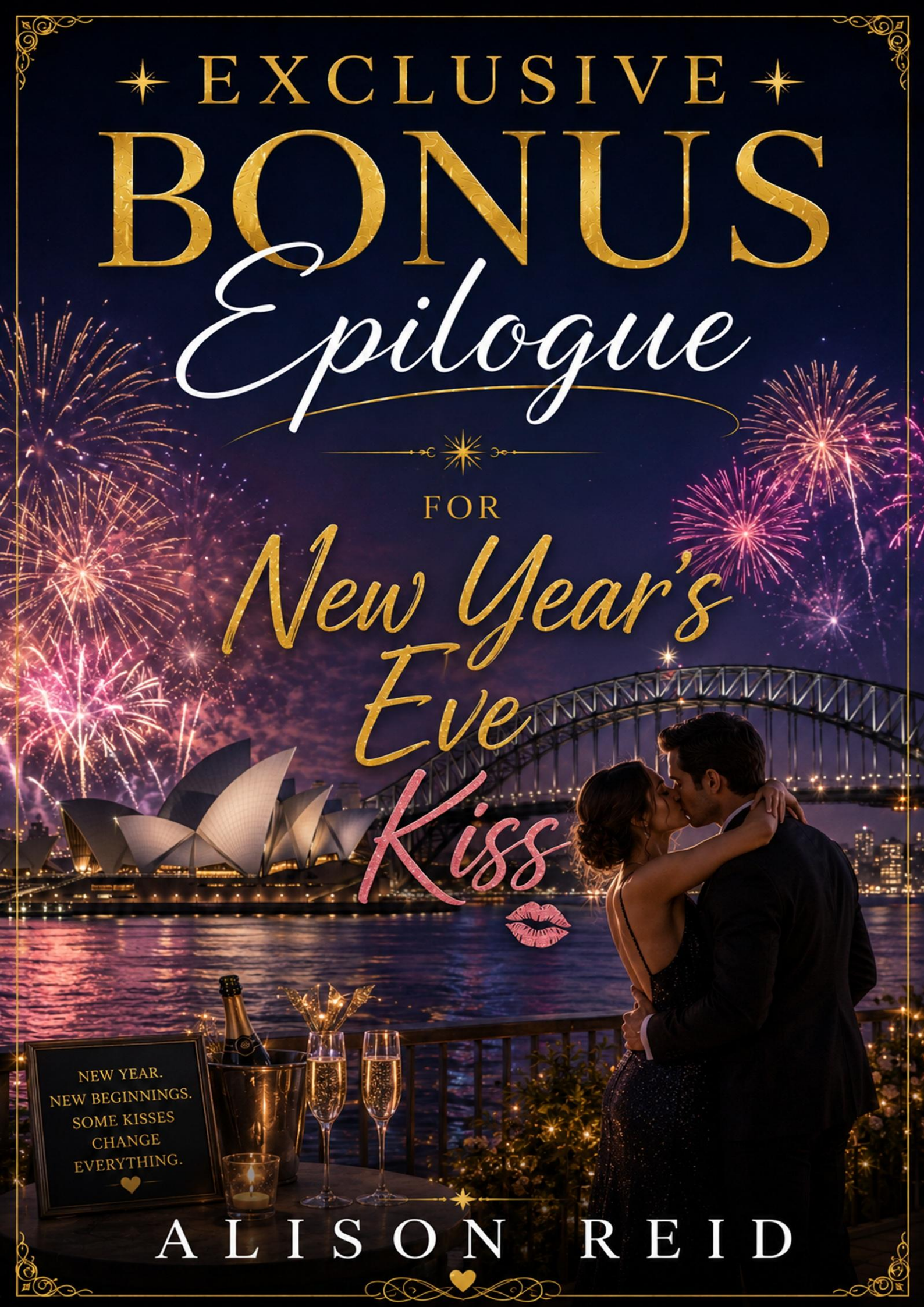
EXCLUSIVE

BONUS Epilogue

FOR

New Year's Eve Kiss



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Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

New Year's Eve Kiss

by Alison Reid

Twenty Years Later…

The Sinclair estate had never been louder.

