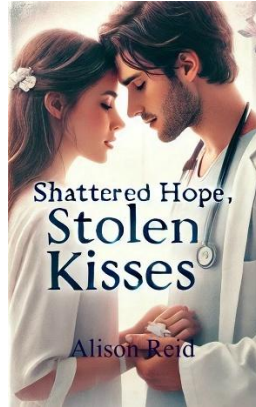


Shattered Hope, Stolen Kisses

by Alison Reid



Anthony loosened his tie and poured himself a glass of water, staring out at the dark expanse of the harbour. The realisation should have hit harder, but it didn't. It had been creeping up on him for a while—a slow unravelling of the illusion he had convinced himself to believe in.

Mary wasn't cruel. She wasn't terrible. But there was something missing. Something real.

He rubbed a hand over his face, frustration simmering beneath the fatigue. His job was demanding. As an oncologist, he faced life and death every day. It was gruelling, heartbreaking. But when he got to deliver good news—to tell a patient they were in remission, that they had more time—it made everything worth it.

That was the kind of fulfilment he craved. The kind of depth he needed.

And Mary... Mary didn't fit into that.

Maybe she never had.

Anthony placed his empty glass in the dishwasher, the soft clink echoing in the quiet of his penthouse. The city lights flickered beyond the massive windows, casting a glow across the sleek, modern space, but his mind was

elsewhere. Exhaustion dragged at his limbs as he walked into the bedroom, tugging at his tie and unbuttoning his shirt.

Then he saw it.

A dark stain smeared across the crisp white fabric—blood.

Aurora's blood.

His breath hitched, and for a moment, he just stared at it, the deep red stark against the pale cotton. His fingers brushed over the dried stain, and suddenly, the night came rushing back in vivid detail—the alley, the sound of fists meeting flesh, her broken body lying in the dirt. The way her hand had trembled when she reached for him in the hospital.

His stomach tightened.

He had seen his fair share of trauma in the ER, but this was different. He hadn't just been a doctor treating a patient—he had been the one to find her, to pull her away from the brink. And now, standing alone in his bedroom, he couldn't shake the image of her lying in that hospital bed, wrapped in bandages, barely holding on.

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