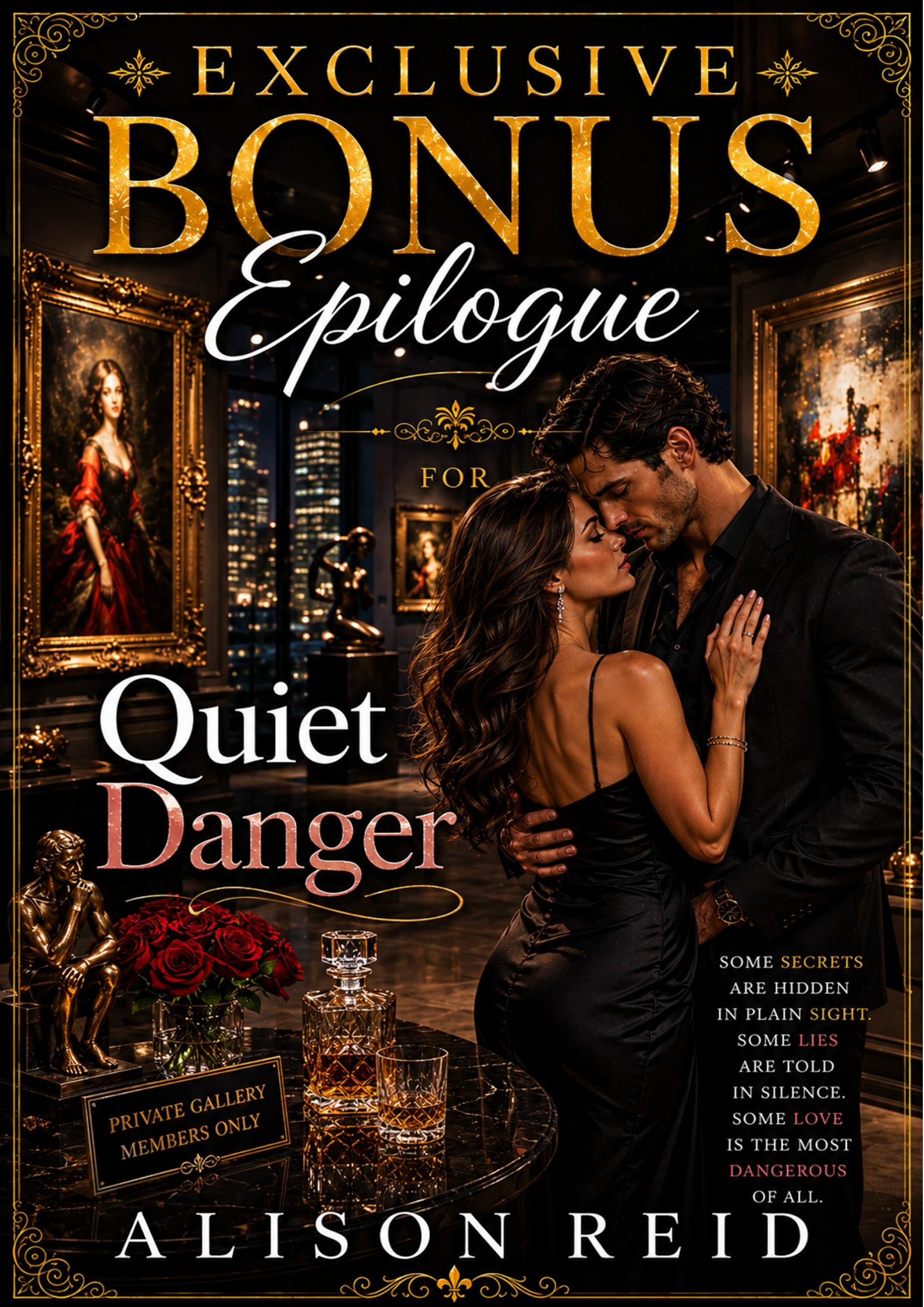
EXCLUSIVE

BONUS Epilogue

FOR

Quiet Danger



SOME SECRETS ARE HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT. SOME LIES ARE TOLD IN SILENCE. SOME LOVE IS THE MOST DANGEROUS OF ALL.

