of running a small business that usually grounded me but today felt like meaningless distractions.

My phone buzzed with a text from my mother:

Haven’t heard from you in weeks. Everything alright?

I stared at the message for a long time before typing back:

Everything’s fine. Just busy with the shop.

It was a lie, of course. Nothing was fine. My carefully constructed life was teetering on the edge of a precipice, and I was about to either leap to safety or fall into something that would change me forever.

Another text came through, this one from Summer:

Thinking about you. Call me if you need to talk.

I thought about Luca, probably sitting in his first-grade classroom right now, blissfully unaware that his world might be about to change forever. He'd be working on math problems or listening to a story, secure in the knowledge that his dad would pick him up after school and that Miss G would probably be there for dinner, just like always.

What if Lyla won? What if she took him away from Millbrook, from his friends, from the only stable home he'd ever known? What if he ended up in some sterile apartment in Boston or New York, shuttled between his mother's social obligations and a string of nannies? How would this be any better for Luca than his current situation?

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It wouldn't, but Lyla had money, and lots of it.

The thought made my chest tight with anger and protectiveness. Luca deserved better than that. He deserved a mother who showed up, a home where he felt safe, adults who put his needs first.

That's exactly what Colby provided for Luca.

Maybe that's what this really came down to. Not my feelings for Colby, not my dreams of having a family, but my love for a six-year-old boy who called me when he was scared and saved his best hugs for me.

I picked up my phone and dialed Colby's number before I could change my mind.

"Hey," he answered on the second ring, his voice cautious.

"I've been thinking about what you said last night."

"And?"

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, feeling like I was standing at the edge of a cliff. "And I think we should talk. Not about the practical stuff but about what this really means. For all of us."

"Okay." Relief flooded his voice. "When?"

"Tonight. After Luca goes to bed. We need to be completely honest with each other

about what we're getting into."

"Gianna—"

"This isn't a yes, Colby. But it's not a no either. It's a conversation we should have had three years ago."

After I hung up, I sat in my office chair feeling like I'd just lit a fuse on something explosive. Tonight, I would finally tell my best friend that I'd been in love with him since the night he'd cried in my arms.

Tonight, I would find out if this crazy plan was about love or just about legal strategy.

Tonight, everything would change.

The question was whether I was brave enough to handle whatever came next.

CHAPTER 3

Colby

I spent the day at the Hendersons' job site, installing custom kitchen cabinets and trying not to check my phone every five minutes. The oak panels required precise measurements and careful handling, but my mind kept drifting to Gianna's face when she'd said she needed time to think. The hope that had flickered there, quickly smothered by caution.

By six o'clock, I'd finished the installation and cleaned up the workspace twice. My crew had already headed home, but I stayed behind, adjusting hinges that didn't need adjusting and polishing hardware that already gleamed. Anything to avoid going home and waiting for an answer that might change everything.

My phone buzzed with a text from Kay Redman:

Luca's helping with dinner. Pick him up whenever you're ready.

I typed back my thanks and packed up my tools. The October air carried the scent of woodsmoke and dying leaves as I loaded my truck. Millbrook looked postcard perfect in the golden hour light, all painted Victorian houses and maple trees blazing orange and red. This was the life I wanted for my son. Small-town safety, neighbors who looked out for each other, a place where everyone knew his name.

Lyla had never understood the appeal. She'd complained constantly about the lack of shopping, restaurants, nightlife. She'd wanted to move to Portland or Boston, somewhere with more opportunities and fewer questions about our increasingly cold marriage. I'd refused, and she'd resented me for it right up until the day she left.

Kay's house smelled like pot roast and fresh bread when I knocked on the front door. Through the window, I could see Luca at the kitchen table with her grandson Marcus, both boys bent over homework with identical expressions of concentration.

"Come in, come in," Kay called, appearing with flour on her apron and a knowing smile. "Luca's been an angel. Set the table without being asked and helped Marcus with his math."

"Thanks for taking him on such short notice."

"Nonsense." She waved off my apology. "That boy is welcome here anytime. You look stressed, honey. Everything alright?"

Of course she'd noticed. In a town of three thousand people, it was impossible to hide when something was wrong. But I wasn't ready to explain the situation to anyone yet.

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“Just work stuff,” I said vaguely.

Kay gave me a look that suggested she wasn’t buying it, but she didn’t press. “Well, whatever it is, that little boy thinks the world of you. He spent most of the afternoon telling Marcus about the birdhouse you two built last weekend.”

While Luca gathered his backpack, Kay pulled me aside. “How are you holding up, honey? Really?”

The genuine concern in her voice almost undid me. Kay had been like a surrogate grandmother to Luca since Lyla walked out. She’d babysat during emergencies, attended every schoolplay and soccer game, and never once made me feel like I was imposing.

“I’m managing,” I said carefully.

Luca bounded over with his backpack slung over one shoulder. “Ready, Dad?”

The drive home was filled with Luca’s chatter about school, his upcoming soccer game, and the Halloween costume he couldn’t decide between. Normal six-year-old concerns that made my chest ache with how simple and innocent they were.

“Dad?” Luca’s voice turned thoughtful as we pulled into our driveway. “Marcus said his parents argue a lot. Do you think they’re sad?”

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. Trust Luca to pick up on adult problems even when the adults tried to hide them. “Sometimes grown-ups disagree about

things, buddy. That doesn't mean they don't love each other."

"Oh. Good." He seemed satisfied with this explanation. "Can we have hamburgers for dinner? With the buns that have seeds on top?"

"Sure thing."

We were halfway through dinner when the doorbell rang. I glanced at the clock. Too late for deliveries, too early for emergencies, but right on time for Gianna.

She stood on my front porch, clutching a bottle of wine and looking nervous. She'd changed from her work clothes into dark jeans and a cream-colored sweater that made her hazel eyes look more green than brown. Her hair was loose around her shoulders, and she'd chewed off most of her lipstick.

"Hi," she said quietly.

"Miss G!" Luca squeezed past me to hug her waist. "Did you come for dinner? We're having cheeseburgers."

She smiled down at him, some of the tension leaving her shoulders. "I ate already, sweetheart. But thank you."

"You can have dessert with us. Dad said we could have ice cream if I finished all my carrot sticks."

"Did you finish them?"

Luca's grin turned sheepish. "Almost. There's one stick left, but it looks weird." He held his hand up and curved his index finger into a half-arch shape.

Gianna laughed. A real laugh that made my chest warm despite the circumstances. “Well, we can’t have weird vegetables. Why don’t you go deal with that carrot while I talk to your dad?”

He scampered back to the kitchen, leaving us alone on the porch. The October evening was crisp enough to see our breath, and Gianna pulled her sweater tighter around herself.

“Want to come in?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not yet. I need to say this first, before I lose my nerve.”

My stomach dropped. She was going to say no. I could see it in the way she held herself, the careful distance she maintained between us. I’d asked too much, pushed too hard, and now I was going to lose my best friend along with my son.

“Okay,” I said quietly.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said. About the marriage, all of it.” She took a shaky breath. “You’re right that we already act like a family most of the time. Luca does spend more time with me than with most babysitters, even with his own mother. And I do love him like he’s my own.”

Hope flickered in my chest, but I kept my expression neutral. She wasn’t done yet.

“But I need you to understand what this would mean for me. What I’d be risking.”

“Tell me.”

“My heart.” The words came out barely above a whisper. “I’d be risking my heart, Colby. Because playing house with you and Luca, pretending to be your wife, sharing

your bed . . .” She stopped, color flooding her cheeks. “It’s going to feel real. And when it’s over, when you don’t need me anymore, I’ll have to find a way to go back to being just your friend. I’m not sure I can do that.”

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The confession hit me like a physical blow. Not because I was surprised—deep down, I'd always known there was something more between us—but because hearing her say it out loud made me realize how selfish I'd been. I'd been so focused on my own desperation that I hadn't considered what this arrangement might cost her.

“Gianna.” I stepped closer, close enough to catch the faint scent of her shampoo. “I never wanted to hurt you. If you can't do this, if it's asking too much?—”

“I'm not done.” She looked up at me, eyes bright with unshed tears. “I'd be risking my heart, yes. But Luca would be risking his whole world. His home, his friends, his father who loves him more than anything. When I think about it that way, the choice is easy.”

My heart stopped. “You're saying yes?”

“I'm saying yes.” She managed a watery smile. “I'll marry you, Colby Marshall. For Luca. For as long as you need me to.”

The relief hit me so hard it left me lightheaded. I reached for her without thinking, pulling her into my arms and holding her tight against my chest. She felt perfect there, like she'd been designed to fit against me. Her hair smelled like flowers and rain, and when she wrapped her arms around my waist, I felt something settle into place that I hadn't even realized was broken.

“Thank you,” I whispered against her hair. “God, Gianna, thank you.”

We held each other for a long moment on my front porch, two people about to

embark on the biggest lie of their lives. But it didn't feel like a lie. It felt like coming home.

"Dad! Miss G!" Luca's voice carried through the screen door. "I ate the weird carrot! Can we have ice cream now?"

Gianna pulled back, laughing despite the tears on her cheeks. "We should go in. He'll want to celebrate his victory over the crooked carrot."

I caught her hand before she could step away. "We need to talk about the details. How we're going to do this, what we tell people, when?—"

"Tomorrow," she said firmly. "Tonight let's just be normal. Let's eat ice cream with your son and watch whatever cartoon he picks, and pretend this is just another evening."

She was right. One more normal evening before everything changed forever.

We spent the next hour on the living room couch, Luca curled between us as we watched a movie about talking cars. Gianna laughed at all the right moments and made appropriate comments about the plot, but I caught her watching me instead of the screen more than once. I wondered what she was thinking, what doubts were already creeping in.

When Luca's eyelids started drooping, I carried him upstairs for his bath and bedtime routine. He was asleep before I finished reading the second chapter of his current favorite book, one hand clutching his stuffed elephant and the other stretched toward the empty side of the bed where I sometimes slept when he had nightmares.

Gianna was washing our ice cream bowls when I came back downstairs. She'd kicked off her shoes and rolled up her sleeves, looking comfortable and familiar in my

kitchen. Like she belonged there.

“He go down okay?” she asked without turning around.

“Out cold.”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Now that we were alone, the weight of what we’d agreed to was settling between us.

“So,” I said, leaning against the counter. “Ground rules?”

“Probably a good idea.” She dried her hands on a dish towel and faced me. “How do we make this believable?”

“We’ll need to make it legal first. Get a marriage license, find someone to perform the ceremony. Small and private. We can say we didn’t want a big fuss.”

“People will think it’s sudden.”

“People already think we’re together half the time anyway. Cory practically told me I was an idiot for not making a move already when we had our guys night.”

Gianna’s eyebrows rose. “He said that?”

“More or less.” I studied her face, looking for any sign that Cory might have been right about Gianna’s feelings. I figured if anyone would know, it would be Cory since his wife Summer and Gianna were friends.

“Is that what people think? That we’re together?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” I shrugged.

She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly looking vulnerable.

“Does it matter what people think?” I asked.

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When she didn't answer I continued. "It might make this easier. Less explaining to do." The practical answer, not the one my heart wanted to give. The truth was that part of me had always wondered what it would be like if we were together for real. But this wasn't about us. It was about Luca, about keeping my family intact. I couldn't afford to complicate things by admitting I'd spent the last three years fighting an attraction to my best friend.

"Where will I sleep?" The question came out quietly, almost timidly.

Heat pooled in my stomach. "There's a guest room. You can have your privacy."

"But if we're supposed to be married . . ."

"We'll figure it out. Make it look convincing when it matters, keep things separate when it doesn't."

She nodded, but something flickered across her face too quickly for me to read. Disappointment? Relief? I couldn't tell.

"What about Luca? What do we tell him?"

This was the part that made my chest ache. "Well tell him the same we'll tell everyone else. We're married."

"And after when we're not?"

After. The word hung between us like a sword waiting to fall. After we'd convinced

everyone we were the perfect couple, after we'd built a life together that would have to be carefully dismantled.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," I said.

It was a cop-out, and we both knew it. But the alternative—planning the end of something that hadn't even begun—felt impossible in that moment.

Gianna picked up her purse and keys from the counter. "I should go. It's getting late."

"Stay." The word slipped out before I could stop it. "I mean, if you want. The guest room bed is already made up."

She hesitated, keys dangling from her fingers. "Colby . . ."

"It would be good practice. For when we're living together officially."

A weak excuse, but she seemed to consider it. Finally, she set her keys back down. "Okay. But I don't have anything to sleep in."

"I'll find you something."

Ten minutes later, she emerged from the guest bathroom wearing one of my old college t-shirts and a pair of my pajama pants rolled up at the ankles. The shirt hung loose on her smaller frame, and her hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail. She looked young and soft and beautiful in a way that made my chest tight.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "For letting me stay. This is all going to take some getting used to."

"Yeah, it is."

We stood there in the hallway, suddenly awkward with each other in a way we'd never been before. Three years of easy friendship, and now we couldn't seem to find our footing.

"Goodnight, Colby."

"Goodnight."

I watched her disappear into the guest room before heading to my own bedroom. But sleep was impossible. I lay in the dark, staring at the ceiling and thinking about the woman sleeping twenty feet away. My soon-to-be wife. The mother Luca had been wishing for without even knowing it.

In three days, we'd go to the courthouse and make it official. In three months, we'd stand before a judge and prove that we were the stable, loving family Luca deserved.

And somewhere in between, I'd have to figure out how to keep my own heart intact when this was all over.

CHAPTER 4

Gianna

Three boxes of my belongings sat in Colby's living room like evidence of a crime I hadn't yet committed. I stared at them from the kitchen doorway, coffee mug trembling in my hands as the reality of what I'd agreed to settled over me.

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We'd been married for exactly four hours. A quick ceremony at the courthouse with Cory and Summer as witnesses, Luca bouncing on his toes in his best shirt, and Judge Morrison's kind smile as he pronounced us husband and wife. Colby had kissed me afterward. It was a brief, soft press of lips that tasted like mint and promises we couldn't keep.

Now I was officially Mrs. Marshall, and my stomach churned with terror and something dangerously close to joy.