Laughter drifted through the sprawling home as family and friends gathered to celebrate another New Year's Eve. Music floated through the open French doors onto the terrace, where fairy lights twinkled amongst the gardens and staff moved quietly through the crowd with champagne and canapés.

Inside, organised chaos reigned.

Harry, now eighteen and the unmistakable image of his father with his dark hair, piercing green eyes and commanding height, leaned casually against the billiard table with all the confidence of someone convinced he was about to win. The eldest of the four siblings, he had inherited Marcus's competitive streak and quiet self-assurance, though Emily often joked he'd also inherited his father's tendency to believe he was right even when he clearly wasn't.

"I'll give you one last chance to admit defeat," Harry declared, spinning his cue dramatically between his fingers.

Across the table, Everett, fifteen, folded his arms with a grin that was far too smug for someone his age. Unlike his older brother, Everett delighted in provoking people simply to watch their reactions. Mischievous, quick-witted and endlessly entertaining, he had inherited Emily's playful humour and Marcus's razor-sharp intelligence—a dangerous combination.

“You’ve been saying that for the last ten minutes,” Everett replied. “And you’re still losing.”

“I am not losing.”

“You’ve potted more of my balls than your own.”

Harry looked down at the table.

“...That’s beside the point.”

Before Everett could deliver another sarcastic remark, sixteen-year-old Julian appeared between them carrying a box of sparklers.

“What are you two doing?” he demanded dramatically. “It’s New Year’s Eve!”

Harry looked at him.

“We’re playing billiards.”

“I can see that.” Julian threw both hands into the air. “But there are fireworks outside! Actual explosions! Why are we indoors hitting little coloured balls with sticks?”

Everett nodded thoughtfully.

“When you put it like that...”

Harry sighed.

“I’m surrounded by idiots.”

Julian grinned unashamedly. Adventurous, energetic and incapable of sitting still for more than five minutes, he was forever chasing excitement. If something involved speed, noise or the possibility of getting into trouble, Julian was almost certainly involved.

Sarah, thirteen, looked up from the lounge where she’d been reading a novel and watched her three brothers with the weary expression of someone decades older.

“You three are exhausting.”

The boys looked at her simultaneously.

"Oh, don't start," Harry muttered.

Sarah simply smiled.

Unlike her brothers, she had inherited Emily's calm temperament and quiet grace. Intelligent, observant and wonderfully sarcastic when the occasion called for it, she possessed the rare ability to silence all three of her brothers with nothing more than a raised eyebrow. Marcus often said she ruled the household without ever raising her voice.

She closed her book and stood.

"I'm going to find people capable of behaving like adults."

Harry laughed.

"Good luck with that in this family."

Sarah smiled sweetly.

"I wasn't talking about you."

Before Harry could think of a comeback, she linked arms with her cousins, Sophie and Olivia—Mary and James's daughters.

"Come on," Sarah said. "Before Uncle James eats all the desserts."

Olivia gasped.

"He wouldn't."

Sarah gave her a knowing look.

"He absolutely would."

The three girls disappeared towards the kitchen, laughing together.

Watching them leave, Everett looked at Harry.

"You know..."

"What?"

"I think Sarah just insulted us."

Harry watched his sister disappear around the corner.

"She definitely did."

Julian shrugged.

"She's probably right."

Harry stared at him.

"You are not helping our case."

Everett twirled his cue in his hand before setting it against the wall.

"Come on," he said to Julian. "Let's go outside before Dad decides we're too irresponsible to be trusted with fireworks."

"I heard that," Marcus called without looking away from his conversation.

"See?" Everett said. "He's already suspicious."

The two brothers disappeared through the open French doors, their laughter drifting back into the house as they made their way towards the gardens where the fireworks had already been carefully laid out under adult supervision.

James wandered over, accepting a fresh whisky from one of the staff before taking his place beside Marcus.

John Sinclair watched the organised chaos from his favourite armchair, a tumbler of whisky resting comfortably in one hand and the broadest smile on his face.

