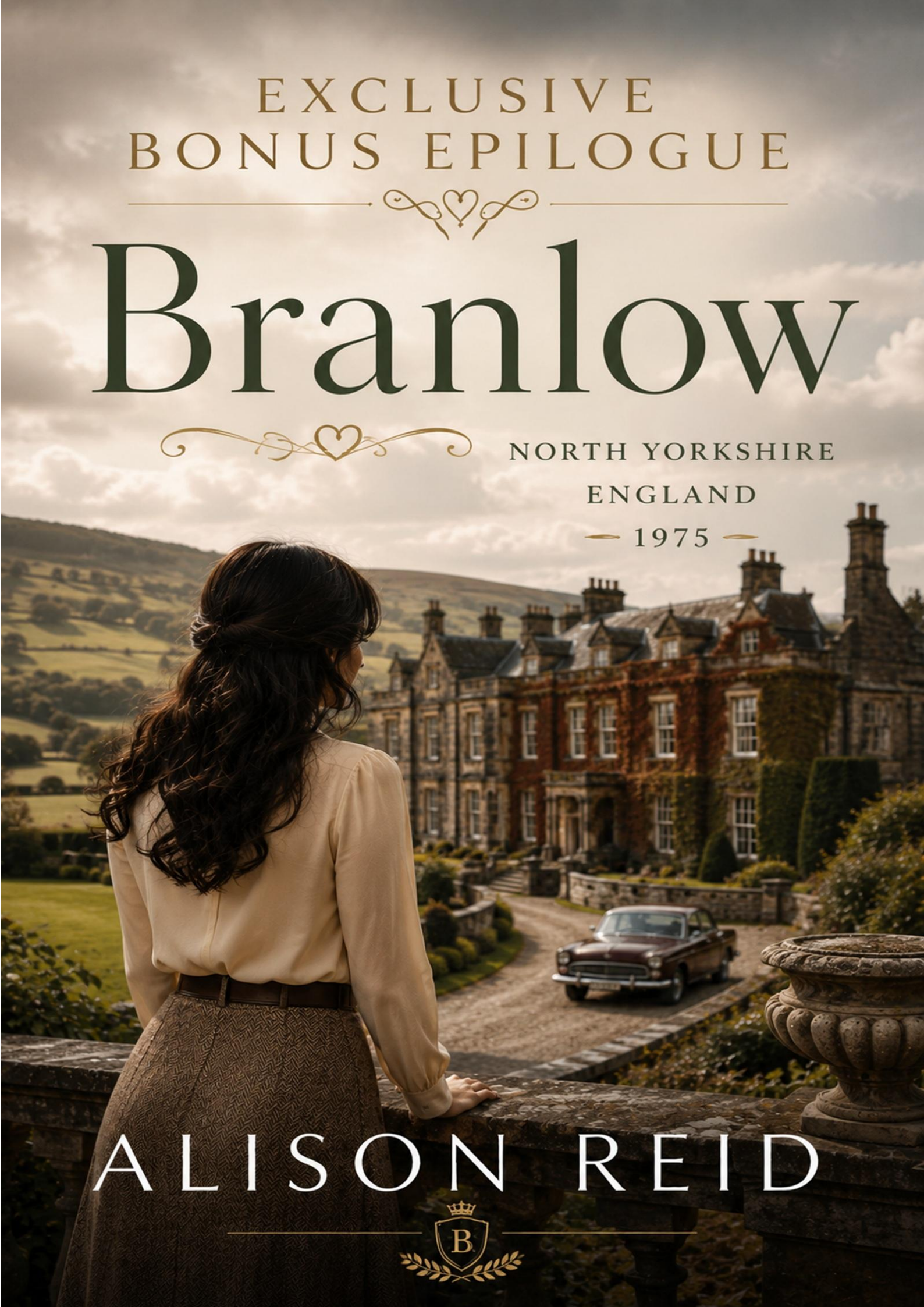
EXCLUSIVE
BONUS EPILOGUE

Branlow

NORTH YORKSHIRE
ENGLAND
1975



ALISON REID

Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Branlow

by Alison Reid

Twenty Years Later…

Morning sunlight spilled across the lawns of Branlow Hall, turning the old stone honey-gold beneath a cloudless Yorkshire sky. Beyond the terraces, the estate rolled endlessly into the distance—green hills, ancient woods, dry-stone walls, and mist lingering low in the valleys.