"The movers said they'd bring the rest tomorrow," Colby said, appearing beside me with his own cup of coffee. He'd changed from his courthouse clothes into worn jeans and a flannel shirt, looking more like the man I'd known for three years and less like the stranger who'd slipped a simple gold band onto my finger four hours ago.

"This is plenty for now." I gestured at the boxes with my free hand. "Most of my furniture won't fit anyway."

His house was bigger than my apartment above the flower shop, but it was undeniably his space. Masculine furniture, neutral colors, everything practical and sturdy. The only touches of warmth came from Luca's artwork covering the refrigerator and the family photos scattered throughout the rooms.

"We can rearrange things. Make room for whatever you want to bring."

I nodded, not trusting my voice. The kindness in his tone made this harder somehow. If he'd been cold or businesslike about the arrangement, I could have treated it like any other contract. But he was being gentle with me, careful, like he understood what

this was costing me emotionally.

“Miss G?” Luca’s voice carried from the living room, followed by the sound of something crashing to the floor.

We both turned toward the sound. I set my coffee down and hurried to find him kneeling beside a fallen lamp, looking mortified. The ceramic base had cracked but hadn’t shattered completely, and the shade sat askew but intact.

“I knocked it over,” he said, his bottom lip trembling. “I was trying to move this box so I could set up my cars, and I bumped into it. I’m sorry!”

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” I said automatically, crouching down to help him. “Accidents happen.”

“But I broke it. Dad’s gonna be mad.”

“No one’s mad,” Colby said gently, appearing beside us. “It’s just a lamp, buddy. We can fix it.”

Luca looked between us anxiously. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” I confirmed, reaching out to smooth his hair. “These things happen when we’re moving boxes around. No big deal.”

His face brightened immediately. Six-year-olds were remarkably resilient when they knew they weren’t in trouble. “Can I help fix it?”

“Absolutely,” Colby said. “But first, why don’t you tell Miss G about the new cars you added to your collection? I bet she’d like to see them.”

As Luca launched into an enthusiastic explanation of the new toy cars and trucks, carefully arranging them on the coffee table for my inspection, I felt something fundamental shift inside my chest. This wasn't pretend anymore. This wasn't about helping Colby or stopping Lyla or maintaining a facade.

This was about love. Pure, unconditional, terrifying love for a child who deserved stability and a father who would do anything to protect him.

"This one's my favorite. Mr. Henderson gave it to me the other day," Luca said, holding up a red fire truck. "It has a real ladder that goes up and down. Want to see?"

"I'd love to see," I said, settling cross-legged on the floor beside him.

For the next hour, we played with cars and built elaborate roads out of couch cushions. Luca chattered about school and his friends and his upcoming soccer game, completely at ease with the changes in his world. To him, this was simple: Miss G was moving in, which meant more people to play with and help with homework.

When it was time for dinner, we ordered pizza and ate it cross-legged on the living room floor while Luca demonstrated his favorite video games. He was patient with my fumbling attempts at the controller, cheering when I managed to make my character jump successfully and offering gentle corrections when I forgot which button did what.

Colby watched us with that same unreadable expression, occasionally joining the conversation but mostly content to observe. I wondered what he was thinking, whether he regretted asking me to do this, whether seeing us together felt as natural to him as it did to me.

By eight o'clock, Luca was yawning despite his protests that he wasn't tired. Colby carried him upstairs for his bath while I cleaned up the pizza boxes and tried to

process everything that had happened in one day. This morning I'd been Gianna Stapleton, single florist with a tidy apartment and a carefully ordered life. Tonight, I was Mrs. Gianna Marshall, stepmother to a six-year-old who'd claimed my heart completely.

"He wants you to read to him," Colby said when he came back downstairs. "If you're up for it."

"Of course."

I found Luca in his pajamas, teeth brushed, and hair still damp from his bath. His room blended little boy chaos with parental organization with toys scattered across the floor, but clothes folded neatly on his dresser, superhero posters on the walls but books lined up carefully on his bookshelf.

"Which one tonight?" I asked, settling beside him on his bed.

Luca handed me a worn copy of a book about a bear who went on adventures with his forest friends. I'd read it to him dozens of times before during sleepovers and sick days, but tonight felt different. Tonight, I was reading as part of his family, in the house where we all lived together, as part of the bedtime routine that would be mine to share from now on.

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“Miss G?” His voice was sleepy, content. “Can I call you mom?”

My heart seized as had my breath. There’d been a handful of times over the years when he’d slipped and called me mom. I brushed it off, never making a big deal about it.

This was different.

I wanted to tell him no because there would be a day in the near future when I wouldn’t be his mom, but he would never understand.

He shouldn’t have to understand.

What a mistake this was.

Instead, I nodded. Unable to use my voice out of fear. Out of weakness.

“Mom,” he said trying it out. I looked at him, my eyes watered from love and sadness. I loved this little boy more than anything. “Hmm?”

“I’m glad you’re living here now. It feels more like I have a real family now.”

My throat tightened. “What makes it feel like a real family?”

He considered this seriously, snuggling deeper into his blankets. “Well, you and Dad both take care of me. And you make breakfast sometimes, and you know how I like my sandwiches cut. And you laugh at my jokes even when they’re not very funny.”

“Your jokes are always funny to me.”

“And now I don’t have to wonder if you’re going to come back the next day. You’ll just be here.”

The innocent observation pierced straight through my chest. How many mornings had he woken up hoping to find his world unchanged, only to discover another person had left? His mother had walked away from him. Even babysitters changed with Colby’s work schedule.

“I’ll be here,” I promised, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “For as long as you want me to be.”

He was asleep before I finished the story, one small hand curled around my wrist like he was afraid I might disappear if he let go. I sat there for a long time, watching him breathe and marveling at how completely my life had changed in the span of a single day.

When I finally crept downstairs, I found Colby in the kitchen loading the dishwasher. He’d changed into a gray t-shirt that clung to his shoulders and emphasized the strength in his arms. Domestic Colby had always been dangerous to my peace of mind, but married Colby was going to be the death of me.

“He go down okay?” he asked without looking up.

“Like a light. He’s exhausted.” I pushed my hands into the soap water and handed Colby another dish. “He asked to call me mom.”

Colby paused; his hand suspended in the air. Slowly, I looked at him, unsure what to expectant.

“What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything but nodded because I had this giant lump clogging my throat. You know he’s slipped up a few times before, and I guess I should’ve asked you?—”

“You don’t need to ask me,” he said. “You’re here more than Lyla is. I’ve said it time and again, Luca loves you and if he wants to call you mom, let him. As long as you’re okay with it.”

I was, but then . . .

“Yeah.” I leaned against the counter, suddenly unsure of my place in this space that was now supposedly mine. “We should talk about the sleeping arrangements . . .” I needed to change the subject, although I should’ve chosen something like the parking arrangement outside or whether he needed me to pick Luca up from school tomorrow.

He closed the dishwasher and turned to face me. “I know we need to talk about the practical stuff. Ground rules, expectations, how we make this work.”

“How do we make this believable?”

“We’ll need to act like a married couple when it matters. In public, around Luca, if anyone asks questions.” He ran a hand through his hair, looking as uncertain as I felt. “But in private, we can maintain whatever boundaries make you comfortable.”

“What about sharing a bedroom? Luca will expect?—”

“Only if you’re okay with it. Everything else, we’ll figure out on the fly as long as we look convincing when it needs to be, keep things separate when it doesn’t.”

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I nodded, but something twisted in my chest at how easily he compartmentalized it. Of course, he could separate the performance from reality. This wasn't about feelings for him. This was about custody and stability and legal strategy.

"I should probably get some sleep," I said finally. "Tomorrow's going to be another adjustment day."

Colby nodded and followed me upstairs. I thought about his bedroom, the masculine space that would now technically be ours. The walk-in closet and king-sized bed he'd built custom, and the deep garden tub he'd installed after he and Lyla bought the house.

We stood in his . . . our room, staring at nothing, yet everything.

"We're both adults. We can share a room without it meaning anything." The lie tasted bitter on my tongue, but he nodded like it made perfect sense.

"I'll take the left side. I'm used to sleeping there."

"Fine."

"I don't snore."

"Good to know."

"Do you?"

“Not that anyone’s ever complained about.”

The awkward conversation felt surreal. Planning sleeping arrangements with the man I’d married that morning, the man I’d been in love with for years, the man who saw me as a convenient solution to his custody problems.

“Okay, I have a few things to finish up in the workshop and then I’ll be up.”

I could feel the silence of the room weighing on me heavily, making my skin crawl, but not with fear. It was anxiety. A nervousness I had never experienced before. I’d fallen asleep on Colby’s couch too many times to count. We both have. But this was different.

Ten minutes later, I emerged from the attached bathroom wearing one of my most conservative pajama sets and clutching my phone like a lifeline. The room suddenly felt huge, overwhelming, and oddly intimate. Colby’s presence filled the void even though he was still downstairs.

When he finally came up, he moved quietly through his nighttime routine, and I kept my eyes fixed on my phone screen while he changed into pajama pants and a worn t-shirt. The mattress dipped when he climbed into bed, and suddenly the king-size bed felt impossibly small.

“Goodnight, Gianna,” he said quietly, reaching over to turn off the lamp.

“Goodnight.”

The darkness felt heavy and charged with possibility. I lay there listening to his breathing slow and even out, counting the inches between us and wondering how I was going to survive months of this exquisite torture.

This was what I'd agreed to. This was the price of keeping Luca safe and Colby's family intact. But as I finally drifted toward sleep, with my husband's wedding ring on my finger and his child calling me family, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was in far deeper than either of us had planned.

CHAPTER 5

Colby

The elementary school parking lot buzzed with controlled chaos. Parents juggled car seats and diaper bags while older kids raced toward the playground, their voices carrying across the crisp October evening. I sat in my truck for a moment, watching other families through the windshield and trying to calm the nerves that had been building all week.

Tonight, would be our first public appearance as a married couple. The whole town would see us together, and I knew gossip would start before we even made it through the front doors. But more importantly, Lyla would be here. She'd made a point of telling me during yesterday's tense phone call that she wouldn't miss Luca's art showcase, especially now that he had a "new family situation" to navigate.

"Dad, can we go in now?" Luca bounced in his booster seat, practically vibrating with excitement. "I want to show Mom my painting before everyone else sees it."

Mom. The word still caught me off guard every time he said it, even though it had been a week since the wedding. Gianna had slipped into the role so naturally that sometimes I forgot this was supposed to be temporary. She made pancakes without burning them, helped with homework without losing patience, and tucked Luca in each night with stories that made him giggle.

She also shared my bed without complaint, careful to stay on her side while I lay

awake listening to her breathe and fighting the urge to reach for her.

“Dad?”

“Yeah, buddy. Let’s go find your mom.”

Gianna stood near the school’s main entrance, talking to Summer Redman and looking effortlessly beautiful in a burgundy sweater and dark jeans. Her hair caught the light from the parking lot lamps, and she wore the small diamond earrings I’d given her as a wedding gift. She’d protested that she didn’t need anything, but I’d wanted her to have something real from this arrangement, something she could keep when it was over.

The thought made my chest tight.

“There she is,” Luca said, waving enthusiastically.

Gianna’s face lit up when she saw us approaching. She hugged Luca first, listening intently as he chattered about his artwork and which projects he wanted to show her. Then she turned to me with that careful smile she’d perfected over the past week, the one that looked genuine but never quite reached her eyes.

“Hey,” she said softly.

“Hey yourself.” I brushed a quick kiss against her cheek, the gesture feeling both natural and foreign. “You look beautiful.”

Pink colored her cheeks. “Thank you.”

“Are we being convincing?” I murmured near her ear, low enough that only she could hear.

“I think so.” Her voice was barely a whisper. “Summer asked if we were still in the honeymoon phase.”

Before I could respond, Luca grabbed both our hands and started pulling us toward the school. “Come on! Mrs. Patterson said the art show starts at six, and it’s already five after.”

Student artwork decorated the hallways, and families filled the space, admiring the

displays. Luca led us straight to his section, where a watercolor painting of our house hung prominently on the wall. He'd painted it from memory, complete with the big oak tree in the front yard and the flowers in the window boxes that Gianna had insisted I needed long before she moved in.

"It's us," he explained proudly, pointing to three stick figures standing in the front yard. "That's Dad, that's me, and that's Mom. We're a family."

My throat tightened. In his six-year-old world, this was simple truth. We lived together, we took care of each other, we were happy. He didn't understand the complicated web of legal documents and pretense that had brought us to this point.

"It's perfect, sweetheart," Gianna said, her voice thick with emotion. "I love how you painted the flowers."

"Those are the ones you planted. The purple ones that smell good."

"Lavender," she confirmed, reaching out to smooth his hair. "You have a wonderful memory."

We spent the next hour moving through the displays, admiring artwork and chatting with other parents. I kept one arm around Gianna's waist, partly for show and partly because I couldn't seem to help myself. She felt right against my side, like she belonged there.

"Colby?"

I turned at the sound of my name and felt every muscle in my body tense. Lyla stood behind us, perfectly polished as always in a designer dress and heels that clicked against the linoleum floor. Her blonde hair fell in a sleek bob, and her blue eyes held the calculating look I remembered from our worst fights.

“Lyla.” I didn’t move my arm from around Gianna’s waist. “I didn’t see you come in.”

“I’ve been here for a while. Admiring Luca’s work.” Her gaze shifted to Gianna, and I felt my wife stiffen slightly. “You must be the new Mrs. Marshall. I’m Lyla, Luca’s mother.”

“Gianna,” my wife replied evenly. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Likewise. Though I have to say, this all seems rather sudden. Colby never mentioned he was seeing anyone seriously when we spoke last month.”

The barb hit its mark, but Gianna didn’t flinch. “Sometimes the best things happen when you’re not looking for them.”

“How romantic.” Lyla’s smile was sharp enough to cut glass. “And how convenient, timing-wise.”

“Mom!” Luca appeared at Lyla’s side, his face bright with excitement. “Did you see my painting? It’s the one with my house and my family.”

Lyla’s expression softened as she looked down at her son. Whatever her faults as a wife, she did love Luca in her own way. “I did see it, baby. It’s very good.”

