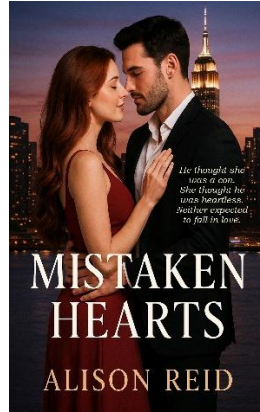


Mistaken Hearts

by Alison Reid



The bell above the shop door jingled—a soft, cheerful sound that didn’t suit the man who walked in.

Ava looked up from behind the counter, where her fingers were mid-knot in a spool of pale pink ribbon. Her smile came automatically—gentle, practiced warmth. The kind she offered everyone.

Then she saw him.

Tall. Immaculately dressed. His charcoal suit fit like it had been sewn onto his body, the open collar revealing just enough of his throat to hint at something unrestrained beneath the refinement. His eyes—dark, sharp, unreadable—swept the room like they were calculating every possible escape.

Everything about him said power. Control. Threat.

He didn’t look like a man shopping for flowers.

“Hi,” Ava said cautiously. “Can I help you?”

The man stepped inside, gaze moving in a deliberate arc—over the pale peonies, the vases catching afternoon sun, the music drifting faintly from a speaker hidden on a shelf. His silence was loud. Pressurised.

“You’re Ava Scott.”

Not a question.

Her smile faltered. “Yes. Do I... know you?”

He didn’t answer immediately. He studied her, taking in the curve of her mouth, the softness in her eyes, the threadbare cardigan she wore like armour. Something flickered in his expression. Disbelief. Or maybe disappointment.

“I’m Ethan Hawthorn.”

The name fell into the air like a warning shot.

Her breath caught. “Liam?” she asked, her voice dropping. “Are you Liam’s brother?”

That gave him pause. Just a beat. She said his name like it mattered to her.

And then she smiled. Soft. Sincere.

Something punched into his chest like regret.

“You called him Liam,” he said coolly. “That’s interesting. Considering you don’t seem to know much else about him.”

Her smile dropped. Confusion crept in.

“I—what is this? I only met him a few days ago. I liked him. He was...” She trailed off. “What’s going on?”

“You tell me,” Ethan said, stepping closer to the counter. “You seduced him. Lied to him. Stole half a million dollars. And then vanished.”

Ava blinked.

And then she laughed—soft, incredulous. Not mocking. Just... stunned.

“I’m sorry—what did you just say?”

“You conned him,” he repeated. “Got him drunk. Got into his bed. Got him to sign a cheque meant for a children’s tech initiative. Now he’s in a coma.”

The room stopped.

She went pale. Her hands dropped to the counter, gripping it as though it was the only thing holding her up.

“A coma?” she whispered. “Liam’s... hurt?”

“You didn’t know?”

“No,” she breathed. “No, I haven’t seen him since—” She shook her head. “Wait. You think I did this?”

He folded his arms. “You expect me to believe this is all coincidence? The name. The timing. The money.”

“Yes!” Her voice rose, sharp with emotion. “I’m Ava Scott. I’ve lived here for five years. I own this shop. My mother’s in the hospital—dying of cancer. I didn’t seduce anyone. I didn’t take anything.”

She was shaking now, from anger or shock or both.

“I’m a florist,” she said fiercely. “Not a thief.”

Ethan watched her.

No flash of guilt. No fake tears. Just wide, outraged eyes and a spine made of steel.

She didn’t look guilty.

She looked gutted.

But appearances had lied before.

He took a step back. Just one.

“Then prove it,” he said quietly. “Because until Liam wakes up and tells me otherwise... you’re not going anywhere.”

Her chin lifted. “Where would I go? I run a flower shop. I sit with my mother every night and pray I won’t lose her. You think I have time to be a criminal?”

The words cut deeper than they should have.

But Ethan didn’t flinch.

“I’m not asking,” he said. “You’re coming with me.”

Ava stared. “Excuse me?”

“You have one hour to close your shop and say goodbye to your mother. After that, we’re leaving. You’ll stay where I can see you. Where you won’t disappear.”

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