"This," he said contentedly, looking around the room, "is exactly how a home should sound."

Marcus chuckled.

"You say that now. You weren't saying it when Everett and Julian flooded the pool trying to build a pirate ship."

John dismissed the memory with an amused wave of his hand.

"They were being creative."

"They nearly sank the pool."

"They were still creative."

James laughed, clinking his glass lightly against Marcus's.

"He's definitely become more forgiving with age."

John smiled.

"Grandchildren will do that."

Nearby, Emily and Mary moved effortlessly amongst the guests, making sure everyone had a drink in hand and someone to talk to. Twenty years of friendship had made them the perfect hostesses. They laughed easily together, finishing each other's sentences as they welcomed old friends and introduced new ones.

Marcus barely heard another word of the conversation around him. His eyes had found Emily. They always did.

She was standing beside Mary, laughing at something one of the guests had said, her smile every bit as breathtaking as it had been twenty years earlier. Time had been kind to her. A few delicate silver strands shimmered amongst her honey-brown hair whenever they caught the light, but Marcus thought they only made her more beautiful. She wore them with the same quiet elegance she wore everything else.

She still had that remarkable ability to make every person she spoke to feel as though they were the most important person in the room. A gentle touch on an elderly guest's arm. A warm smile for a member of staff carrying a tray of drinks. A sincere question about someone's family. Kindness flowed from Emily as naturally as breathing.

Marcus had fallen in love with her beauty. He had stayed hopelessly in love with her heart.

Across the room, Sarah quietly slipped an extra chocolate éclair from a passing dessert tray. Emily noticed immediately. Instead of scolding her, she

simply smiled. Sarah caught her mother's eye, grinned mischievously, and disappeared into the crowd before anyone else noticed.

Marcus couldn't help smiling.

"Just like her mother," he murmured.

James followed his friend's gaze. There it was again. The look. The same expression Marcus had worn ever since that New Year's Eve in Sydney. Complete adoration.

It didn't matter how many people filled the room. The moment Emily entered it, Marcus's world narrowed until there was only her.

James smiled to himself and slowly shook his head.

"Remember when I told you to keep your hands off Emily?"

Marcus slowly turned towards him.

"You remember that?"

"I remember every word."

Harry looked between the two men.

"What are you talking about?"

James took a leisurely sip of his whisky.

"I told your father to stay away from your mother."

Harry frowned.

"...Why?"

"Because she was my girlfriend."

Harry's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"What?"

He promptly choked on his drink.

Marcus winced.

"You didn't have to tell him like that."

Harry coughed into his sleeve before pointing accusingly at his father.

“You kissed Uncle James’s girlfriend?”

“In fairness,” Marcus said calmly, “I didn’t know she was Uncle James’s girlfriend.”

Harry frowned.

“That’s your defence?”

Marcus nodded.

“It’s an excellent defence.”

James let out an amused snort.

“It really isn’t.”

Marcus shrugged.

“I stand by it.”

James took another sip of his whisky before saying casually, “Especially considering she became my fiancée.”

Harry froze.

“...What?”

He looked from James to Marcus, certain he’d misheard.

“Mum was engaged to you?”

James nodded.

“She was.”

Harry stared at his father.

“And she left you for Dad?”

Marcus couldn’t help laughing.

“Well... yes.”

Harry blinked several times.

“I’m going to need the full story.”

John chuckled into his whisky.

“So did the rest of us.”

James leaned comfortably against the bar, a nostalgic smile touching his face.

"Your mother and I were engaged. We genuinely cared for each other, and I fully expected we'd spend the rest of our lives together."

Harry looked at his father.

"So... what happened?"

Marcus's eyes drifted across the room.

Emily was laughing with Mary, completely unaware she had become the subject of conversation. A smile softened his features.

"What happened," Marcus said quietly, "was that your mother and I couldn't help falling in love."

James followed Marcus's gaze. A knowing smile crossed his face.

"I never really stood a chance."

There wasn't a trace of bitterness in his voice. Only acceptance. Harry frowned.