“That’s Dad and Mom and me,” he continued, pointing toward his artwork displayed on the wall. “We’re all happy together.”

“I can see that.” Lyla’s voice was carefully neutral, but I caught the flash of something in her eyes. Pain? Jealousy? It was gone too quickly to identify. “Tell me about school. Are you being good for your father?”

While Luca chattered to his mother about his classes and friends, I felt Gianna relax slightly against my side. But the tension in the air was thick enough to cut, and I knew this was just the beginning. Lyla was studying us, looking for cracks in our facade.

“Well,” Lyla said after a few minutes, “I should probably get going. I have an early meeting tomorrow.” She knelt down to hug Luca. “Be good, okay? I’ll see you soon.”

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“Are you coming to my soccer game on Saturday?” Luca asked hopefully.

“I’ll try, sweetheart. Depends on work.”

The same excuse she’d used for the past three games. I bit back the comment that wanted to escape and focused on keeping my expression neutral.

After she left, Gianna sagged against me like a marionette with cut strings. “That was intense.”

“She was testing us,” I said quietly. “Looking for evidence that something’s not right.”

“Did we convince her?”

I thought about the way Lyla had watched us, the careful questions she’d asked, the tightness around her eyes when Luca had called Gianna “Mom.” “I’m not sure. But we didn’t give her anything obvious to work with.”

The rest of the evening passed without incident. We admired more artwork, chatted with Luca’s teacher about his progress, and made plans for upcoming school events. By the time we got back to the truck, I was exhausted from maintaining the performance.

“Ice cream?” I suggested as we buckled our seatbelts. “To celebrate surviving our first public outing?” I mumbled the last part for only Gianna to hear.

“Yes!” Luca cheered from the backseat.

Gianna smiled. A real smile this time. “Ice cream sounds perfect.”

The local ice cream shop was busy despite the cool weather, filled with families who’d had the same idea after the school event. We found a booth in the corner and ordered our usual flavors: chocolate chip for Luca, mint chocolate chip for Gianna, and plain vanilla for me.

“Dad’s boring,” Luca informed Gianna solemnly. “He always gets vanilla.”

“Hey now,” I protested. “Vanilla is a classic. It goes with everything.”

“It’s safe,” Gianna teased, licking her spoon. “Predictable.”

“I’m not predictable.”

“You had cornflakes for breakfast this morning. Same as every morning for the past week.”

Luca giggled. “And you always put two sugars in your coffee.”

“And you read the sports section of the newspaper first, every single time,” Gianna added.

“Okay, okay. Maybe I’m a little predictable.” I couldn’t help but smile at their teasing. This felt normal, natural. Like a real family enjoying a simple evening out.

“I like that you’re the same every day,” Luca said seriously, swinging his legs from the booth. “It makes me feel safe.”

The innocent comment hit me harder than I expected. This little boy, who'd already experienced too much change in his short life, found comfort in my routines. In knowing what to expect from the adults around him.

"Dad?" Luca's voice pulled me from my brooding. "Can we go to the park tomorrow? Mom said she'd teach me how to tell different flowers apart."

"If the weather's nice," I agreed.

"And Mom are you coming to my soccer game on Saturday?"

"Of course I'll be there," Gianna said before I could respond. "I wouldn't miss it."

"Good. You make the best noise with that horn thing."

"It's called an air horn, and yes, I do make excellent noise with it."

The ride home was quiet, Luca drowsy in his booster seat and Gianna staring out the passenger window at the darkened streets. I wondered what she was thinking, whether the evening had been as emotionally draining for her as it had been for me.

Back at the house, we went through our established routine. Gianna helped Luca with his bath while I cleaned up the kitchen, then I read him a bedtime story while she finished some paperwork for the flower shop. Normal domestic activities that felt both comfortable and dangerous.

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“How do you think we did tonight?” Gianna asked later, when we were alone in our bedroom getting ready for bed.

“With Lyla, you mean?”

“With everything. The whole performance.”

I thought about the evening and the way we’d moved together naturally, the easy conversation at the ice cream shop, the looks other parents had given us like we were just another happy family. “I think we did fine. Better than fine, actually.”

“It didn’t feel like performing,” she said quietly, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. “Not all of it, anyway.”

“No. It didn’t.”

She was quiet for a moment, brushing her teeth at the bathroom sink while I changed into pajama pants. The routine was becoming familiar, comfortable in a way that probably should have worried me more than it did.

“Colby?” Her voice was muffled by toothpaste.

“Yeah?”

“What happens if this gets too real? If we forget it’s supposed to be temporary?”

The question I’d been avoiding all evening hung in the air between us. I could give

her the practical answer, that we'd stick to our agreement, maintain our boundaries, remember why we were doing this. But standing there in our shared bedroom, watching her get ready for bed like she'd been doing it for years instead of days, the practical answer felt hollow.

"I don't know," I said honestly.

She nodded like she'd expected that response. "Me neither."

We got into bed on our respective sides, maintaining the careful distance we'd established. But tonight the space between us felt smaller somehow, charged with possibility and danger in equal measure.

"Goodnight, Colby."

"Goodnight."

I lay there in the dark listening to her breathe, thinking about Lyla's calculating stare and Luca's innocent joy and the way Gianna had fit so perfectly against my side all evening. Somewhere in the space between sleep and consciousness, I allowed myself to imagine what it would be like if this was real. If the woman beside me was truly my wife, if the child down the hall was truly ours, if the life we were building was something we could keep.

But morning would come, and with it the reminder of what this really was. A performance. A temporary arrangement. A means to an end that had nothing to do with the feelings growing stronger between us every day.

I just hoped we could both remember that when the time came to walk away.

CHAPTER 6

Gianna

The kitchen smelled like cinnamon and glue stick as Luca and I worked on his solar system project at the breakfast table. He'd been assigned to create a model of the planets, and we'd spent the past hour painting Styrofoam balls in various shades of blue, red, and yellow. His tongue stuck out slightly in concentration as he carefully applied orange paint to what would become Jupiter.

"Mom, does Jupiter really have that big red spot?" he asked, holding up the ball to examine his work.

"It does. It's called the Great Red Spot, and it's actually a giant storm that's been going on for hundreds of years."

His eyes widened. "Hundreds of years? That's longer than you and Dad have been alive."

"Much longer," I agreed, smiling at his amazement. "Space is full of incredible things."

From the garage came the faint sound of Colby's power tools as he worked on a custom bookshelf for a client. The familiar noise had become part of the soundtrack of our evenings, along with Luca's chatter and the low hum of domestic life that I'd never experienced before moving in here.

Two weeks. That's how long I'd been Mrs. Marshall, and already the rhythms of this house felt more natural than my old apartment ever had. I woke up to the smell of Colby's coffee and fell asleep to the sound of his breathing. I packed Luca's lunch every morning and helped him with homework every afternoon. I'd become part of their routine so seamlessly that sometimes I forgot this was supposed to be temporary.

“Can you help me with the rings around Saturn?” Luca asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Of course.” I reached for the thin wire we’d brought home from the craft store.

“We’ll need to be really careful with this part.”

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As we worked together, bending the wire into delicate circles, I found myself thinking about my own childhood. My parents had never helped me with school projects. My father had left when I was eight, and my mother had been too busy working two jobs to sit at the kitchen table making solar systems. I'd learned early how to be self-sufficient, how to handle things on my own.

Maybe that's why this felt so foreign and wonderful. The simple act of being present for a child who needed help, of having someone depend on me for more than just flower arrangements and small talk.

"There," I said, carefully attaching the rings to Saturn. "What do you think?"

"Perfect!" Luca beamed, then threw his paint-stained arms around my waist. "Thanks, Mom. This is going to be the best project in the whole class."

The hug caught me off guard, as it always did. The easy affection, the complete trust, the way he said "Mom" like it was the most natural thing in the world. My chest tightened with an emotion too big to name.

"I hope so, sweetheart."

The power tools went quiet in the garage, and a moment later Colby appeared in the kitchen doorway. Sawdust clung to his dark hair, and his gray eyes looked soft as he took in the scene: paint-covered table, our heads bent together over the project, the comfortable domesticity of it all.

"How's the solar system coming along?" he asked.

“Mom helped me make Saturn’s rings,” Luca announced proudly. “And she knows all about Jupiter’s red spot.”

“Does she now?” Colby’s gaze met mine across the table, something unreadable flickering in his expression. “Your mom is pretty smart.”

The word sent a familiar flutter through my stomach. When Colby called me Luca’s mom, it felt different than when Luca said it. More weighted. More dangerous.

“We’re almost done,” I said, focusing on cleaning paint from my hands. “Just need to let everything dry and then we can assemble it tomorrow.”

“Speaking of tomorrow,” Colby said, leaning against the doorframe, “I got a call from Luca’s teacher. Parent-teacher conferences are next week. She wants to meet with both of us.”

Both of us. Like we were a real parenting team, making decisions together about Luca’s education and future. The thought should have terrified me. This level of involvement, this depth of responsibility. Instead, it made me feel needed in a way I’d never experienced before.

“Of course,” I said. “Whatever works with your schedule.”

“Thursday at four. I can pick you up from the shop.”

“It’s a date.” The words slipped out before I could stop them, and heat flooded my cheeks. “I mean?—”

“I know what you meant,” Colby said quietly, but his eyes lingered on my face longer than necessary.

Luca, oblivious to the tension crackling between his parents, had already moved on to more pressing concerns. “Can we have mac and cheese for dinner? The kind with the breadcrumbs on top?”

“Sure thing, buddy,” Colby said, finally breaking eye contact with me. “Why don’t you go wash your hands while Mom and I clean up this mess?”

After Luca scampered upstairs, Colby and I worked together to clear the table in comfortable silence. Our hands brushed as we reached for the same paint jar, and the brief contact sent electricity up my arm. I pulled back quickly, but not before I saw his sharp intake of breath.

“Gianna.” His voice was rougher than usual.

“Yeah?”

“About what happened at the school the other night . . .”

My heart hammered against my ribs. “What about it?”

“The way we were together. How natural it felt.” He set down the paint jar and turned to face me fully. “It didn’t feel like acting.”

“No,” I whispered. “It didn’t.”

“That’s dangerous territory for us.”

I knew he was right. The whole point of this arrangement was to maintain enough distance to walk away when it was over. But standing there in his kitchen, surrounded by the evidence of the life we’d built together, distance felt impossible.

“I know,” I said.

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“So what do we do about it?”

Before I could answer, his phone buzzed on the counter. He glanced at the screen, and his expression immediately darkened.

“Lyla,” he said, showing me the caller ID.

My stomach clenched. “Answer it.”

He accepted the call, putting it on speaker so I could hear. “Hello, Lyla.”

“Colby.” Her voice was crisp, businesslike. “I need to talk to you about this weekend.”

“What about it?”

“I won’t be able to make Luca’s soccer game. Something came up at work.”

Something came up. The same excuse she’d used for the past month. I saw Colby’s jaw tighten, but his voice remained steady.

“Luca will be disappointed.”

“I’m sure Gianna can cheer extra loud to make up for it,” Lyla said, and I caught the edge in her tone. “You two seem to have the happy family routine down perfectly.”

“We’re not putting on a routine,” Colby said carefully. “We’re just living our lives.”

“How convenient that your life suddenly includes a ready-made mother figure right when you need one.”

The accusation hung in the air like poison. I wanted to defend us, to tell her that my feelings for Luca were real regardless of circumstances. But anything I said would only make things worse.

“Is there something specific you need, Lyla?” Colby asked.

“Just calling to let you know about Saturday. Give Luca my love.”

The line went dead, leaving us standing in the sudden silence of the kitchen. I could see the tension in Colby’s shoulders, the way his hands had clenched into fists at his sides.

“She knows,” I said quietly.

“She suspects. There’s a difference.”

“Is there?” I wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly cold. “Maybe she’s right. Maybe this is all too convenient, too perfectly timed.”

“Don’t.” Colby stepped closer, his gray eyes intense. “Don’t let her get in your head. What we have here, what you and Luca have that’s real. It doesn’t matter how it started.”

“But what if the judge sees it the same way she does? What if our marriage looks like exactly what it is, a desperate attempt to create stability that doesn’t actually exist?”

“It does exist.” His voice was fierce now, almost angry. “You think the way you help him with homework is fake? The way you make sure he eats his vegetables and pack

his lunch every morning? The way you worried when he had that fever last week and stayed up half the night checking his temperature?”

I stared at him, surprised by the vehemence in his voice.

“You love him,” Colby continued, his voice softer now. “And he loves you. That’s not fake, Gianna. That’s the realest thing in this whole mess.”

Tears pricked at my eyes. He was right. My love for Luca was completely genuine. But that only made this more complicated, not less.

“What happens when this is over?” I asked. “When you don’t need a wife anymore and I go back to my apartment? How do I explain to Luca that I was only temporary?”

The question seemed to hit him like a physical blow. He ran a hand through his hair, leaving it more disheveled than before.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I try not to think that far ahead.”

“Maybe you should. Maybe we both should.”

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Before he could respond, Luca's footsteps thundered down the stairs. "Is dinner ready? I'm starving!"

The moment shattered, and we both stepped back, putting safe distance between us. But as I started pulling ingredients from the refrigerator and Colby began boiling water for pasta, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were heading toward something neither of us was prepared for.

Later that evening, after Luca had gone to bed and Colby had retreated to his workshop, I sat alone in the living room staring at my phone. Lyla's words echoed in my head, mixing with my own doubts and fears about what we were doing.

Maybe I should call my mother. It had been months since we'd spoken, our relationship strained and distant ever since she'd remarried and moved to Florida. But she was the only person who might understand what it felt like to be caught between wanting to belong somewhere and being afraid to trust that belonging.

I dialed her number before I could change my mind.

"Gianna?" Her voice was surprised, cautious. "Is everything okay?"

"Hi, Mom. Yeah, everything's fine. I just . . . I wanted to talk."

"About what?"

I closed my eyes, not sure how to begin. "I got married."

Silence stretched across the line for so long I wondered if the call had dropped.

“Married?” she finally said. “When? To who?”

“Two weeks ago. To Colby. You remember him and his son, Luca?” She’d met them once, when she had visited.