Branlow.

Unchanged in all the ways that mattered.

Simone stepped out onto the terrace fastening the cuffs of her riding jacket while the cool spring air lifted strands of dark red hair from her loose braid.

At forty-two, she was still beautiful in the same untamed way she had been at twenty-two. Time had softened nothing essential. Her eyes still flashed amber when she laughed. Her smile still had the power to ruin Sean Taylor's concentration entirely.

Which was deeply inconvenient given he was currently attempting to intimidate New York bankers over the telephone.

"No," Sean said coldly into the receiver from the library doorway. "I don't particularly care what their objections are."

Simone leaned against the frame watching him.

God, he was handsome still.

Silver threaded faintly at his temples now, but it only made him more dangerously elegant. Tall, dark, controlled—the future Sir Sean Taylor had become exactly the formidable man everyone at Branlow once expected him to be.

Except around her.

Around her, the control occasionally cracked.

"You promised you were riding with me this morning," she reminded him.

Sean glanced up immediately.

"I know."

"You always know."

"And you're always impatient."

"That's because unlike you, I don't enjoy spending my life arguing with Americans before breakfast."

From the sofa, seventeen-year-old Jason grinned without looking up from the newspaper.

"He's been threatening financial destruction since seven-thirty."

"I heard that," Sean said mildly.

"Naturally. You hear everything."

Andrew looked up from the estate ledgers spread across the desk near his grandfather.

"At this point I'm fairly certain Father hears thoughts."

Sir Michael gave a low chuckle behind his teacup. Charlotte wandered into the room pulling on riding gloves.

"Mama, are we still taking the upper ridge?"

"Yes, unless your father intends to imprison us both."

Sean's eyes narrowed immediately.

"You're not galloping near Blackthorn after last night's rain."

Charlotte sighed dramatically.

"Papa, honestly."

"You say that now. Then somebody breaks their neck and suddenly I'm expected to become reasonable."

Simone laughed softly.

"She's inherited your gift for melodrama."

"She inherited recklessness from you."

"That child inherited recklessness from both of you," Lady Vivian said dryly from beside the window. Charlotte looked delighted by this. Sean finally lowered the receiver, muttering something lethal about contracts before ending the call entirely.

"Fine," he said. "Give me ten minutes."

Simone smiled in triumph. Then the telephone rang again. Sean closed his eyes briefly.

"No," Jason said immediately. "Don't answer it. Let civilisation collapse."

"It probably is collapsing," Andrew replied calmly. "That's usually why they ring."

Sean picked up the receiver with visible reluctance.

"Taylor."

Simone grinned at Charlotte.

"Come on. We'll go ahead before he starts reorganising the western world again."

Sean looked up sharply.

"You're not waiting?"

"You'll be trapped for an hour."

"Twenty minutes."

"That's what you said forty minutes ago."

She crossed the room toward him anyway, leaning down to kiss him lightly. The moment her mouth touched his, his hand slid around her waist automatically, holding her there.

"Stay out of the woods," he said quietly.

Simone smiled against his mouth.

"Darling, I've been riding this estate since before you learned to brood attractively."

"I never brooded attractively."

"You absolutely do."

Charlotte made a choking noise.

"Can the two of you not flirt in front of your children?"

"No," Sean and Simone answered together.

Jason groaned.

"Hopeless. Both of them."

Sean's gaze remained fixed on Simone a second longer. Something flickered across his expression then. Brief. Uneasy.

"Take Andrew with you."

"I do know how horses work."

"That isn't reassuring."

She touched his face lightly.

"We'll be careful."

Then she and Charlotte disappeared out into the bright spring morning. Sean stood motionless beside the telephone after they left. Sir Michael folded his paper slowly.