ALISON REID

Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Quiet Danger

by Alison Reid

Twelve Years Later…

Warm autumn sunshine bathed the sprawling Banks estate, casting golden rays across acres of manicured gardens and rolling green lawns. Beyond the elegant sandstone home, ancient oak trees provided welcome shade while colourful flowerbeds burst with blooms. It was the perfect setting for Easter Sunday.

Laughter echoed across the property as four excited children raced around the gardens, baskets swinging wildly as they searched for chocolate eggs hidden among the shrubs and beneath the trees.

"I found one!" seven-year-old Oliver shouted triumphantly, holding a large chocolate bunny high above his head.

"That was mine!" five-year-old Emily protested before darting off toward another flowerbed.

Ten-year-old Derek Banks laughed at his younger cousins before deliberately pointing them toward a cluster of bushes where he'd already spotted several eggs.

"They're over there."

Eight-year-old Diana Banks rolled her eyes at her older brother.

"Derek! You're supposed to let them find them."

"I am," he replied innocently. "I'm just... helping."

Nearby, Henry Banks couldn't resist joining in.

“I think I saw one behind that tree!” he called, pointing dramatically.

“Husband,” Helen said with mock disapproval, “there isn’t one behind that tree.”

Henry grinned.

“There is now.”

He quietly slipped another chocolate egg behind the trunk while the children weren’t looking. William watched the exchange from the patio before shaking his head.

“Mum... Dad...”

Helen looked over innocently.

“What?”

“You’re cheating.”

“We are not,” Henry replied with a perfectly straight face.

“You’ve hidden at least another dozen eggs.”

“They looked like they were running out.”

“They were supposed to run out.”

Helen waved a dismissive hand.

“Nonsense. It’s Easter.”

William laughed under his breath.

“They’re going to expect a hundred eggs every year.”

“They’re children,” Henry said. “That’s exactly what they’re supposed to expect.”

William gave up arguing. There was no winning against his parents when grandchildren were involved. Beside him, Annie laughed so hard she had to wipe a tear from the corner of her eye.

“I think they’re having more fun than the kids.”

“I know they are.”

William slipped an arm around her waist, pulling her against his side.

Twelve years. It hardly seemed possible. So much had changed.

Eight years earlier Sarah had married Bryan, and together they had built a beautiful family. During the week she worked beside Annie as second-in-command at **Banks Gallery of Fine Art**, helping manage exhibitions while Annie focused on expanding the gallery's reputation into one of New York's most respected private collections.

Watching the two women work together always made William smile. They weren't just sisters by marriage anymore. They were best friends. His gaze drifted back toward the gardens.

Derek had somehow convinced Oliver that the Easter Bunny always hid the biggest chocolate eggs near the vegetable patch. Diana was patiently helping Emily search beneath the roses. Sarah and Bryan were laughing as they followed behind their children.

It was noisy.

Chaotic.

Perfect.

William looked down at Annie.

She hadn't changed nearly as much as the years suggested. Her dark hair still shimmered in the sunlight, although motherhood had somehow made her even more beautiful. She was laughing again, watching Diana proudly carry an overflowing basket toward her grandparents.

The sound settled deep within his heart.

Twelve years ago, he'd found a terrified woman pinned against a car in a dark parking lot. Today... she was his wife. The mother of his children. His best friend. The love of his life. His entire world.

Annie noticed him staring.

"What?" she asked with a smile.

William shook his head.

"Nothing."

She narrowed her eyes.

"No... that's your thinking face."

He smiled softly before leaning down to kiss her forehead.

"I was just thinking I'm the luckiest man alive."

Her expression melted.

"I think," she whispered, resting her head against his shoulder, "I'm the lucky one."

William smiled as another chorus of excited squeals erupted across the gardens.