“Two weeks ago and you’re just telling me now?”

The hurt in her voice made my chest ache. “It happened quickly. We didn’t have a big wedding or anything, just a small ceremony at the courthouse.”

“Are you pregnant?”

“No, Mom. It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like?”

How could I explain that I’d been in love with Colby for three years but had only married him to help him keep custody of his son? How could I tell her that I was living a lie that felt more real than anything I’d ever experienced?

“It’s complicated,” I said finally, realizing I shouldn’t have called and told her. I probably should’ve led with something like Colby and I are dating.

“Marriage usually is.” Her voice was gentler now, less accusatory. “Are you happy?”

The simple question caught me off guard. Was I happy? In stolen moments—when Luca hugged me goodnight, when Colby smiled at me across the dinner table, when we worked together on homework or household tasks—yes. I was happier than I’d ever been.

But underneath that happiness was a constant undercurrent of fear. Fear that this would end. Fear that I was getting too attached. Fear that when the pretense was over, I'd be left with nothing but the memory of what it felt like to be part of a family.

"I think so," I said. "Most of the time."

"That's more than a lot of people can say. Your father and I . . ." She trailed off, and I heard the weight of old regrets in her silence. "We were never happy, not really. We stayed together out of obligation and fear, and look how that turned out."

My parents' marriage had been a disaster from the beginning. Two people who'd married because it was expected, not because they loved each other. They'd spent eight years making each other miserable before my father finally left for good.

"This is different," I said, though I wasn't sure if I was trying to convince her or myself.

"I hope so, sweetheart. You deserve to be happy. You deserve to be loved."

After we hung up, I sat there thinking about her words. Did I deserve to be loved? And more importantly, was what I had with Colby and Luca real enough to last, or was I just setting myself up for the same kind of heartbreak that had defined my childhood?

The sound of the garage door opening interrupted my brooding. Colby appeared in the living room, looking tired but satisfied with his evening's work.

"Everything okay?" he asked, noticing my expression.

“Just thinking.”

“About what Lyla said?”

I nodded. “Among other things.”

He sat down beside me on the couch, close enough that I could smell the faint scent of wood stain on his clothes. “Want to talk about it?”

“I called my mother. Told her about the wedding.”

His eyebrows rose. “How did that go?”

“Better than expected, actually. She asked if I was happy.”

“What did you tell her?”

I looked at him. Really looked at him. The strong line of his jaw, the gray eyes that seemed to see straight through me, the hands that created beautiful things from raw wood and touched me with such careful gentleness.

“That I think so. Most of the time.”

Something shifted in his expression, a softness that made my breath catch. “And the rest of the time?”

“The rest of the time I’m terrified.”

“Of what?”

“Of this.” I gestured between us, at the space that seemed to crackle with possibility.

“Of how real it feels. Of what happens when it’s over.”

He was quiet for a long moment, studying my face like he was trying to memorize it. Finally, he reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering against my cheek.

“What if it doesn’t have to be over?” he said quietly.

My heart stopped. “Colby . . .”

“I know what we agreed to. I know this was supposed to be temporary. But somewhere along the way, it stopped feeling like pretend for me.”

“We can’t.” The words came out as barely a whisper. “We agreed?—”

“Agreements can change. People can change.” His thumb brushed across my cheekbone, and I felt myself leaning into his touch despite every rational thought in my head. “I’ve been thinking about what you said earlier, about what happens when this is over. And the truth is, I don’t want it to be over.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t I?” His steely eyes were intense, searching. “When I watch you with Luca, when we’re making dinner together or helping with homework or just sitting here talking, it doesn’t feel like an arrangement, Gianna. It feels like home.”

Tears stung my eyes. “What if you’re wrong? What if you’re just confused because we’re living together and sharing a bed and playing house? What if when everything

settles down, you realize this isn't what you actually want?"

"What if you're wrong?" he countered. "What if this is exactly what I want, and I've just been too scared to admit it?"

Before I could respond, he leaned closer, and I could see the flecks of silver in his eyes, could feel his breath warm against my lips. Every rational thought fled my mind as the space between us disappeared.

His kiss was soft, tentative, nothing like the brief press of lips at our wedding ceremony. This was real. This was him asking a question I wasn't sure I was ready to answer.

I kissed him back anyway, my hands fisting in his shirt as weeks of suppressed longing crashed over me like a wave. He tasted like coffee and possibility, like everything I'd ever wanted and been afraid to reach for.

When we finally broke apart, we were both breathing hard. His forehead rested against mine, and I could see the uncertainty in his eyes that probably mirrored my own.

"This changes everything," I whispered.

"Maybe it was always going to change," he said. "Maybe we were just kidding ourselves that we could keep this simple."

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I wanted to believe him. I wanted to trust that this moment was real, that his feelings weren't just a product of our circumstances. But the fear was still there, whispering reminders of every time I'd been left behind, every time I'd been disappointed by someone I'd trusted.

"I need time," I said finally. "To think. To figure out what this means."

He nodded, though I could see the disappointment flicker across his face. "Okay."

"I'm not saying no," I clarified quickly. "I'm just saying . . . this is complicated."

"I know it is." He stood up from the couch, running a hand through his hair. "But Gianna? Some things are worth being complicated for."

As I watched him head upstairs, I sat there touching my lips and wondering if he was right. If what we were building together was worth the risk of heartbreak. If love—real love—was worth fighting for, even when it came wrapped in custody battles and legal complications and all the messy realities of life.

I thought about Luca upstairs in his bed, dreaming of solar systems and soccer games. I thought about the parent-teacher conference next week, and all the ways our lives had become intertwined.

And I thought about the way Colby had looked at me when he'd said this felt like home.

Maybe some risks were worth taking after all.

CHAPTER 7

Colby

The coffee shop downtown buzzed with the usual morning crowd, but the corner table where I sat felt isolated from the cheerful chatter around me. I'd arrived fifteen minutes early, needing time to prepare for a conversation I'd been dreading since Lyla's text yesterday:

We need to talk. Just the two of us. Millbrook Café, 9 AM.

I checked my phone for the third time in five minutes. No messages from Gianna, who was at the flower shop preparing for a wedding delivery. We'd barely spoken since the kiss three nights ago, both of us dancing around what had happened with careful politeness that felt worse than outright conflict.

The bell above the café door chimed, and Lyla walked in wearing a charcoal business suit and the kind of smile that had once made me think she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Now it just made me wary.

She spotted me immediately and approached with the confident stride of someone who owned every room she entered. "Colby. Thank you for meeting me."

"Lyla." I stood to pull out her chair, old habits dying hard. "Coffee?"

"Please. Black."

I signaled the waitress while Lyla settled herself across from me, placing her designer purse on the table like a statement piece. She looked polished as always, every hair in place despite the October wind outside.

“You look tired,” she said, studying my face with the calculating gaze I remembered from our worst fights.

“Long week. What did you want to talk about?”

She accepted her coffee from the waitress with a gracious smile, then turned those blue eyes on me. “Your marriage.”

My jaw tightened. “What about it?”

“Come on, Colby. We were married for four years. I know you better than anyone.” She leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping to the tone she’d always used when she thought she had the upper hand. “This whole thing is a setup. A desperate attempt to look stable for any future custody discussions.”

“That’s not?—”

“I’ve done my research. Gianna Stapleton, florist, single with no serious relationships on record, conveniently available right when you might need to prove you can provide Luca with a stable home.” Lyla’s smile sharpened. “The timing is remarkable.”

Heat rose in my chest, but I kept my voice level. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I? She’s been your friend for years, always available to babysit, always ready to step in when you needed help. And suddenly, right when things might get complicated, she becomes the love of your life?” Lyla laughed, the sound cutting through the café’s ambient noise. “Even for you, that’s quite a coincidence.”

“My relationship with Gianna isn’t up for discussion.”

“Your fake relationship with Gianna is absolutely up for discussion. It’s fraud, Colby. Designed specifically to make you look like the perfect family man.”

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The accusation struck me like a physical blow, partly because it was technically true and partly because it felt completely wrong. What Gianna and I had might have started as an arrangement, but it had become something else entirely. Something real enough that I'd spent the last three nights lying awake thinking about the taste of her lips and the way she'd looked at me afterward.

"You're fishing," I said finally.

"Am I? Then you won't mind if I have my lawyer look into the timeline. When you applied for the marriage license, how long you'd been 'dating,' whether anyone can verify this grand romance actually existed before you started worrying about custody."

My hands clenched around my coffee cup. "Leave Gianna out of this."

"I can't do that. She's inserted herself into my son's life, playing house with a man she barely knows, and you expect me to just accept it?"

"We're not playing, Lyla. She was my friend before you walked out of our lives. You know this. You know her. She loves Luca."

"I'm sure she does. He's a lovable kid. But loving someone else's child doesn't make you a mother, and it certainly doesn't make you qualified to influence decisions about his future."

The contempt in her voice made my temper spike. "You mean the way you've been influencing his future? Missing his games, canceling visits, using him as a weapon in

whatever game you're playing?"

Lyla's composed mask slipped for just a moment, revealing something raw underneath. "I'm trying to protect him."

"From what? From having a stable home with two parents who actually show up?"

"From watching you use another woman as a placeholder until someone better comes along." Her voice rose slightly, drawing glances from nearby tables. "That's what you do, Colby. You find women who'll take care of you and Luca until you get bored or find an excuse to leave."

"That's not?—"

"Isn't it? How long did Sarah last? Six months? And what about that teacher, Rebecca? She was good with Luca too, until you decided she was getting too attached."

The names struck me like slaps. Sarah and Rebecca, two women I'd dated briefly over the past few years, both of whom had tried to build something lasting with me and Luca. Both of whom I'd eventually pushed away when things got too serious, too real.

"This is different," I said, but the words sounded hollow even to my own ears.

"How? Because you married this one? Because you're willing to commit fraud to maintain custody?" Lyla leaned back in her chair, looking satisfied. "Face it, Colby. You're so desperate to keep Luca that you'll drag an innocent woman into your mess and pretend it's love."

"Don't tell me what I feel."

“Then tell me yourself. Look me in the eye and tell me you’re madly in love with Gianna Stapleton. Tell me this isn’t about proving you can provide stability.”

I stared at her across the small table, my heart hammering against my ribs. The truth was complicated, messy, impossible to explain in simple terms. Had I married Gianna to help with custody? Yes. Was I in love with her? The kiss three nights ago suggested I was, but the foundation of our relationship made everything uncertain.

“I thought so,” Lyla said when I didn’t answer immediately. “You can’t even convince yourself, let alone a judge.”

“What do you want, Lyla?”

“I want what’s best for Luca. And what’s best for him isn’t watching his father manipulate women and call it love.”

“So you’re going to take him away from his home, his friends, his school? You’re going to uproot his entire life to prove a point?”

“I’m going to give him stability. Real stability, not this house of cards you’ve built with your convenient wife.”

I stood up abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor. “We’re done here.”

“Sit down, Colby. I’m not finished.”

“Yes, you are.” I threw a ten on the table to cover our coffee. “If you want to keep playing games, do it through the lawyers. Leave Gianna alone.”

“I can’t promise that. If she’s going to be part of this situation, she’s fair game.”

The threat in her voice made my blood run cold. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’ll do whatever I have to do to protect my son. Even if it means exposing the truth about your marriage.”

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I walked out of the café before I could say something I'd regret, but Lyla's words followed me onto the sidewalk. The truth about your marriage. She was right that the foundation was built on legal necessity, but she was wrong about everything else. What I felt for Gianna, what she felt for Luca, the life we'd built together that was real.

Wasn't it?

By the time I got home, my mood had darkened to match the gray October sky. The house felt different somehow. Not obviously wrong, but the subtle displacement of someone who'd been there while I was gone. A pillow displaced on the couch. The slight chemical smell of cleaning products in the air.

Lyla must have stopped by while I was at the Henderson job site. She still had a key for her visits with Luca, but she'd never cleaned before. My skin crawled as I walked through the rooms, wondering what she'd been looking for or what she'd left behind.

I found Gianna in the kitchen making lunch, her dark hair pulled back in a messy bun and paint smudged on her cheek from whatever project she'd been working on at the shop.

"How did it go?" she asked without turning around.

"About as well as expected."

She glanced over her shoulder, taking in my expression. "That bad?"

“She knows. Or thinks she knows. About the arrangement, the timing, all of it.”

Gianna’s hands stilled on the sandwich she was making. “What did you tell her?”

“Nothing. But she made it clear she’s not going to let this go.”

“What does that mean for us?”

The question hung in the air between us, loaded with implications neither of us wanted to face. What did it mean for us? Were we still just following the script of our arrangement, or had we crossed into something else entirely?

“I don’t know,” I said honestly.

She turned to face me fully, and I could see the worry in her hazel eyes. “Colby, maybe we should talk about what happened the other night.”

“The kiss?”

“The kiss,” she agreed. “And what you said afterward. About not wanting this to be over.”

I moved closer, drawn to her despite the chaos in my head. “Did you mean what you said? About needing time to think?”

“I meant it. But I’ve been thinking, and I keep coming back to the same questions.” She wrapped her arms around herself, a gesture I’d learned meant she was feeling vulnerable. “What’s real here? What we feel for each other, or what we’ve convinced ourselves we feel because we’re living like a married couple?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters. If we’re just caught up in playing house, if these feelings are just a product of proximity and convenience, then what happens when the pressure is off? When you don’t need a wife anymore?”

Lyla’s words echoed in my head: You find women who’ll take care of you and Luca until you get bored or find an excuse to leave. Was that what I was doing? Using Gianna’s feelings for Luca and her growing attachment to me as a way to get what I needed?

“I don’t know,” I said again, and hated how helpless it sounded.

“That’s what scares me.” Gianna’s voice was quiet, but there was steel underneath. “I can’t be another Sarah or Rebecca, Colby. I can’t let myself fall completely in love with you and Luca only to have you decide I’m getting too attached.”

“That’s not what this is.”

“Isn’t it? Be honest with me, Colby. If there was no custody case, if Lyla had never filed her motion, would you have married me?”

The question pierced me like a punch to the gut because I couldn’t answer it. Without the custody case, would I have been brave enough to admit my feelings? Would I have risked our friendship for the possibility of something more?