"You weren't angry?"

James let out a quiet breath.

"Oh, I was devastated," he admitted honestly. "Losing your mother hurt more than I've ever admitted."

Marcus's smile faded.

"I've never thanked you."

James looked at him, surprised.

"For what?"

Marcus met his old friend's eyes.

"For letting her go."

James was silent for a moment before slowly shaking his head.

"I didn't let her go, Marcus."

His gaze settled affectionately on Emily.

"I simply realised she had already given her heart to someone else."

Marcus swallowed.

"No..."

His voice was almost lost beneath the chatter around them.

"She was always meant to be my wife."

Almost as though she felt him thinking about her, Emily glanced across the room. Their eyes met. Twenty years disappeared. She smiled. The very same smile she'd given him across a crowded ballroom on New Year's Eve twenty years earlier.

Marcus smiled back with exactly the same expression he'd worn that night. Still captivated. Still completely in love.

Harry watched the silent exchange before quietly shaking his head.

"You still look at Mum like she's the only person in the room."

Marcus smiled.

"Because to me..."

His voice softened.

"...she usually is."

Emily excused herself from her guests and wandered over.

"What are you boys talking about?"

James grinned mischievously.

"I was just telling Harry that I once warned his father to keep his hands off you."

Emily laughed.

"Oh?"

Without thinking, she slipped naturally beneath Marcus's arm. His arm immediately wrapped around her waist.

"And how did that work out for you?"

James sighed dramatically.

"Terribly."

Laughter rippled through the group. Emily looked up at Marcus.

"Any regrets?"

He didn't hesitate.

"Only one."

She raised an eyebrow.

"What's that?"

"I should've kissed you sooner."

Emily smiled, rose onto her toes and kissed him anyway.

John shook his head with a chuckle.

"I suppose after twenty years I should stop pretending that wasn't inevitable."

Emily glanced at the antique grandfather clock standing proudly in the foyer. Her eyes widened.

"Oh!"

She clapped her hands together.

"Everyone outside! It's almost midnight."

The house immediately erupted into motion.

Guests collected their drinks before making their way through the open French doors onto the sprawling back lawn. Children darted excitedly between adults, their laughter filling the warm summer night. Harry hurried ahead to join his brothers, while Sarah slipped her hand into Emily's as they walked together beneath the fairy-lit trees.

The gardens overlooking the water glowed beneath thousands of tiny lights. Round tables dotted the lawn, lanterns flickered softly along the stone

pathways, and the fireworks waited silently beyond the gardens, ready to illuminate the midnight sky.

Marcus slipped his hand into Emily's.

She smiled up at him.

"I love this night."

"So do I."

She squeezed his hand.

"I wonder why."

He laughed quietly.

"I can't imagine."

The final seconds of the year echoed across the estate.

"Ten..."

Guests gathered together, voices joining as one.

"Nine..."

Children bounced excitedly on their feet.

"Eight..."

Julian was practically vibrating with anticipation.

"Seven..."

Harry rested an arm across Everett's shoulders.

"Six..."

Sarah stood beside her cousins, grinning from ear to ear.

"Five..."

Mary slipped her hand into James's.

"Four..."

John looked around at the family surrounding him, his eyes shining with quiet pride.

"Three..."

Marcus turned towards Emily.

"Two..."

His hands settled gently around her waist.

"One..."

"Happy New Year!"

The first firework streaked into the night before bursting into a shower of brilliant gold above the estate. A second followed. Then another. Within moments the sky was ablaze with colour, each explosion reflected across the harbour beyond the gardens as cheers erupted from the crowd.

Marcus didn't look up. He was already looking at Emily. She smiled exactly as she had twenty years ago. He drew her into his arms.

"I love you, Mrs Winters."

"I love you too."

As fireworks burst overhead, Marcus kissed her.

Twenty years had passed. Four children. Countless memories. An extraordinary life together.

Yet when Marcus kissed Emily beneath the fireworks, it still felt exactly like their very first New Year's Eve kiss.

Some kisses changed your life.

Theirs had changed forever.

— The End —

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