"What is it?"

Sean frowned toward the distant hills beyond the terrace.

"Nothing."

But the unease stayed with him.

* * * * * * * *

Nearly an hour later, Andrew looked up from the ledger book.

"Mama's been gone a while."

Sean checked his watch automatically. Before he could answer, Prince lifted his enormous head from beside the fire. A low growl rumbled from deep in the Great Dane's chest. The entire room went still. Then came the sound.

Hooves.

Fast.

Too fast.

Sean was already moving before anyone spoke. He strode through the front hall and out onto the terrace just as the mare came flying across the stable yard.

Alone.

Everything inside him turned to ice. The mare was drenched in sweat, sides heaving violently. One stirrup flapped wildly against the saddle. Mud streaked her legs. And there was blood across the leather.

Not much.

Enough.

The mare tossed her head sharply toward the lower woods, frantic and trembling. Charlotte stumbled into the yard behind her on foot, pale and breathless.

"Papa—"

Sean felt the world drop out beneath him.

"Where's your mother?"

Charlotte's voice shook.

"There was a snake. Willow bolted. Mama fell near Blackthorn Creek and hit the rocks—"

She never finished. Sean was already moving.

"Andrew!" he barked.

His eldest son was running from the house before the order fully left Sean's mouth. Jason vaulted the terrace rail instead of using the steps. Sir Michael appeared in the doorway beside Lady Vivian, both of them instantly understanding. Henry Symons went completely white.

"No," he whispered.

The mare shoved anxiously against Sean, still trying to turn back toward the woods.

"She kept trying to come home," Charlotte said shakily. "I think she wanted help."

Sean grabbed the reins of the horse Andrew brought him.

"Jason with me. Andrew circle east through the lower ridge."

"Right."

Charlotte caught Sean's sleeve desperately.

"She wouldn't wake up."

The fear in her voice nearly destroyed what little composure he still had. Sean cupped the back of her head briefly.

"We'll find her."

Then he swung into the saddle and rode. Hard. Branches tore past as they thundered through Blackthorn Wood. Sean barely saw any of it. His entire mind had narrowed into one brutal thought. Not Simone. Not her. Never her. The terror felt horribly familiar.

A red-haired girl flying through the air from a motorbike. A broken body in a ditch. Bloodless skin. Closed eyes. He had survived that once. He could not survive losing her now. Jason suddenly pointed ahead.

"There!"

Sean saw her immediately. Simone lay near the edge of the stream beneath the trees, one arm twisted awkwardly beneath her, dark red hair scattered across the wet stones. Motionless. Sean hit the ground before his horse fully stopped.

"Simone."

No response. His knees slammed into the mud beside her. Blood streaked her temple. One side of her face was bruising already. For one horrifying second she did not move at all. Then he felt her breathing. Relief hit so violently he nearly lost balance.

"Oh God…"

His hands shook as he pushed damp hair back from her face.

"Simone."

Her lashes fluttered weakly.

"Sean…?"

The sound shattered something inside him.

"You little fool," he whispered hoarsely, bowing his head against hers for one brief second. "Jesus Christ… you absolute little fool…"

Jason turned away instantly, suddenly giving his parents privacy he had never before considered necessary. Simone blinked slowly.

"You look furious."

"I am furious."

"Horse spooked," she mumbled faintly. "Snake."

Sean carefully checked her ribs, arms, legs.

"Can you move?"

"I think so."

"You think so?"

"Don't become dramatic."

He stared at her in disbelief.

"Dramatic?" His voice nearly broke. "Willow came home without you."

That silenced her. Because she could see it now. The terror still written all over him. After twenty years of marriage, after three children and an entire lifetime built together, Sean Taylor still looked at her like losing her would end him. Simone's expression softened instantly.

"Oh," she whispered.

Andrew came crashing through the trees moments later. Behind him, Charlotte burst into tears outright the moment she saw her mother conscious.

"Mama…"

"I'm all right, sweetheart."

"You wouldn't wake up!"