“I don’t know,” I said for the third time, and saw her face crumble slightly.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Gianna, wait?—”

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“No, it’s okay. I understand.” She turned back to the counter, but I could see the tension in her shoulders. “We got caught up in the moment. It happens when people live in close quarters and share responsibilities. But we can’t lose sight of why we’re doing this.”

“And why are we doing this?”

“For Luca. To keep him safe and stable and with the parent who actually shows up for him.” Her voice was steadier now, but I caught the slight tremor underneath. “That’s what matters. Not whatever we think we feel for each other.”

I wanted to argue with her, to tell her that what I felt was real regardless of how it started. But Lyla’s accusations were still fresh in my mind, along with the uncomfortable truth that I couldn’t definitively separate my feelings from my needs.

“So we go back to the arrangement,” I said.

“We stick to the arrangement. We maintain the facade for any legal issues, and when it’s over, we figure out how to untangle ourselves without hurting Luca.”

The practicality of it should have been reassuring. Instead, it felt like giving up something precious before I’d even fully understood what it was.

“What about the other night? The kiss?”

She was quiet for a long moment, not looking at me. “A mistake. We let our guard down and forgot what this was supposed to be.”

“It didn’t feel like a mistake.”

“That’s what makes it dangerous.” She finally turned around, and I could see the pain in her eyes despite her controlled voice. “We can’t afford to make that kind of mistake again. Too much is at stake.”

Before I could respond, the sound of Luca’s school bus rumbling down our street cut through the tension. In five minutes, he’d come bouncing through the front door full of stories about his day, expecting the stable family life we’d promised to provide.

“He can’t know about this,” Gianna said quietly. “Whatever confusion there is between us, we can’t let it affect him.”

“Agreed.”

She nodded and went back to making lunch, but the easy domesticity from earlier was gone. Now we moved around each other like strangers, careful not to touch, careful not to meet each other’s eyes for too long.

The front door burst open right on schedule. “Mom! Dad! Guess what happened at school today!”

Luca’s voice carried the uncomplicated joy of a child whose world still made sense. He ran into the kitchen and threw his arms around Gianna’s waist, chattering about a science experiment and a playground argument that had been resolved before recess ended.

She smiled, listened, and asked all the right questions, but I could see the effort it cost her. The careful mask she wore to hide her pain from the child who loved her without reservation.

But watching her pretend everything was fine while my own chest felt like it was caving in, I realized Lyla might be right about one thing: I was using Gianna. Not intentionally, not maliciously, but using her nonetheless. Her love for Luca, her willingness to sacrifice her own emotional safety for his stability, her ability to make our house feel like a home.

The question was whether I was brave enough to figure out what I actually felt for her, or if I'd keep hiding behind the excuse of necessity until it was too late to choose love over convenience.

As I watched her help Luca with his backpack and listened to her genuine laughter at his silly jokes, I knew one thing for certain: losing her was going to hurt far more than losing a convenient arrangement.

It was going to feel like losing everything.

CHAPTER 8

Gianna

I stood in my flower shop at seven in the morning, arranging white roses and eucalyptus for a funeral service, trying to lose myself in the familiar rhythm of stems and wire and careful placement. The work usually calmed me, but today my hands shook as I trimmed the rose stems, and I'd already pricked my finger twice on thorns I should have seen coming.

Three days had passed since my argument with Colby, and the careful distance we'd maintained felt like a chasm neither of us knew how to cross. We spoke only about Luca's needs: homework, soccer practice, what to pack for lunch. We moved around each other in the kitchen like polite strangers, avoiding touch, and eye contact that lasted too long.

At night, we lay on opposite sides of his king-size bed with an ocean of space between us, both pretending to sleep while the tension crackled like electricity in the dark.

The bell above my shop door chimed, and I looked up to see Summer entering with two cups of coffee and a concerned expression.

“You look terrible,” she said without preamble.

“Good morning to you too.” I accepted the coffee gratefully, inhaling the rich aroma.
“Rough night.”

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“Another one?” Summer perched on my work stool, studying my face with the intensity of someone who’d known me long enough to read between the lines. “Want to talk about it?”

I focused on the roses, arranging them in a cascade that would drape beautifully over the casket. “Not much to talk about.”

“Gianna.” Her voice was gentle but firm. “I’ve watched you work yourself into the ground this week. You’re here before dawn, you barely eat, and yesterday you put baby’s breath with sunflowers, which you would never do if your head was on straight.”

I glanced at the arrangement she mentioned, still sitting unfinished on my back counter. She was right. The combination looked amateur, sloppy. Not like my work at all.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. And neither is Colby, from what Cory tells me. Whatever’s going on between you two, it’s affecting everyone around you.”

I set down my scissors and finally looked at her directly. “What do you mean?”

“Luca asked Marcus yesterday if grown-ups could stop being happy.” Summer’s expression softened. “That little boy is picking up on the tension, honey. Kids always do.”

The words hit me like a physical blow. Luca—sweet, innocent Luca who just wanted his family to stay together—was already sensing that something was wrong. The very thing we'd been trying to protect him from was happening anyway.

“We’ve been careful,” I said weakly.

“Have you? Because from the outside, it looks like two people who are desperately in love but too scared to admit it.”

I turned back to the roses, unable to handle the knowing look in her eyes. “It’s complicated.”

“Love usually is.”

“This isn’t about love. It’s about . . .” I trailed off, realizing I couldn’t explain the arrangement without revealing the truth about our marriage. “It’s about doing what’s best for Luca.”

“And what’s best for Luca is having two parents who are miserable?”

“We’re not miserable.”

Summer raised an eyebrow. “Really? Because you’re arranging funeral flowers at seven the morning instead of having breakfast with your family, and Colby’s apparently been working in his shop until midnight every night this week.”

I hadn’t known about the late nights in his workshop, but it made sense. We were both finding excuses to avoid being alone together, afraid of the tension that simmered between us whenever Luca wasn’t around to provide a buffer.

“Sometimes space is healthy,” I said.

“Space, yes. Emotional walls, no.” Summer hopped off the stool and moved closer. “Gianna, I don’t know what happened between you and Colby, but I do know that man looks at you like you hung the moon. And you light up around him and Luca in a way I’ve never seen before.”

“You don’t understand?—”

“Then help me understand. Because right now, it looks like you’re both throwing away something beautiful out of fear.”

Before I could respond, the shop door chimed again. This time it was Mrs. Henderson, picking up the centerpieces for her daughter’s engagement party. I forced a bright smile and helped her load the arrangements into her car, grateful for the interruption.

But after she left, Summer was still there, waiting with the patience of a friend who refused to be dismissed.

“I have feelings for him,” I admitted quietly. “Real feelings. But I’m not sure if they’re genuine or just a product of the situation we’re in.”

“What situation?”

I chose my words carefully. “Living together, taking care of Luca together, playing house. It’s easy to confuse proximity and shared responsibility with love.”

“Is it? Because I’ve lived with roommates before, and I never wanted to marry any of them.”

Despite everything, I smiled at that. “It’s not the same thing.”

“Isn’t it? You’re two adults sharing a home and raising a child. If that doesn’t create real feelings, nothing will.”

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I thought about the past weeks, the easy mornings making breakfast together, the quiet evenings helping with homework, the way Colby looked at me when he thought I wasn't watching. Had those moments been real, or just the result of forced intimacy?

"What if I'm wrong?" I said finally. "What if what I think I feel is just . . . convenience? What if I'm just a placeholder until he finds someone better?"

"Has he given you any reason to think that?"

I thought about the women he's dated before, the women who had tried to build something lasting with Colby and had been pushed for some reason or the other. As his best friend, he never confided in me as to why he broke up with them, just that things didn't work out.

"I've always been on the sideline watching him fumble his way through relationships. The first after Gabrielle was Sarah. She tried so hard to be part of his and Luca's life, but when she started talking about moving in together, Colby panicked and ended things. Then came Rebecca. She lasted six months before he found reasons to pull away."

"People can change. Especially when they find the right person."

"How do you know if you're the right person or just the convenient person?"

Summer was quiet for a moment, considering. "I think you ask yourself this: If Colby didn't need anything from you—no help with Luca, no domestic support,

nothing—would you still want to be with him?”

The question stopped me cold. If I stripped away all the practical reasons for our arrangement, all the ways I’d become useful to him and Luca, what was left?

The answer came immediately, with a clarity that surprised me. I would still want the man who ate nothing but vanilla ice cream and listened patiently to his son’s rambling stories. I would still want the man who worked with his hands to create beautiful things, who kissed my forehead when he thought I was asleep, who looked at me sometimes like I was precious and rare.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Then that’s your answer. The rest is just fear talking.”

After Summer left, I spent the morning wrestling with her words while I worked on arrangements for the weekend’s weddings. Two brides, both radiating joy and certainty as they planned their futures with the men they loved. I’d helped create the flowers for dozens of weddings over the years, but today the symbolism felt pointed, almost mocking.

If Colby didn’t need anything from you—no help with Luca, no domestic support, nothing—would you still want to be with him?

But wanting him and trusting that he wanted me—really wanted me, not just needed me—were two different things. Lyla’s accusations from their coffee meeting still stung because they held a grain of truth. I was convenient. I was available. I was already woven into the fabric of their lives.

The question was whether I was also loved.

By lunch time, I'd decided to close the shop early and go home. Maybe Summer was right. Maybe Luca was picking up on our tension, and that wasn't fair to him. We needed to find a way to coexist peacefully, even if we couldn't bridge the emotional distance between us.

The house was quiet when I arrived, Colby's truck gone from the driveway. I remembered he had a delivery across town, something about custom cabinets for a law office. Luca would be at school for another two hours, giving me time to think without the pressure of maintaining a facade.

I was in the kitchen making tea when my phone rang. Unknown number, but local area code.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Marshall? This is Janet from Millbrook Elementary. I'm calling about Luca."

My heart stopped. "Is he hurt? What happened?"

"He's fine, physically. But he had an incident during lunch recess. He got into an argument with another student and ended up in the principal's office. He's asked for you specifically."

"I'll be right there."

The drive to the school took eight minutes that felt like hours. I called Colby twice, but both times it went straight to voicemail. He was probably in the middle of his installation, tools running too loud to hear his phone.

I found Luca sitting in the main office, his small legs swinging from an adult-sized chair. His face showed streaks of tears, and grass stains covered his shirt from

whatever had happened on the playground.

“Mom,” he said when he saw me, and threw himself into my arms.

I held him tight, breathing in the familiar scent of his strawberry shampoo mixed with playground dirt. “Hey, sweetheart. What happened?”

“Tommy Morrison said mean things about you,” he said against my shoulder, his voice muffled but angry. “He said you’re not my real mom because you don’t look like me and you just moved in with us.”

The words were like a knife to my chest.

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“What did you tell him?” I asked gently.

“I told him he was wrong and that you are my real mom because you make my lunch and help with homework, and you came to all my soccer games even when it was raining.” His voice was fierce, protective. “But then he said his big sister heard their mom talking, and that you only married Dad because of some grown-up problem.”

I closed my eyes, feeling sick. The rumors were spreading, just as I’d feared they would. And now Luca was caught in the middle of adult complications he shouldn’t have to understand.

“And then what happened?”

“I pushed him,” Luca admitted in a small voice. “I know I’m not supposed to, but he was being really mean about you and I got mad.”

“Oh, honey.”

Principal Martinez appeared beside us, a kind woman in her fifties who’d worked at the school for decades. “Mrs. Marshall, thank you for coming. I’ve already spoken with Tommy and his parents. There will be consequences for both boys, but I wanted to talk with you about the underlying issue.”

I nodded, still holding Luca close.

“Children pick up on more than we think they do,” she continued carefully. “And unfortunately, adult conversations sometimes make their way to the playground. Luca

was defending his family, which I understand, but we need to make sure he has better tools for handling these situations.”

“Of course. What do you recommend?”

“We’ll work with both boys on using words instead of physical actions when they’re upset. And it might be helpful to have some simple responses ready for Luca when other children ask questions about his family.”

After we left the school, I took Luca for ice cream even though it was barely two o’clock on a school day. He needed comfort food, and I needed time to process what had happened before Colby got home.

“Mom?” Luca said around a mouthful of chocolate chip cookie dough. “Are you mad at me for pushing Tommy?”

“I’m disappointed that you used your hands instead of words,” I said carefully. “But I understand why you were upset.”

“He was wrong, wasn’t he? About you not being my real mom?”

The question I’d been dreading, asked with such innocent trust that it made my chest ache. How could I explain that legally, biologically, technically, Tommy Morrison was right? How could I tell this child who loved me so completely that our family was built on legal documents and necessity?

“What makes someone a real mom?” I asked instead.

He considered this seriously, licking his spoon. “Taking care of you when you’re sick. Making your favorite foods. Helping with scary things like homework and doctor visits. Loving you even when you’re in trouble.”

“Do I do those things?”

“Yeah. And you smell good, and you give the best hugs, and you always remember to cut the crusts off my sandwiches.” He paused. “Tommy’s mom forgets the crusts all the time.”

Despite everything, I smiled. “Well, then I guess that makes me pretty real.”

“That’s what I told him. But he said his dad said you only married Dad because of court stuff.” Luca’s voice got smaller. “Is that true?”

The direct question from this innocent child who trusted me completely felt like a physical blow. I could lie, deflect, change the subject. Or I could find a way to tell him a version of the truth that wouldn’t destroy his sense of security.

“Sometimes grown-ups get married for complicated reasons,” I said finally. “But the important thing isn’t why people get married. It’s whether they love each other and take care of each other afterward.”

“Do you love me and Dad?”

“I love you more than all the stars in the sky,” I said without hesitation. “And I love your dad too.”

The words slipped out before I could stop them, but once they were spoken, I realized they were completely true. Despite all my fears and doubts, despite the complicated circumstances of our marriage, I loved Colby Marshall. Not because of proximity or convenience or shared responsibility, but because of who he was when he didn’t think anyone was watching.

“Good,” Luca said, satisfied. “Because we’re a family, and families love each other.”

By the time we got home, Colby's truck was in the driveway. I found him in the kitchen, phone pressed to his ear and worry lines creasing his forehead.

