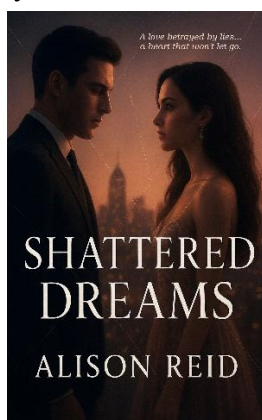


Shattered Dreams

by Alison Reid



Upstairs, the moonlight spilled through her window, silvering the room in ghostly calm. She raised her fingers to her mouth, tracing the tender curve of her lips. They were still swollen from his kiss—a kiss that had undone her, unravelled every defence, whispered of a life she still longed for but could never claim.

Her breath came unsteady, chest rising and falling as she caught her reflection in the glass. The woman staring back was flushed, shaken, alive in a way she hadn't been in years. And that, she realised bitterly, was the most dangerous truth of all.

She wanted to tell him. To confess that she had never stopped loving him, that all she wanted was a lifetime in his arms. But she couldn't—not when the price was everything he had worked for, everything that was his birthright. Not when her love could be the reason he lost it all.

Her mind dragged her back—back to the day her dreams had shattered.

Pippa sat stiffly in the drawing room; her hands folded tightly in her lap. Gwen reclined in the high-backed chair opposite her, the afternoon sun glinting off the crystal in her hand. Her expression was smooth, polite—but cold, deliberate, calculating.

“Pippa,” Gwen began, voice soft but firm, “I’ve heard... rumours that you and Flynn are becoming... close.”

Pippa swallowed, feeling the heat rise to her cheeks. “We... we care for each other,” she admitted cautiously.

Gwen’s eyes narrowed slightly, a flicker of steel beneath her calm. “Care, yes. But love can be so dangerous, can’t it? Especially in our world, where appearances, family, and legacy matter more than mere affection.”

Pippa stiffened. “I don’t understand.”

“You will, child.” Gwen leaned forward, the motion subtle but commanding. “You know Flynn’s father is gone. May he rest in peace. But you may not realise how meticulously his estate was arranged. Everything—the trust, the company shares, the family holdings—was designed to protect the Oakland legacy. And there are... stipulations.”

Pippa’s stomach twisted. “Stipulations?”

“Yes.” Gwen’s lips curved in a tight smile. “The trustees—men of law and experience—are bound to uphold the terms. If Flynn were to marry someone deemed... unsuitable, someone not of the family’s station or discretion... he could be stripped of control, denied his inheritance entirely.”

Pippa’s heart lurched. “But... that’s impossible. Flynn... he’d never—”

“Wouldn’t he?” Gwen interrupted gently, though there was an edge to her tone. “Do you think the law bends for love? Do you think the trustees, the board, the family’s associates would overlook a marriage that might embarrass the estate, tarnish the name?”

Pippa bit her lip, silent.

Gwen’s voice softened, almost intimate, and she leaned closer, lowering it to a whisper. “Pippa, I don’t say this to frighten you unnecessarily, but—if you and Flynn go through with this... you could be the reason he loses everything his father left him. Everything he’s been promised, everything he’s worked for, could vanish in a heartbeat.”

Pippa's hands tightened in her lap. The weight of it pressed down on her chest. She wanted to argue, to defy Gwen, but the words died in her throat. She had never wanted to hurt Flynn, never imagined putting his future at risk—but now... now it felt almost inevitable.

Gwen sat back, letting the silence stretch, letting Pippa feel the full measure of her warning. "I'm sure you understand why I have to be honest with you," she said, voice silky. "Some loves... are too dangerous to pursue."

Pippa nodded mutely, a storm of longing, fear, and frustration roiling inside her. She left the room quietly, every step weighted with the impossible choice that now lay before her: follow her heart—or protect the only life she wanted Flynn to have.

Pippa sat alone in her room, the late afternoon sun slanting through the curtains, casting warm stripes across the floorboards. The echo of Gwen's words still lingered in her mind, sharp and precise, slicing through every memory she had of Flynn: the laughter, the stolen glances, the way his hand had felt in hers along the lake.

Her chest ached with the weight of the impossible. I can't tell him. I can't. The thought repeated itself like a mantra, each repetition hollow and final. How could she explain that her love, fierce and real as it was, might cost him everything his father had left him? That every dream he had for his future—every ounce of inheritance, every ounce of freedom—could vanish because of her?

Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes, but she blinked them away. She had to be strong. I have to protect him. Even if it kills me to do it.

Her fingers trembled as she gathered paper and pen. She had to leave, but she couldn't face him. Not now, not ever with Gwen's shadow still pressing down. The letter would have to speak for her, the truth she could not say aloud, the love she could not afford to reveal.

She wrote slowly, each word a careful, deliberate fracture of her heart:

Flynn,

I've tried to fight this, tried to ignore the truth I can no longer deny. But I can't stay, and I can't let you continue to believe in something that isn't real.

I don't love you the way you think I do. I care for you, I always will, but not in the way a woman should care for the man she is meant to spend her life with.

You deserve someone who can give you everything you need, everything your heart wants—and I am not that person.

Please understand that this is for the best. I cannot be the person you hope I am. I cannot be the person you love. Holding on will only bring us both pain.

I am leaving, and you must try to move on. Believe me when I say it's not easy for me, but it's necessary. You deserve happiness—true happiness—and I am not the one to give it to you.

—Pippa

She folded the letter with trembling hands, pressing it flat as though the crease could somehow hold her resolve together. Her lips pressed briefly to the paper, a silent kiss, a goodbye she could not voice.

Her chest ached as she packed a suitcase. Every item she placed inside felt like another layer of herself she was leaving behind, every movement a reminder of the life she could not share with him.

Standing at the door, she took a deep breath, her fingers lingering on the knob. I can't face him. I can't let him see me like this. He would never understand... not fully.

With one final, shuddering breath, she stepped into the corridor, leaving the room—and her heart—behind. The letter she had left would have to speak for her: her confession, her farewell, and her silence, bound together in ink she could never take back.

Outside, the evening air wrapped cool against her flushed cheeks, the estate hushed in its quiet grandeur, as though holding its breath. When the Uber pulled up, headlights cutting across the gravel, Pippa forced herself forward. The crunch beneath the tyres as the car rolled away was soft, almost merciful, yet each turn of the wheels dragged her further from Flynn, from the only future she had ever wanted.

She pressed her forehead lightly to the glass, the great house shrinking behind her, swallowed by shadow and distance. Her chest ached with the unbearable truth: sometimes love—no matter how fierce, no matter how forever—was not enough.

Blinking hard, Pippa wrenched herself back to the present, pressing the memories deep into the corners of her mind where they could do no more damage—for now. Upstairs, in the quiet sanctuary of her bedroom, she sank heavily onto the edge of the bed, the weight of the day pressing against her chest. The room felt still, almost expectant, as if holding its breath along with her.

There could be no more wavering. No more allowing herself to linger on what had been lost or what might have been. Her father needed her—his health and strength depended on her steadiness, on her resolve. She had to be the anchor, the calm in the storm, the steady presence that would guide him back to safety. And when that was done, she would leave New York behind, retreating from the echoes of a life that had both thrilled and wounded her. The sooner, the better.

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