"Yes, well," Simone murmured weakly, "apparently I enjoy frightening the entire estate."

Sean gave a rough sound that might once have been a laugh. Andrew crouched beside him calmly despite the fear still visible in his eyes.

"Broken anything?"

"I don't think so," Sean answered quietly, never taking his eyes off Simone. "Concussion probably."

Then he slid one arm beneath her carefully. Simone looked up at him.

"I can walk."

"No."

"Sean—"

"No."

And as he lifted her into his arms and carried her back toward Branlow Hall, the estate stretched around them exactly as it always had—ancient woods, rolling hills, stone walls, history, legacy. Enduring. Like them. By the time they reached Branlow Hall, the entire household was waiting. Staff crowded the front steps. Lady Vivian stood pale and rigid beside Sir Michael while Henry Symons looked twenty years older than he had that morning. Sean barely slowed as he carried Simone up the terrace steps.

"I'm alive," Simone protested weakly against his shoulder. "Honestly, everybody's behaving as though I've been shot."

"You hit your head," Sean said flatly.

"I've had worse."

"You are not helping yourself."

Prince bounded anxiously around Sean's legs as they entered the hall, whining deep in his throat until Jason grabbed the dog's collar. Charlotte hovered beside her grandmother, eyes still red. Andrew stepped forward immediately.

"How is she?"

Sean's arms tightened fractionally around Simone.

"She was unconscious."

The silence that followed was immediate and awful. Henry closed his eyes briefly.

"Oh darling…"

Simone reached one hand toward him.

"Dad, honestly, I'm fine."

"You were lying unconscious beside a stream," Sean said coldly. "You are not fine."

She opened her mouth to argue again, then stopped. Because he looked furious still. Not polished Sean irritation. Not amused exasperation. Fear. Raw enough that it was still sitting visibly beneath his skin. Sir Michael studied his eldest son quietly and seemed to understand that too.

"Take her upstairs," he said gently. "We'll manage things here."

Sean nodded once. Then he carried Simone up the great staircase without another word. The entire household watched him go. Even after twenty years of marriage, Sean Taylor carried his wife like something infinitely precious. As though putting her down might risk losing her.

* * * * * * * *

Their bedroom overlooked the lower hills of Branlow, sunlight spilling through the tall windows across the familiar warmth of their private rooms. Sean crossed directly to the bed.

"Sean, truly, you can put me down now."

"No."

"I can walk."

"No."

"You are being impossible."

"Yes."

He laid her down carefully against the pillows with astonishing gentleness for such a large, powerful man. The mattress shifted beneath her and pain flared briefly through her ribs. Simone winced despite herself. Sean saw it instantly. His jaw tightened.

"Andrew," he said without turning, "call the doctor."

Simone sat up slightly.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Sean—"

Sean looked at her. That was all. Just one look. And Simone stopped speaking. Andrew disappeared immediately toward the telephone downstairs. Jason lingered uncertainly near the doorway while Charlotte hovered beside the bed gripping her mother's hand. Lady Vivian crossed quietly to Simone first, brushing trembling fingers through her hair.

"You frightened us all half to death."

"I'm sorry."

"You'd better be."

But Vivian's voice broke slightly on the words. Henry moved closer next, his face still grey beneath the strain.

"When Charlotte came back alone…" He stopped and swallowed hard. "God, Simone."

Guilt twisted painfully through her chest then.

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

Henry bent and kissed her forehead exactly the way he had when she was little.

"You rest now."

Eventually the room emptied little by little. Sir Michael guided Vivian gently downstairs. Jason took Charlotte with him after promising three separate times that their mother was clearly too stubborn to die.

Andrew went to ring the doctor. And finally, for the first time since Blackthorn Creek, Sean and Simone were alone. The silence settled softly around them. Sean stood beside the bed staring down at her. His face looked drawn suddenly. Exhausted. Older. As though the last hour had taken years from him.

Very slowly, he sat beside her. Then, unexpectedly, he knelt on the carpet beside the bed instead. Simone's breath caught. Sean took her hand carefully between both of his and pressed his mouth against her knuckles.