"She's here now," he said when he saw us. "I'll call you back."

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He hung up and crossed to us in three quick strides, pulling Luca into a hug. “Hey, buddy. Are you okay? The school called, but I was in the middle of?—”

“I’m okay,” Luca said. “Mom took me for ice cream, and we talked about real moms and court stuff and why Tommy Morrison is stupid.”

Colby’s eyes met mine over Luca’s head, and I saw my own worry reflected there. “Court stuff?”

“Kids talk,” I said quietly. “Luca heard some rumors.”

His jaw tightened. “What kind of rumors?”

“The kind that make six-year-olds get in fights defending their families.”

Luca pulled back from his father’s embrace. “Dad, you didn’t marry Mom just because of court stuff, did you? Because I told Tommy that was dumb.”

Colby knelt down to Luca’s eye level, his expression gentle but serious. “I married your mom because I wanted her to be part of our family forever. Because I love her, and she loves us.”

It was a beautiful answer, one that satisfied Luca completely. But I caught the careful way Colby had phrased it, how he’d avoided saying he’d married me for love rather than legal reasons. The distinction was subtle but important, and it reminded me of all the uncertainty that still existed between us.

After Luca went upstairs to play, Colby and I stood in the kitchen facing each other across the familiar distance that had become our default.

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “For what you told him.”

“I meant it.”

“Did you?”

He moved closer, close enough that I could see those silver flecks in his eyes that mesmerized me. “Every word.”

“Even the part about loving me?”

He was quiet for a long moment, studying my face. “Especially that part.”

“Colby—”

“I know we agreed to stick to the arrangement. I know we decided what happened between us was a mistake. He reached up to cup my face in his hands. “I can’t pretend anymore, Gianna. I can’t pretend this is just convenience or proximity or whatever logical explanation we’ve been using.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I’m in love with you. Really, truly, completely in love with you. And it has nothing to do with custody cases or convenience or needing someone to help with Luca.” His thumbs brushed across my cheekbones. “It’s because you make everything better just by being here. Because you love my son like he’s your own. Because when I wake up in the morning, the first thing I want is to see your face.”

Tears spilled over despite my efforts to contain them. “What if you change your mind? What if when this is all over, you realize?—”

“I won’t.” His voice was fierce, certain. “I’ve spent three years fighting these feelings because I was too scared to risk losing you. But I’m more scared of living without you.”

“Colby . . .”

“I know I don’t deserve you. I know I’ve made mistakes with other women, pushed people away when things got real. But you’re not other women, Gianna. You’re the love of my life, and I was just too stupid to see it before now.”

Before I could respond, he kissed me. Not the tentative, questioning kiss from a few nights ago, but something deeper, more desperate. A kiss that tasted like hope and promises and years of suppressed longing finally set free.

When we broke apart, we were both breathing hard.

“I love you too,” I whispered against his lips. “I’ve loved you for so long I can’t remember what it felt like not to love you.”

“Then why are we fighting this?”

“Because I’m scared.” The admission came out broken, vulnerable. “I’m scared of being another woman you get tired of. I’m scared of loving you and Luca so much that losing you would destroy me.”

“You won’t lose us.” His forehead rested against mine, his voice quiet but steady. “We’re not going anywhere, Gianna. We’re home.”

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The simple word broke something open in my chest. Home. Not the house or the arrangement or the legal documents, but the feeling of belonging somewhere completely. Of being part of something bigger than myself.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Now we stop pretending this is temporary. Now we build something real, something that lasts.” He smiled, and it was like sunshine breaking through clouds. “Now we stop being afraid and start being happy.”

Outside, while it had started to rain, a soft October shower that drummed against the windows and made the kitchen feel cozy and warm, Colby and I held each other and finally admitted what had been true all along: this had never been about convenience or custody arrangements or legal necessity.

This had always been about love.

CHAPTER 9

Colby

The law office smelled like leather and old money. The kind of place designed to intimidate anyone who couldn't afford the hourly rate. I sat across from my lawyer, David Voight, watching him spread documents across the polished conference table with the methodical precision of someone delivering bad news.

“They filed the motion yesterday,” he said, sliding a thick stack of papers toward me.

“Lyla’s attorney is challenging the validity of your marriage.”

My stomach dropped. Three weeks had passed since Gianna and I had finally admitted our feelings to each other, three weeks of happiness I’d never thought possible. We’d fallen into an easy rhythm of real life: morning coffee shared over the newspaper, evening walks around the neighborhood, quiet conversations after Luca went to bed. I’d started to believe we could actually make this work.

Now Lyla was trying to destroy it all.

“On what grounds?” I asked, though I suspected I already knew.

“Marriage fraud. She’s claiming you entered into the marriage solely to influence the custody case, with no genuine intent to create a marital relationship.” David’s expression was grim. “She has evidence.”

“What kind of evidence?”

He pulled out a manila folder and opened it carefully. “Timeline documentation showing when you applied for the marriage license relative to her custody filing. Witness statements from people who say they never saw you and Gianna together romantically before the custody case began. Financial records showing Gianna maintained her own apartment until the week of your wedding.”

Each piece of evidence felt like a punch to the gut. Together, they painted a picture of exactly what our marriage had been at the beginning a calculated move to improve my custody chances.

“There’s more,” David continued reluctantly. “She has a recording.”

My blood turned to ice. “What kind of recording?”

“A phone conversation between you and Gianna. Something about ‘sticking to the arrangement’ and ‘maintaining the facade for the custody case.’”

The conversation from after our fight, when we’d both been hurt and defensive and said things we didn’t mean. Somehow Lyla had gotten hold of it, and now our private moment of doubt was going to be used as ammunition against us.

“How did she get that?” I asked, my voice barely controlled. And then my stomach dropped. She did have a key. I’d never bothered to change the locks after the divorce because she rarely came by, and when she did, it was to pick up Luca. “She has access to the house when she picks up Luca.”

David sigh and wrote some notes. “That’s likely how. A small recording device in your home.” David’s expression was grim. “It’s invasive, but unfortunately not illegal since she has legitimate access to the residence.”

The violation felt like ice in my veins. Lyla had been in our home, listening to our private conversations, gathering ammunition for her legal war. I made a mental note to call a locksmith the moment this meeting ended.

“But Colby, this is serious. If the judge determines your marriage is fraudulent, it won’t just affect the custody case. You could face criminal charges. Both of you could.”

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to process the magnitude of what we were facing. “What are our options?”

“We fight it. We present evidence that your marriage has become genuine, that you and Gianna have built a real relationship regardless of how it started.” David leaned forward. “But I have to ask you directly. Is your marriage real now? Because if you’re going to commit perjury on top of marriage fraud, I need to know.”

“It’s real,” I said without hesitation. “What Gianna and I have now is completely real.”

“Can you prove that? Because feelings aren’t enough. We need concrete evidence of a genuine marital relationship.”

I thought about the past three weeks. The way Gianna curled against me in sleep, the shared looks across the dinner table, the quiet moments when she helped Luca with homework while I cooked dinner. How could I prove that those moments were real? How could I document love?

“We share a bedroom, a bank account, household responsibilities. We make decisions together about Luca. We—” I stopped, realizing how thin it all sounded in a legal context.

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“Those things can be faked for appearances,” David said gently. “What we need is evidence that outsiders would recognize. Joint financial planning, integrated social lives, future commitments that extend beyond the custody case.”

Future commitments. The phrase hit me like a revelation. “We haven’t made any long-term plans because we’ve been so focused on getting through the custody case. But that doesn’t mean we don’t want a future together.”

“Then you need to start making those plans. Publicly. Joint investments, vacation bookings, anything that shows you’re building a life together that extends beyond this legal situation.”

After leaving David’s office, I sat in my truck in the parking lot for twenty minutes, trying to figure out how to tell Gianna that our carefully constructed happiness was under attack. She’d been so radiant lately, so settled and content. The thought of watching her face crumble when I explained what we were facing made my chest ache.

But there was no choice. We were in this together now, for real, and that meant facing the hard things as well as celebrating the good ones.

I found her at home, curled up on the living room couch with a book and a cup of tea. Late afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows, turning her hair golden and making her look like something from a painting. When she looked up and smiled at me, my heart clenched with the knowledge that I was about to shatter her peace.

“Hey,” she said, marking her place in the book. “How did the meeting go?”

I sat down beside her, close enough to touch but not quite ready to. “Lyla filed a motion to challenge our marriage.”

The color drained from her face. “What does that mean?”

“She’s claiming marriage fraud. Saying we only got married to influence the custody case.”

Gianna set down her book with shaking hands. “Can she do that?”

“She’s doing it. The hearing is in ten days.”

“Ten days?” Her voice rose to almost a whisper. “Colby, what happens if she wins?”

I reached for her hands, needing the contact as much as she did. “We fight it. We prove that what we have now is real.”

“But how? She’s right about how it started. We did get married for the custody case. The timing, the circumstances. It all looks exactly like what she’s claiming.”

“The beginning doesn’t matter. What matters is what we’ve built since then.”

Gianna pulled her hands free and stood up, beginning to pace the living room like a caged animal. “What if the judge doesn’t see it that way? What if they decide we’re both criminals?”

“That won’t happen.”

“You don’t know that.” She turned to face me, and I could see the fear in her eyes. “Colby, I could go to jail. We both could. And Luca? God, what would happen to Luca if we both got arrested?”

“Stop.” I stood up and caught her by the shoulders, forcing her to look at me. “That’s not going to happen. We’re going to fight this, and we’re going to win.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because what we have is real. Because I love you, and you love me, and that has to count for something.”

Tears gathered in her eyes. “But what if it’s not enough? What if love isn’t enough to overcome the legal mess we’ve created?”

Before I could answer, the front door burst open and Luca came running in, backpack flying behind him and a huge grin on his face.

“Mom! Dad! Guess what happened at school today!” He skidded to a stop when he saw our faces, his excitement immediately shifting to concern. “What’s wrong? Why do you both look sad?”

Gianna quickly wiped her eyes and forced a smile. “Nothing, sweetheart. Just grown-up stuff. Tell us about school.”

But Luca wasn’t fooled. He’d grown expert at reading adult moods over the past few months, and he could tell something was seriously wrong.

“Did I do something bad?” he asked quietly, his voice small.

The simple question from my six-year-old son broke something open in my chest. He’d been so happy lately, so secure in our little family. The thought of him worrying that he was somehow responsible for our stress made me want to put my fist through the wall.

“No, buddy,” I said, kneeling down to his level. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You’re perfect. Sometimes grown-ups just have things to figure out.”

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“But you look really worried. Like when I had that bad dream and couldn’t stop crying.”

Gianna knelt down beside me, reaching out to smooth Luca’s hair. “Hey, look at me. We’re going to be okay. All of us.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” she said without hesitation, and I could hear the steel in her voice that hadn’t been there a few minutes ago.

After Luca went upstairs to start his homework, Gianna and I sat back down on the couch in heavy silence. The fear was still there in her eyes, but underneath it was something harder, more determined.

“What do we need to do?” she asked.

“David says we need to show evidence of building a future together. Joint investments, long-term plans, things that prove we’re not just pretending until the custody case is over.”

“Okay. What kind of things?”

I thought about David’s suggestions, trying to figure out what would be most convincing to a judge. “We could look at buying a house together. Something bigger, with room for Luca to grow up. Maybe set up college savings accounts in both our names.”

“A house.” She was quiet for a moment, considering. “That’s a big step.”

“Too big?”

“No, not too big. Just . . . permanent. Real.”

“It is real, Gianna. Whatever happens with the legal stuff, what I feel for you is real.”

She looked at me then, really looked at me, searching my face for any sign of doubt or deception. “Even if we win the custody case and you don’t need a wife anymore for legal reasons?”

“Especially then. Because then I’ll get to keep you just because I want to, not because I have to.”

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “That’s the most romantic thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“I mean it.”

“I know you do. And I love you for it.” She reached for my hand, threading our fingers together. “So, let’s do it. Let’s buy a house and set up college funds and plan a future together. Let’s give that judge so much evidence of our real marriage that Lyla’s accusations look ridiculous.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m terrified,” she admitted. “But, I’m sure. This is worth fighting for, Colby. You and Luca and the life we’re building together. It’s worth everything.”

I kissed her then, pouring all my love and gratitude and determination into the

contact. When we broke apart, I could see the fear still lingering in her eyes, but it was overshadowed by something stronger.

“We’re going to win this,” I said.

“Yes, we are.”

The next few days passed in a blur of activity. We met with a realtor and looked at houses that could actually contain our growing family. We opened joint investment accounts and made plans that extended months and years into the future. We acted like the married couple we’d become, making decisions together and building something that looked permanent and real.

Because it was permanent and real, regardless of what any judge might say.

But underneath all the practical preparations, I couldn’t shake the fear that we were about to lose everything we’d worked so hard to build. Lyla had been planning this attack for weeks, maybe months. She had evidence and recordings and lawyers who specialized in tearing apart families.

All we had was the truth and each other.

I just hoped it would be enough.

The night before the hearing, I lay awake staring at the ceiling while Gianna slept curled against my side. Her breathing was even and peaceful, but I could feel the tension in her body even in sleep. Tomorrow we would walk into that courtroom and defend our marriage, our family, our right to be together.

Tomorrow we would find out if love really could conquer all, or if sometimes it just wasn’t enough.

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I tightened my arms around Gianna and tried to memorize the feeling of her warm body against mine, just in case it was one of the last times I'd get to hold her like this.

Just in case we lost everything.

CHAPTER 10

Gianna

I stood in my flower shop at dawn, mechanically arranging white lilies for an anniversary celebration, my hands moving through familiar motions while my mind raced through everything that could go wrong today. Soon, Colby and I would walk into a courtroom and defend our marriage against Lyla's accusations of fraud. Today, a judge would decide whether our love was real enough to survive legal scrutiny.

The irony wasn't lost on me that I was creating flowers for a couple celebrating fifty years together while preparing to fight for the right to stay married after just three months.

My phone buzzed with a text from Summer:

Coffee and moral support? I'm outside.

I unlocked the door to find her holding two steaming cups and wearing the determined expression of someone prepared to talk sense into a friend.

