



Footnote Bonus Scene

By Alexa Gregory

*Penley
Five Years Later*

The framed diploma, protected in its black leather sleeve, was propped up against a large bouquet of flowers. Every time I looked at it, I got a real kick. A thrill, really. Pride, mixed in with a heavy dose of love, made my blood heavy.

She did it.

I always knew she would. Even back when we were just a couple of kids, holding on to each other to get through high school, through life, I knew Sasha Covey was meant for truly epic things.

Getting a doctorate in psychology was definitely something of legendary proportions.

Sasha was going to be *the* best child therapist. I could *feel* it. Her dissertation on play therapy was phenomenal, even though some of it went way over my head. She was still hoping to integrate animals in certain scenarios because she wholeheartedly believed in the benefits of animals on mental and physical wellbeing.

Maybe one day, we would bridge her psychological work with mine at the shelter.

The future, with all of its possibilities, was ours.

Sasha's Ph.D. was the beginning of a brand-new era for us.

Living apart for most of the year while she took a full load of classes wasn't always easy, but yesterday, seeing her walk across that stage to get her diploma, her beautiful face beaming with her accomplishment, made it all worth it.

Every late-night phone call. Every weekend apart. Every morning waking up without her by my side. It had all led to Sasha making her dreams come true.

Today, along with all of our friends and family, we celebrated her victory. Not only her professional one but a very personal one.

She had come a long way in her recovery, and though the disease did try to poke up its ugly head sometimes, Sasha was stronger than ever.

We were stronger than ever.

Henry, now a tall and gangly eleven-year-old, had created a massive canvas for Sasha. The scene was a library, where each book had the title of an event in our lives over the last five years. After his obsession with piracy and animals ended, Henry had developed many passions. The latest definitely seemed to be the lasting one. He started painting when he was nine, and he hadn't stopped.

I would've loved to take credit for it, having taught him that mixing yellow and blue paint makes green, but it was all him. The kid had more creativity in his little finger than I did in my whole body. He still had a hard time focusing on things that didn't captivate him right off the hop. But plop that kid in front of a fresh canvas, and he could be lost to his own imagination for hours upon hours. It was fascinating to watch.

Maybe, as his father, I was biased, but I thought he had real talent. More than that, he had determination. He'd already entered a few art contests and won. Maybe he'd end up being a painter. Maybe in a couple of months, his interests would change.

The beauty of his mind was endless, and Laurie, Sasha, and I were only along for the ride. He hadn't turned into a full teenager yet, but it would come. Laurie was terrified, but I had faith. The kid was surrounded by people who had overcome every obstacle thrown their way.

He witnessed resilience and hard work. No matter what path he chose, Henry would be fine.

"Penley?" Sasha asked, squeezing my shoulder. "Did you hear me?"

"What? No. Repeat, please, Dr. Covey."

She giggled. "I gotta admit I love hearing *that*. I'm a *doctor*." Her voice was made of wonder and joy. "I did it."

"You sure did, lovely. Have I told you lately how proud I am of you?"

"Hmm, only every minute," she answered with a smile.

"Damn. I'm off my game, then. Applaud. Brag. Congratulate."

Sasha closed her arms around my neck. "What are you doing?"

I ran my lips across her hairline. "Playing the word game. Lexical field for pride in my girlfriend."

“Oh, by all means, don’t let me stop you.”

“Did you have a good time today?” I hugged her tighter.

“Absolutely. It was so nice to have everyone here. Though we’ll have one hell of a cleanup.”

I scrunched up my face. “Nope. Not thinking about that. That’s tomorrow’s problem. Tonight, we celebrate, just the two of us.”

Our small backyard was empty now, but a few hours ago, it was full of people. Margie and Leo Webb came down from Burlington. Jenny, now a fundraiser, and her fiancé, Reyes, had trekked all the way from their home in New York. Even Laurie and her husband, Stanley, had come by with their little girl, Cassie. The two women weren’t exactly friends, but the four of us were all on Team Henry, and that’s all that mattered. In fact, Laurie knew what was going to happen tonight. Despite it being my week with Henry, she brought him to her place to give Sasha and me some privacy.

If everything worked out, the evening would be memorable.

Maybe *that’s* why my heart was racing so hard it made my ears ache.

“You’re quiet.” Sasha kicked off her heels and sank down into the couch.

Our couch.

She was finally moving to Colebury for good. She would start seeing patients soon enough out of a small office near my vet clinic. We could probably carpool if we wanted to. There would be no more weeks on end spent apart. No more back and forth. Not if tonight went my way.

“Pen?” She frowned at me. “You’re sweaty. Are you okay? All tuckered out from hosting duty?”

I chuckled, taking a seat next to her. “I’m fine, lovely. Perfectly fine.”

I’d played out this moment a thousand times in my mind over the last few months. In the end, doing this in our home, on a couch, felt right. Our whole story was built in exactly this position. Side by side, legs gently touching, toes turned toward the other.

An entirely new sort of relationship also grew on a series of couches. The one in the Busy Bean, the old one that was long ago destroyed by foster animals. A wicker loveseat in the Webbs’ backyard.

This one was going to be bronzed and framed.

I pulled out a stack of tricked-out sticky notes. Sasha couldn’t know that the sheets were glued together and that the inside was hollowed out to make room for a surprise. It had taken me a few shots to get it right, but I was pleased with the final product.

“Sasha, my lovely heart, this is for you.” I handed her the notes.

She took the stack, a smirk tugging at her lips. “You can never have too many sticky notes.”

“These are special.” Beads of sweat rolled down my back, and my hand shook on my bouncing legs. “Flip it open.”

She frowned, confused, but studied the notes. She flipped the first few pages up, opening the secret compartment. With careful and trembling fingers, she pulled out a ring. *Her* ring. The one that would tie us together. Her throat worked on a swallow, her eyes swimming with tears.

“Will you marry me, Dr. Sasha Covey?”

“Of course I will.” She launched herself at me, straddling me into the couch. Her lips found mine, and between each kiss, she repeated, “Yes. Obviously. Yes.”

“Shall I put the ring on your finger, lovely?”

She nodded, her mood ring eyes bright blue and lined with tears. I slid the white gold band topped with a solitaire diamond onto her finger.

“Always,” I whispered, pressing my lips to her ringed finger.

“Betrothed,” she murmured.

Together, we went through the word game, each word solidifying the promise we made to each other. When we got to T, we settled on *till death do us part* before moving on to our other favorite couch activity.

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