"No," he said quietly, watching their children race through the sunshine while Henry secretly hid yet another chocolate egg behind a flowerpot.

"I'm pretty sure it's me."

And as he stood there surrounded by the people he loved most in the world, William realised that everything he'd ever dreamed of had started with one frightened woman... and a chance encounter in a parking lot.

Sometimes fate only needed a single moment to change two lives forever. He tightened his arm around Annie's waist, breathing in the familiar floral scent of her perfume. Even after twelve years of marriage, holding her still felt like coming home.

"I love you," he murmured.

Annie tilted her head to look at him, her sapphire-blue eyes as beautiful as the day they'd met.

"I love you too."

Before he could steal another kiss, a familiar voice interrupted them.

"You two making googly eyes at each other again?"

William looked up to find Sarah and Bryan strolling across the lawn hand in hand, both smiling. Sarah looked every bit as happy as her older brother remembered her wishing to be all those years ago.

Marriage suited her. Motherhood suited her even more. Bryan slipped an arm around his wife's shoulders as they stopped beside them. William smirked.

"We're married. We're allowed."

Sarah laughed.

"Twelve years later and you're still acting like teenagers."

Bryan chuckled.

"She's just jealous."

Sarah looked at her husband in mock outrage.

"I am not."

Bryan raised an eyebrow.

"No?"

She folded her arms.

"No."

Without saying a word, Bryan gently cupped her face and kissed her. When he pulled away, Sarah blinked up at him before bursting into laughter.

"Okay... maybe a little."

William shook his head.

"Show-off."

Bryan grinned.

"I learnt from the best."

Annie laughed, slipping her hand into William's.

"I think it's sweet."

Sarah rolled her eyes dramatically.

"Oh, please. You two are disgustingly perfect."

"We're not perfect," Annie replied warmly.

"We're perfect for each other," William corrected.

Annie looked up at him, her smile growing softer.

"I like that better."

Sarah groaned theatrically.

"I knew I shouldn't have come over here."

Helen called from across the lawn.

"Sarah! Bryan! Come and help me before your father hides another twenty eggs!"

Henry looked thoroughly offended.

"It was only six."

"It was fifteen," William called back.

Henry shrugged without the slightest remorse.

"They looked disappointed."

"They had baskets overflowing with chocolate!" William laughed.

"Exactly," Henry replied. "No child has ever complained about having too much chocolate at Easter."

The adults laughed together while the children continued running through the gardens, their excited voices filling the crisp autumn air. Derek suddenly sprinted towards them, waving a giant chocolate bunny above his head.

"Dad! Grandpa hid another one!"

William looked across at his father. Henry simply winked.

"I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about."

Helen sighed dramatically.

"Hopeless."

"Grandpa cheated!" Diana giggled as she joined them.

Henry crouched beside his granddaughter.

"I prefer the term... improved the Easter Bunny's planning."

Diana threw her arms around his neck.

"I love your planning."

Henry looked up at William with a triumphant grin.

"See?"

William laughed, unable to argue. Watching his parents spoil their grandchildren, seeing Sarah and Bryan so happily in love, and feeling Annie's hand resting comfortably in his own... it was everything he'd ever wanted.

He glanced once more at the woman beside him. She caught him looking.

"What?" she asked with a smile.

He simply shook his head.

"Nothing."

She smiled knowingly.

"You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Looking at me like I'm the best thing that's ever happened to you."

William didn't even try to deny it.

"You are."

Annie reached up, cupping his cheek before kissing him softly.

"Happy Easter," she whispered.

William smiled.

"Every day with you feels like a gift."

Around them, children laughed, grandparents fussed, chocolate wrappers rustled, and the people they loved most filled the beautiful home they'd built together with warmth, happiness, and life.

It was noisy. It was chaotic. It was everything.

And as William looked around at the life they'd built together, he knew with absolute certainty that one chance encounter in a parking lot had been the greatest blessing of his life.

— The End —

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