"You look terrible," she said, stepping inside and locking the door behind her, the

statement becoming her norm.

“Thanks. Just what every woman wants to hear on the day her marriage might be declared fraudulent.”

Summer handed me the coffee and studied my face with concern. “Did you sleep at all last night?”

“Maybe two hours.” I accepted the warmth of the cup gratefully, inhaling the rich aroma. “Every time I closed my eyes, I kept thinking about all the ways this could go wrong.”

“And all the ways it could go right?”

I managed a weak smile. “You’re relentlessly optimistic.”

“Someone has to be. You’re catastrophizing enough for both of us.” She perched on my work stool, the same spot where she’d given me advice so many times over the past months. “Talk to me. What’s really scaring you?”

I set down my coffee and returned to the lilies, needing something to do with my hands. “Everything. The recording Lyla has of us talking about the arrangement?—”

“The what?” Her eyes widened.

I rolled mine in response. “Oh yeah, that’s how she bolstered her fraudulent accusation. The day she came to talk to Colby, she stopped by the house and planted a listening device.”

“That snake!”

“Among other things I’d like to call her. When Colby told me I felt so violated. She’s been listening to us for weeks. It’s unnerving. But because she had a key to the house and had permission to use it, Colby can’t do anything about it.”

“Oh, wow . . . I don’t know what to say.”

I sighed. “So coupled with her lovely recording of Colby and I discussing private stuff, she’s calling into question the timeline that makes it look like we only got married for the custody case. The fact that we can’t deny it started as a fake marriage because it did.”

“But it’s not fake now.”

“How do we prove that? How do we convince a judge that somewhere between the courthouse ceremony and today, we fell in love for real?” I trimmed a stem with more force than necessary. “What if the judge thinks we’re just better actors now?”

Summer was quiet for a moment, watching me work. “Do you remember what you told me about why you agreed to marry Colby in the first place?”

“Because I couldn’t let Luca lose his father.”

“And what did you tell me three weeks ago when you finally admitted you loved them both?”

I paused, lily stem halfway to the vase. “That I couldn’t imagine my life without them.”

“So ,what changed? What made it real?”

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I thought about the question, really thought about it. When had the arrangement become genuine? Was it the first night Luca called me Mom? The morning I woke up and realized I belonged in Colby's bed, in his house, in his life? The moment I stopped thinking about an exit strategy and started planning a future?

"I think it was real from the beginning," I said quietly. "I just took a while to admit it to myself."

"Then that's what you tell the judge. That love doesn't always start with romance and flowers and perfect timing. Sometimes it starts with showing up, with choosing someone every day, with building something together one moment at a time."

Her words hit something deep in my chest. She was right, our love story wasn't conventional, but it was ours. We'd built something beautiful from legal necessity and shared responsibility and two hearts that had been ready to love each other all along.

"What if it's not enough?" I asked.

"What if it is?"

After Summer left, I spent the morning finishing arrangements and trying not to check the clock every five minutes. But time moved with relentless inevitability toward the hearing, and by eleven o'clock I couldn't focus on flowers anymore.

I was cleaning my workstation when the shop door chimed. I looked up expecting another customer and found my mother standing in the doorway, elegant and

uncertain in a way that was completely unlike her.

“Mom?” I set down my spray bottle, shocked. “What are you doing here?”

“I flew in this morning.” She stepped inside carefully, taking in the shop with curious eyes. “I wanted to be here. For the hearing.”

“How did you . . . I didn’t tell you about the hearing.”

“Colby called me yesterday. He explained what was happening, what you were facing.” Her voice was gentler than I’d heard in years. “He asked if I could come. Said you might need your family today.”

Tears pricked at my eyes. Colby had called my mother, had reached out to the woman who’d been largely absent from my life, because he knew I was scared and wanted me to have support. Even in the middle of his own crisis, he’d thought about what I needed.

“You didn’t have to come,” I said.

“Yes, I did.” She moved closer, and I caught the familiar scent of her perfume, the same one she’d worn when I was little. “I know I haven’t been the mother you deserved, Gianna. I know I let my own fears and mistakes create distance between us. But you’re my daughter, and you’re in trouble, and that means I’m here.”

“Mom . . .”

“I met him again, you know, this time as your husband and stepson. Colby. And Luca. They picked me up from the airport. Luca gave me flowers and called me Grandma.” Her smile was soft, genuine. “That man loves you, sweetheart. It’s written all over his face when he talks about you. And that little boy . . .” she paused and

shook her head. “He’s so proud to tell people about his mom.”

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. “They’re everything to me.”

“I can see that. I can see how happy you are, even scared as you are right now.” She reached out and touched my cheek, a gesture I remembered from childhood. “Whatever happens in that courtroom today, don’t let anyone tell you that what you have isn’t real. I’ve been married three times, and I’ve never seen love like what I saw in Colby’s eyes when he talked about you.”

By the time I got home, Colby was pacing the living room in his best suit, tie slightly askew and hair showing signs of repeated finger-combing. He looked up when I walked in, relief flooding his face.

“There you are. I was starting to worry.” He crossed to me in three quick strides, pulling me into his arms. “How are you holding up?”

“Better now.” I breathed in his familiar scent, drawing strength from his solid presence. “My mother’s here.”

“I know. I picked her up this morning. I hope that was okay, I just thought you might want family there today.”

I pulled back to look at him, marveling again at his thoughtfulness. “It was perfect. Thank you. Where’s Luca?”

“Still at school. I didn’t want him there for this. Kay’s picking him up and keeping him until we’re done.”

Smart. Luca didn’t need to see his parents’ marriage dissected in a courtroom, didn’t need to witness the legal system questioning the foundation of his family.

“Are you ready?” Colby asked.

I straightened his tie and smoothed his hair, taking comfort in the simple intimacy of caring for him. “As ready as I can be.”

“Whatever happens in there, we face it together.”

“Together,” I agreed.

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The courthouse was an imposing brick building that had stood in the center of Millbrook for over a century. As we walked up the steps, I saw David Voight waiting for us near the entrance, briefcase in hand and expression serious but confident.

“How are we looking?” Colby asked.

“Good. I’ve reviewed Lyla’s evidence, and while it’s compelling, it’s not insurmountable. The key is going to be demonstrating the genuine nature of your current relationship.” David’s gaze included both of us. “The judge will be looking for authenticity, for evidence that this marriage has evolved beyond its original purpose.”

“And if we can’t prove that?”

“Then we deal with whatever comes next. But I believe we can prove it. Your marriage may have started as a legal arrangement, but what I’ve witnessed between you two over the past few weeks is absolutely genuine.”

Inside the courthouse, we found seats in the gallery behind our lawyer’s table. The room was smaller than I’d expected, more intimate, which somehow made it feel more intimidating rather than less. Lyla sat across the aisle with her attorney, perfectly composed in a navy suit that probably cost more than my monthly rent.

She didn’t look at us directly, but I could feel her presence like a cold draft, a reminder of everything we stood to lose. When I stole a glance in her direction, I caught something unexpected, the way her manicured fingers twisted her ring, a nervous habit I’d noticed during the school art show. For just a moment, beneath the

polished exterior, I glimpsed something that looked almost like uncertainty.

Judge Morrison—the same kind man who’d performed our wedding ceremony—entered and called the hearing to order. The irony of having him preside over both our marriage and its potential dissolution wasn’t lost on me.

“We’re here today to address Mrs. Lyla Marshall’s motion challenging the validity of the marriage between Colby Marshall and Gianna Stapleton Marshall,” he began. “Mrs. Marshall alleges that this marriage was contracted solely for the purpose of influencing the custody proceedings regarding the minor child, Luca Marshall, and therefore constitutes marriage fraud.”

The words hung in the air like an accusation, cold and clinical. Marriage fraud. As if the love I felt for Colby and Luca could be reduced to a legal technicality.

Lyla’s attorney stood first, a sharp-dressed woman who laid out their case with surgical precision. The timeline. The recording of our conversation about maintaining the facade. Witness statements about our lack of prior romantic relationship. Financial records showing my maintained apartment.

Each piece of evidence felt like a small cut, and together they painted a picture that was technically accurate but missed the truth of what we’d become.

When it was David’s turn, he stood with quiet confidence.

“Your Honor, while it’s true that Mr. and Mrs. Marshall’s relationship began under unique circumstances, what we have here is not fraud but rather the natural evolution of a deep friendship into genuine love. The evidence will show that what may have started as a practical arrangement has become a real and lasting marriage.”

He called character witnesses: Summer, who testified about watching our relationship

grow over the years; Kay, who spoke about our family dynamic and how natural we were together; even Mrs. Henderson, who talked about how I glowed when I spoke about my husband and stepson.

But I knew the real test would come when Colby and I took the stand ourselves.

“Mr. Marshall,” David said when Colby was sworn in, “can you tell the court why you married Gianna Stapleton?”

Colby looked directly at the judge, his voice steady and clear. “Initially, yes, it was because I was facing a custody challenge and I believed being married would help demonstrate stability for my son. But Your Honor, Gianna wasn’t just convenient. She was already family. She’d been part of our lives for three years, caring for Luca, supporting us through difficult times. The marriage made legal what was already true in our hearts.”

“And your feelings for your wife now?”

“I love her completely. She’s not just my wife. She’s my partner, my best friend, the mother my son needed and the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. If I had to do it over again, I’d marry her tomorrow, custody case or no custody case.”

When it was my turn, I walked to the witness stand on unsteady legs, very aware of everyone watching, judging, trying to determine if my love was real enough to deserve legal protection. As I passed Lyla’s table, I caught her eye for just a moment. What I saw there surprised me, not the cold calculation I’d expected, but something raw and wounded. She looked away quickly, but not before I glimpsed what this was really costing her. Watching another woman raise her child, love her ex-husband, build the family she’d walked away from.

“Mrs. Marshall,” David began gently, “why did you agree to marry Colby?”

I looked out at the courtroom, at my mother sitting in the gallery with tears in her eyes, at Colby watching me with complete trust and love. And I told the truth.

“Because I couldn’t bear the thought of Luca losing his father. Because I’d already been part of their family for years, and making it legal felt right. But mostly because I’d been in love with Colby Marshall for three years and was too scared to admit it, even to myself.”

“And now?”

“Now I wake up every morning grateful that I get to be his wife and Luca’s mother. Now I can’t imagine my life without them. We may have started with a legal arrangement, but what we have now is a real marriage built on love, respect, and commitment to each other and to our son.”

“Even if it means facing criminal charges?”

I looked directly at Judge Morrison, the man who’d pronounced us husband and wife just three months ago. “Even then. Because some things are worth fighting for, and my family is one of them.”

When the testimony was complete, Judge Morrison called a brief recess to review the evidence. Colby and I sat in the hallway, holding hands and waiting to learn our fate.

“Whatever he decides,” Colby said quietly, “I want you to know that these past three months have been the happiest of my life.”

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“Mine too.”

“If we get through this, I want to do it right. I want to propose to you properly, with a ring and flowers and all the romance you deserve.”

I laughed despite the circumstances. “We’re already married.”

“Then I want to marry you again. Every day for the rest of our lives.”

Before I could respond, David appeared. “They’re ready for us.”

We filed back into the courtroom, and Judge Morrison took his seat with an expression that revealed nothing.

“I’ve reviewed all the evidence and testimony presented today,” he began. “While the circumstances surrounding this marriage are unusual, the court must determine whether the current relationship constitutes a genuine marital bond.”

My heart hammered against my ribs as he continued.

“Marriage is not merely a legal contract but a commitment between two people to build a life together. While the initial motivation for this union may have been influenced by the custody proceedings, the evidence suggests that Mr. and Mrs. Marshall have indeed formed a genuine marital relationship.”

I felt Colby’s hand tighten around mine.

“The motion to declare this marriage fraudulent is denied. This court recognizes the marriage between Colby Marshall and Gianna Marshall as valid and genuine.”

The relief hit me so hard I nearly collapsed. We’d won. Our marriage was real in the eyes of the law because it was real in our hearts.

As people began filing out of the courtroom, I saw Lyla gathering her papers with mechanical precision. Her lawyer was speaking to her in low tones, but she wasn’t listening. She was watching something in the gallery, and when I followed her gaze, I saw what had captured her attention.

Luca had appeared beside my mother, his face bright with relief even though he didn’t fully understand what had just happened. He was bouncing on his toes, excited to see his parents, completely unaware of the legal battle that had just concluded.

“Mom! Dad!” he called out, waving enthusiastically. “Mrs. Kay said you had to go to an important meeting. Are you done now? Can we go home?”

For a moment, Lyla’s composure cracked completely. I saw grief there, and regret, and something that looked like recognition that she’d gambled with her son’s happiness and lost. When Luca noticed her watching and gave her a tentative wave, she managed a smile that seemed to cost her everything.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she said, her voice carefully controlled. “How was school?”

“Good! We learned about butterflies, and I drew a picture. Want to see?” He dug into his backpack with the unselfconscious enthusiasm of a child who still believed his mother cared about his artwork.

“I’d love to see it,” Lyla said, and for just a moment, she looked like the mother Luca remembered instead of the woman who’d been trying to tear his family apart.

But I knew the real victory wasn't legal recognition. It was the family we'd built, the love we'd chosen, and the future we were finally free to embrace without fear.

We were going home, all of us, together.

CHAPTER 11

Colby

The December afternoon was crisp and bright as I pulled into the driveway of the house we'd bought together just two weeks ago. It still felt surreal. Our house, with the wraparound porch Gianna had fallen in love with and the big backyard where Luca could play soccer. Moving boxes sat stacked in the living room, but it already felt more like home than anywhere I'd ever lived.

I found Gianna in what would become her home office, hanging curtains and humming softly to herself. She'd taken the afternoon off from the shop to help with the unpacking, and seeing her here in our space, making it ours, made my chest tight with an emotion I was still getting used to.

"Those look good," I said from the doorway, nodding at the sage green curtains she'd chosen.

She glanced over her shoulder with a smile. "I was hoping you'd approve. I know we haven't talked about decorating styles."

"Whatever makes you happy makes me happy."

"Careful with statements like that. I might redecorate the whole house in florals."

"I'd learn to love it."