His eyes closed briefly.

"God, Simone," he said hoarsely. "I was so scared."

The words hit her harder than the fall had. Because Sean Taylor did not frighten easily. He faced business wars, financial disasters, brutal negotiations and estate crises without blinking.

But this?

This had shattered him. Her fingers tightened around his instinctively.

"Oh darling…"

"When Willow came home without you…" His voice roughened further. "Jesus Christ."

She could still see it if she closed her eyes. Sean riding through the trees toward her. That terrible fear in his face.

"I'm sorry," she whispered again.

He shook his head once immediately.

"No. Don't apologise." He lifted his eyes to hers. "Just don't ever do that to me again."

A faint smile touched her lips despite everything.

"I'm not in the habit of falling off horses deliberately."

"You've spent thirty years accidentally trying to kill yourself."

"That is wildly exaggerated."

"You drove a motorbike into my car the first day I came home from Canada."

She laughed softly then winced because laughing hurt. Sean's expression changed instantly.

"Easy."

"I'm fine."

"You are concussed."

"You sound pleased about it."

"I'm furious about it."

But his thumb stroked gently across her hand as he spoke. Simone looked down at him kneeling beside the bed and something deep inside her chest tightened painfully with love. After all these years, he still looked at her like she was the most important thing in his world.

Not Branlow.

Not legacy.

Not title.

Not wealth.

Her.

Sean lifted her hand again and kissed it once more. And this time when he looked at her, his voice was quieter.

"You scared me so badly."

William Stokes arrived twenty minutes later carrying his battered black medical bag and the long-suffering expression of a man who had spent most of his professional life treating Taylor family disasters.

"Well," he muttered as Andrew ushered him into the bedroom, "I heard the horse came home without her this time. Thought I'd better run rather than walk."

Simone sighed from the pillows.

"I am beginning to regret surviving this."

"You hush," Lady Vivian scolded immediately from the armchair beside the bed. Sean had not moved far from the bed once. Even now he stood beside

her shoulder, arms folded tightly across his chest while William examined her. The old doctor checked her pupils first, shining a light into her eyes while Simone squinted irritably.

"That's unpleasant."

"Yes, concussion usually is."

"It's barely a bump."

William snorted.

"You were unconscious."

Sean's expression darkened instantly at the reminder. William noticed it and wisely continued before Sean could begin another lecture.

"Any dizziness?"

"Yes."

"Nausea?"

"A little."

"Headache?"

"Yes."

"Congratulations," William said dryly. "You have a concussion. Again."

Sean's eyes narrowed.

"Again?"

William looked up absently while checking Simone's pulse.

"She fell out of an oak tree when she was eleven. Landed on her head and insisted she was perfectly well while seeing double."

"I was not seeing double."

"You called me two Williams for an hour."

Jason laughed from the doorway.

"That sounds like Mum."

Simone glared at everyone collectively.

"This family is becoming deeply unsupportive."

William moved carefully to examine her ribs next, pressing lightly against her side. Simone hissed sharply.

"There we are," he murmured. "Bruised ribs. Painful, but nothing broken."

Sean finally spoke.

"How long?"

"A few days for the concussion symptoms to settle. The ribs will ache longer." William straightened slowly with a crack of his back. "No riding for several days."

Simone looked appalled.

"Several?"

"Yes, several."

"That seems excessive."

"That seems optimistic," Sean muttered.

William pointed directly at her.

"And no galloping dramatically across Branlow pretending you're still twenty-one."

"I wasn't pretending anything."

"Mm."

He snapped his bag shut.

"Rest. Quiet. No horses for a few days. If she starts vomiting or loses consciousness again, send for me immediately."

Sean nodded once. Simone opened her mouth.

"No," Sean said without even looking at her.

William hid a smile badly.

"Good luck with that, Simone."

"I'm being oppressed in my own bedroom."

"You've always been impossible," William informed her cheerfully. "Now you've merely married someone equally impossible."

"That was clearly my first mistake."