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She laughed, stepping back to admire her handiwork. “I think we’re going to be very happy here.”

“I know we are.” I moved closer, close enough to catch the familiar scent of her shampoo. “Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Our decorating compatibility?”

“Our happiness. Our future. Us.”

Something in my tone made her turn to face me fully, and I saw awareness dawn in her hazel eyes. “Colby . . .”

“Marry me.”

The words came out simply, without elaborate buildup. Just the truth, spoken clearly in the afternoon light of our new home.

She stared at me for a long moment. “We’re already married.”

“Legally, yes. But I want to marry you by choice this time. Not because of custody cases or legal strategies or any of the complicated reasons that brought us together.” I pulled out the ring I’d been carrying for two days, my grandmother’s simple solitaire that had been waiting in my dresser drawer for the right moment. “I want to marry you because I choose you. Because every morning I wake up and choose you again. Because you’re not just my legal wife, you’re my partner in building something lasting.”

Tears gathered in her eyes as she looked down at the ring, then back up at my face. “We don’t need another ceremony to prove anything.”

“This isn’t about proving anything to anyone else,” I said quietly. “This is about us choosing each other freely, without pressure or necessity or fear. This is about celebrating what we’ve built instead of defending it.”

“And if I say no?”

I caught the slight smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “Then I’ll ask again tomorrow. And the day after that. I’ll keep building reasons for you to say yes.”

“Building reasons?”

“I’m good with my hands, remember? I can build us anything, shelves for your books, a garden for your flowers, a life that’s exactly what we want it to be.”

She reached out and touched my face, her thumb brushing across my cheekbone. “Yes, Colby Marshall. Yes, I’ll marry you again. By choice this time.”

I slipped the ring onto her finger, above the simple gold band from our courthouse ceremony. It caught the winter light streaming through the window, sparkling like the tears in her eyes.

“I love you,” I said, pulling her into my arms.

“I love you too.” She looked down at the rings on her finger, then back up at me. “When were you thinking?”

“Spring. April, maybe. Give us time to plan something meaningful, invite everyone who matters.”

“I’d like that.” She paused, considering. “I have one request.”

“Anything.”

“I want Luca to walk me down the aisle. He’s the one who brought us together, who made us a family. I want him to officially give me away to you.”

My throat tightened. “He’d love that.”

“Good. Because I want him to know that this is about all of us choosing each other, not just you and me.”

I kissed her then, soft and sure in the winter light of our new home. When we broke apart, she was smiling through her tears.

“There’s something else,” I said, reaching into my back pocket. “I know you value your independence, your ability to stand on your own. I never want you to feel like you gave that up for us.”

I handed her an envelope, watching as she opened it and read the contents. Her eyes widened.

“It’s the deed to Blossom & Vine,” she whispered.

“The building, the business, everything. It’s yours now, completely.” I watched her face, hoping I’d understood her correctly. “Your shop was the first place you were truly yourself, where you built something entirely your own. I want you to own that, not just rent space for your dreams.”

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“Colby, this is—I can’t?—”

“You can and you will. This isn’t about money or grand gestures. It’s about making sure you never have to choose between love and independence. You can have both.”

She kissed me again, fierce and grateful. “Thank you. For seeing what I need, for understanding who I am.”

“Always. That’s what partners do.”

We spent the next hour sitting on the floor of our empty living room, surrounded by boxes and making plans. A real wedding in the spring, with all our friends and family there to witness us choosing each other freely. A honeymoon somewhere we could build new memories instead of escaping old ones.

“Speaking of family,” Gianna said as we were getting ready to pick up Luca from Kay’s, “how do you think he’ll react to another wedding?”

“He’s always up for a party.”

We both laughed.

Later we found Luca waiting on Kay’s front porch, bouncing with barely contained energy. Somehow, he always seemed to know when something important was happening.

“Did you ask her?” he called out before we’d even gotten out of the truck. “Is she

wearing the ring?”

“How did you—” I started.

“I saw you practicing in the mirror this morning,” he said matter-of-factly. “You kept saying the same words over and over. Did she say yes?”

Gianna laughed and held out her left hand. “What do you think?”

He examined the ring with serious attention. “It’s really pretty. Does this mean you’re going to have another wedding?”

“We are,” I confirmed. “And we were hoping you might want to help.”

His eyes lit up like Christmas morning. “Really? Can we have cake with lots of frosting?”

Gianna kneeled down to his level. “We were hoping you’d walk me down the aisle. You know, give me away to your dad.”

Luca’s mouth formed a perfect O of surprise. “Like in the movies?”

“Exactly like in the movies.”

“That’s the best job ever!” He threw his arms around her neck. “I’m going to wear my best suit and walk really slowly so everyone can see how pretty you look.”

“It’s a deal,” she said, hugging him back.

As we drove home to our new house—really home now, in every way that mattered—I thought about how far we’d come. A year ago, I’d been a desperate

single father willing to do anything to keep custody of my son. Six months ago, Gianna had been afraid to trust that our love was real.

Now we were planning a wedding because we wanted to, not because we had to. We were choosing each other freely, without fear or necessity driving our decisions.

“Look,” Gianna said as we pulled into our driveway. The December sun was setting behind our house, painting the windows gold and making the whole place look like something from a dream.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“It’s ours.”

“And we get to have a wedding!” Luca added from the backseat. “With cake and dancing and everything!”

And as we walked up the steps to our front door—all three of us together, by choice rather than circumstance—I knew we were exactly where we belonged.

The best was yet to come.

CHAPTER 12

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Gianna

The April sun streamed through the windows of our bedroom as I sat at my vanity, watching Summer work magic with my hair. Six months had passed since that terrifying day in the courthouse when our marriage had been challenged, six months of happiness I'd never dared to dream possible. Today, we would marry again. Not out of necessity or fear, but because we chose each other completely.

"Stop fidgeting," Summer said, securing another bobby pin in the intricate updo she'd spent an hour creating. "You're going to mess up my masterpiece."

"I can't help it. I'm nervous."

"About marrying the same man you've been living with for almost a year?"

"About doing it right this time. About standing up in front of everyone and promising forever when I finally understand what that means."

Summer's hands stilled in my hair, and she met my eyes in the mirror. "You've known what it means for months, Gianna. You've been living it every day."

She was right. The past six months had been a masterclass in what real marriage looked like. Not the careful distance we'd maintained in the beginning, or even the passionate rush of new love, but something deeper. The quiet intimacy of morning coffee shared over the newspaper. The way Colby brought me tea when I worked late at the shop. How we moved around each other in the kitchen, a choreography born of paying attention to someone else's needs.

“There,” Summer said, stepping back to admire her work. “You look beautiful.”

I studied my reflection in the mirror. The dress was simple but elegant, ivory silk that skimmed my curves and fell to just below my knees. Not a traditional wedding gown, but perfect for what this day represented. A new beginning built on the foundation of everything we’d already shared.

“Mom, are you ready?” Luca’s voice carried through the bedroom door, followed by a soft knock.

“Come in, sweetheart.”

The door opened and my breath caught. Luca stood there in his navy suit, looking so grown up and handsome that tears pricked at my eyes. But it was the expression on his face that nearly undid me, pure joy mixed with something deeper, something that looked like relief.

“You look perfect,” he said solemnly. “Dad’s going to be really happy when he sees you.”

“Is he nervous too?”

“A little. But the good kind of nervous. The kind that means something really important is happening.” He moved closer, suddenly shy. “Can I tell you something?”

“Always.”

“I used to worry that you might change your mind and move back to your old apartment. Even after you and Dad got married the first time.” He looked down at his shoes. “But then I realized something. You didn’t just marry Dad. You chose us. You chose to be my mom even when it was hard.”

My heart broke a little. “Oh, Luca . . .”

“And I’m really glad you did. Being your son is the best thing ever, and I’m happy Dad asked you to marry him again so everyone knows it’s real.”

I knelt down to his level, not caring if I wrinkled my dress. “I will always choose you, Luca. Always. Being your mom is the greatest privilege of my life.”

He hugged me then, careful not to mess up my hair but holding on tight. “I’m glad we’re a real family now.”

“We were always a real family, sweetheart. Today just makes it official.”

A few minutes later, Summer declared me ready. We made our way downstairs, where Kay was waiting with a corsage and tears in her eyes.

“Oh, honey,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “You look radiant.”

“Thank you for everything, Kay. For watching Luca, for being there when we needed you, for believing in us even when we weren’t sure ourselves.”

“That’s what family does.” She pinned the corsage to my dress with gentle hands. “And make no mistake, you’ve been family for a long time.”

The ceremony took place in our backyard, under the oak tree where Luca and Colby had hung a tire swing just last week. Folding chairs filled neat rows with everyone who mattered to us. My mother sat in the front row, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. David Voight and his wife were there, along with half the parents from Luca’s soccer team.

But it was the man standing under the oak tree who took my breath away.

Colby wore a charcoal gray suit that brought out his eyes, and his dark hair was freshly cut but still showed signs of his nervous habit of running his hands through it. When he saw me walking toward him with Luca at my side, his face transformed with a smile so bright it could have powered the whole town.

“Ready?” Luca asked quietly as we reached the aisle between the chairs.

“Ready,” I said.

He offered me his arm with the solemnity of someone taking his job very seriously. Together, we walked toward Colby and the minister who would make our choice official. Every step felt like a promise, every breath like a prayer of gratitude for the unlikely path that had brought us here.

When we reached the altar, Luca placed my hand in Colby’s with ceremonial gravity. “Take care of her, Dad,” he said loudly enough for everyone to hear. “She’s pretty special.”

Laughter rippled through our guests, but Colby’s response was completely serious. “I promise, buddy. For the rest of my life.”

Luca beamed and took his place in the front row next to my mother, who immediately put her arm around him like he’d always been her grandson.

“Dearly beloved,” the minister began, “we are gathered here today to witness something beautiful. The celebration of a love that has grown from friendship into partnership, from necessity into choice, from arrangement into joy.”

I looked into Colby’s eyes and saw everything I needed to see. Love, yes, but also certainty. Peace. The quiet confidence of someone who knew exactly where he belonged.

“Colby and Gianna have already taken the legal steps to bind their lives together,” the minister continued. “Today is about something deeper, the public declaration of their commitment to each other and to the family they’ve built together.”

When it came time for the vows, Colby spoke first, his voice steady and clear.

“Gianna, four years ago you were the friend who showed up when I needed help. A year ago, you became my wife out of necessity. Today, you become my wife by choice, and that makes all the difference.” He reached up to touch my face gently. “I promise to choose you every day for the rest of our lives. I promise to build a life with you that’s worthy of the love you’ve given me and Luca. I promise to never take for granted the gift of your heart.”

My own vows came from someplace deep and honest. “Colby, you taught me that love doesn’t always look like the movies. Sometimes it looks like showing up every day. Sometimes it looks like choosing someone again and again, especially when it’s hard.” I squeezed his hands. “You gave me a family when I thought I was too broken for one. You gave me a son who calls me Mom and means it. You gave me a love that’s built on friendship and trust and the kind of partnership that lasts. I promise to choose this, choose us, choose our family, every single day.”

When the minister pronounced us husband and wife, Colby kissed me with such tenderness that I forgot we had an audience. When we broke apart, Luca was cheering so loudly that everyone else started laughing and applauding.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the minister announced with a grin, “I present to you the Marshall family, together by choice, united by love, and ready for whatever comes next.”

The reception was simple but perfect. Tables dotted the lawn, string lights twinkled overhead, and food prepared by half the town covered every surface. Luca gave a

toast that made everyone cry, talking about how happy he was to have a mom who kept her promises. My mother danced with Colby and whispered something in his ear that made him nod seriously.

But my favorite moment came later, as the sun was setting and most of our guests had gone home. I found Colby sitting on our back steps, jacket discarded, and tie loosened, watching Luca chase fireflies in the gathering dusk.

“Happy?” he asked as I settled beside him.

“Incredibly.” I leaned against his shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of his cologne mixed with April evening air. “You?”

“I keep thinking about that first night when you agreed to marry me. How desperate I was, how sure I was that I was asking you to give up everything for us.”

“You were asking me to give up everything. My independence, my careful distance, my fear of being left behind.” I turned to look at him. “But what I got in return was so much better.”

“What did you get?”

“Everything I never knew I wanted. A husband who sees me completely. A son who loves me unconditionally. A life that’s messy and real and chosen every single day.”

Colby was quiet for a moment. “Do you ever wonder what would have happened if we’d been brave enough to admit our feelings from the beginning?”

I’d thought about that question many times over the past months. “I think we needed time to build the foundation first. Trust and friendship and partnership. This feels too right to have been an accident.”

“You think we were meant to be?”

“I think we were meant to choose each other. And we did, over and over, until it became the most natural thing in the world.”

Luca ran over to us, breathless and grinning, his hands cupped around something that glowed softly in the twilight.

“Look,” he said, opening his palms to reveal a firefly blinking lazily against his skin.

“I caught one!”

“Make a wish,” I said automatically.

He closed his eyes tight, concentrating fiercely. After a moment, he opened his hands and we watched the firefly float away into the evening air.

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“What did you wish for?” Colby asked.

“That we’ll always be happy like this,” Luca said simply. “And that we can have pancakes for breakfast tomorrow.”

I laughed despite the tears in my eyes. “I think both of those wishes can come true.”

As we sat there on our back steps, watching fireflies dance in our yard while our son caught magic in his hands, I knew his wish had already come true. We were happy. We were together. And most importantly, we were here by choice.

Six months ago, I’d been terrified of loving too much, of wanting something I might lose. Now I understood that the only real tragedy would have been missing this, missing the chance to be part of something bigger than myself, to love and be loved completely, to build a family from choice and commitment and the simple decision to show up for each other every single day.

“I love you,” I said to both of them, and felt the truth of it settle into my bones like a promise I intended to keep forever.

“We love you too,” Luca said, settling between us on the steps.

And as the stars emerged above our house, above our family, above the life we’d built together one careful choice at a time, I finally understood what home really meant.

It meant this.

It meant us.

It meant knowing that no matter what tomorrow brought, we'd face it together.

The temporary wife had become something permanent, something real, something chosen.

And it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever been part of.