Sean finally looked down at her then.

"You've made many mistakes today. We can discuss the list later."

Despite herself, Simone laughed softly. Then immediately winced because her ribs hurt. Sean's hand was at her side instantly, steadying her carefully against the pillows. William watched the movement quietly for a moment.

After all these years, Sean Taylor still reacted to Simone's pain like a man whose own heart had been struck. The old doctor picked up his coat.

"She'll be all right," he told Sean more gently now.

Some of the brutal tension finally eased from Sean's shoulders at those words.

"Thank you."

William paused at the door.

"Though I'd keep her out of trees, motorcars, motorcycles and excitable horses where possible."

"I've been trying for over thirty years," Sean replied dryly.

William chuckled and disappeared downstairs. The bedroom fell quieter after he left. Rain-grey clouds had started gathering beyond the tall windows, dimming the late afternoon light over Branlow. Sean sat carefully on the edge of the bed beside Simone.

"No riding," he said.

"Oh God."

"For three days at least."

"That is cruel and unreasonable."

"Willow came home without you."

The softness vanished from her expression instantly. Sean's voice had gone low again. Roughened by memory. Fear still lingered beneath every word. Simone reached for his hand quietly.

"I'm here."

His fingers closed tightly around hers.

"Yes," he said softly. "You are."

Sean lifted her hand to his mouth again, his thumb brushing slowly across her knuckles.

"And here," he said quietly, his eyes holding hers, "is where I intend keeping you."

Something warm and aching moved through Simone's chest. After all these years, he could still say things that made her feel twenty-two again. She smiled softly and slid her arms around his neck, drawing him closer despite the protest from her bruised ribs.

"I like the sound of that."

But then she winced. Immediately Sean pulled back slightly, his entire expression sharpening with concern.

"Easy."

"It's only my ribs."

"Yes, and apparently you're determined to destroy the rest of yourself too."

She rolled her eyes affectionately and tugged him down anyway. Sean kissed her then. Slowly. Carefully. Like a man reassuring himself she was really here. Simone melted against him automatically, her fingers sliding into his dark hair. For one perfect moment the fear of the morning faded away completely.

Then Sean drew back just enough to look at her.

"None of that either until you are better."

Simone stared at him in absolute disbelief.

"What?"

"You heard me."

Her eyes widened.

"Sean Taylor."

"No excitement. No riding. No wandering into forests. And definitely no attempting to seduce your husband while concussed."

She looked utterly outraged.

"Now *I* am protesting."

Sean's mouth twitched despite himself.

"You've been protesting continuously for the last three hours."

"Because your rules are becoming increasingly unreasonable."

"My rules are keeping you alive."

"I was not aware kissing my husband had suddenly become medically dangerous."

"It is when kissing your husband leads to you trying to climb all over him with bruised ribs."

Colour warmed her cheeks.

"That happened one time."

"It happened yesterday."

"That is not the point."

Sean laughed then, low and helpless and filled with relief. God, he loved this woman. Even battered and concussed, she was still arguing with him from a bed while trying to seduce him between complaints. His hand slid gently against her cheek.

"You frightened me half to death this morning," he murmured.

The humour faded instantly from Simone's face.

"I know."

For a moment neither spoke. Outside the bedroom windows, rain had begun falling softly over Branlow, silver mist drifting across the hills beyond the terraces. Sean rested his forehead lightly against hers.

"When your horse came back without you…" His voice roughened again. "I thought—"

He stopped. Couldn't seem to finish it. Simone's arms tightened around him carefully.

"But you found me."

"Yes," he said softly. "I did."

"And you always will."

Something in his expression changed then. Something unbearably tender. After everything—every fight, every storm, every year together—she still believed that absolutely. Sean kissed her forehead gently.

"Sleep for a while, Sunflower."

Her heart squeezed painfully at the old nickname. She smiled against his mouth.

"Only if you stay."

He looked almost offended.

"Where exactly do you think I'm going?"

— The End —

Ready for another happily-ever-after?

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

👉 **Browse my books on Amazon**