EXCLUSIVE

BONUS Epilogue

FOR

Shattered Dreams

SOME DREAMS DON'T BREAK BECAUSE THEY END— BUT BECAUSE THEY WERE NEVER MEANT TO SURVIVE.

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Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Shattered Dreams

by Alison Reid

Thirty Years Later…

Late afternoon sunlight spilled across the gardens of Oakland Park, bathing the sprawling estate in rich shades of gold and amber. The lake shimmered in the distance, reflecting the fading light, while a warm summer breeze carried the scent of roses and freshly cut grass across the grounds.

Laughter drifted across the lawn.

Flynn Oakland stood on the terrace, a glass of whiskey forgotten in his hand as he watched the chaos unfolding below.

Today was his eldest granddaughter Deborah's fifth birthday, and Oakland Park had been transformed into a wonderland for children. Bright decorations fluttered in the breeze. Balloons bobbed above tables laden with food and birthday treats. Children darted across the gardens, their delighted shrieks and laughter echoing through the afternoon.

Everywhere he looked, there were smiling faces. Families gathered beneath the marquees, friends shared drinks and stories, and children raced across the lawns. The sight filled him with a quiet contentment he never took for granted.

His gaze settled on his eldest daughter, Caitlyn.

At twenty-seven, she had grown into a beautiful woman, confident and kind-hearted. She stood near the rose garden with her husband, Trevor,

watching the children play. Trevor had an arm around her waist and appeared far more interested in stealing kisses than supervising their daughter.

Caitlyn swatted playfully at his shoulder.

"Behave," Flynn could almost imagine her saying.

Trevor simply grinned and leaned in again.

Flynn smiled to himself.

They were hopelessly in love.

Even after years of marriage, they still looked at each other as though they were the only two people in the world.

That was exactly what he had wanted for his children.

Not wealth, status, or power. What he wanted for them was love—the kind he had been fortunate enough to find with Pippa.

His gaze drifted across the lawn to his son.

Derek was twenty-five now, tall and broad-shouldered, looking increasingly like Flynn had at the same age. He hadn't settled down yet, at least officially, but Flynn suspected that wouldn't remain true for much longer.

Sarah stood between Derek's arms as they watched the children racing across the grass.

Derek held her loosely from behind, his chin resting on the top of her head. The gesture was unconscious. Natural. Protective. He leaned down and whispered something into her ear.

Sarah burst out laughing. The sound carried faintly across the lawn. Derek immediately smiled. And there it was—that look. The same look Flynn had once worn whenever he looked at Pippa. The same look Trevor gave Caitlyn. The look of a man completely and utterly in love.

Flynn suspected an engagement ring wasn't too far away. The thought pleased him immensely.

His attention shifted again.

Four-year-old Oliver was racing across the lawn wielding a wooden sword with all the determination of a knight charging into battle. Two equally enthusiastic friends charged after him while an overexcited golden retriever bounded alongside them, barking happily and creating absolute mayhem.

Near the fountain, his youngest daughter Alice was attempting—with very little success—to prevent a group of children from climbing onto the stonework.

"Please get down before somebody falls!"

The children ignored her completely.

Across from her, her fiancé Eric watched the entire scene with obvious amusement. He wasn't helping. In fact, he appeared to be enjoying her frustration. Alice shot him an exasperated look. Eric simply laughed.

In two weeks, he would officially become part of the family.

Flynn couldn't have been happier about it.

Beyond them, extended family members and the parents of Deborah's friends gathered beneath elegant white marquees scattered throughout the gardens. Small groups chatted over drinks while waiters circulated with trays of food. Conversations mingled with children's laughter, creating a steady hum of happiness that seemed to settle over the entire estate.

The grounds of Oakland Park had never felt more alive.

Sometimes Flynn still found himself pausing to take it all in. There had been a time when none of this had seemed possible. A time when Oakland Park had felt like a prison—a monument to duty, expectations, and obligations he had never chosen for himself.

Back then, the estate had been filled with silence, loneliness, and ghosts. Now it was filled with children, laughter, and family.

And every time Flynn looked across the gardens and saw the life that had grown here, he felt the same quiet sense of gratitude. Because there had been a time when he believed none of this would ever exist.

A time when he had been certain his dreams had been shattered beyond repair.

Standing on the terrace now, watching his children and grandchildren fill Oakland Park with joy, he knew the truth.

His dreams hadn't been shattered at all.

Life had simply taken a longer path than he'd expected before leading him exactly where he was meant to be.

A familiar warmth brushed against his back.

Without turning, he smiled.

"I know you're there."

A soft laugh answered him.

"After thirty years, I'd be concerned if you didn't."

Pippa stepped beside him.

His wife.

Even now, the word settled somewhere deep inside him. Thirty years, and he still wasn't tired of it.

The afternoon breeze lifted a few strands of dark hair from her face. Silver threaded through it now, catching the sunlight like fine strands of silk. Flynn privately thought it only made her more beautiful. Time had touched them both, but it had never dimmed the brightness of her smile or the emerald eyes that had captivated him from the very beginning.

His arm slid around her waist automatically, drawing her against his side. She fit there as naturally as she always had.

"Escaping?" she asked.

"Observing."

Her gaze drifted across the gardens. A laugh escaped her.

"Our grandchildren are destroying your mother's fountain."

Flynn followed her gaze.

Several children were now climbing where they absolutely shouldn't have been.

"My mother would be horrified."

Pippa laughed harder.

"She absolutely would."

The sound wrapped around him like sunshine.

For a while, they simply stood together in comfortable silence. Watching. Their children. Their children's partners. Their grandchildren. The family that filled every corner of Oakland Park with life. The life that had grown from a love story that very nearly ended before it began.

As though sensing the direction of his thoughts, Pippa rested her head against his shoulder.

"What are you thinking?"

Flynn's gaze wandered across the estate. Beyond the lawns. Beyond the sparkling lake. Toward the old summerhouse. The small building still stood exactly where it always had.

Time had weathered the timber and faded the paint, but not enough to erase the memories it held.

He felt Pippa's gaze follow his. The summerhouse. The beginning of everything. And, for a while, almost the end.

A slow smile touched his mouth.

"I was thinking about how close I came to losing all this."

Pippa's fingers tightened around his. The words were simply true.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

The weight of those years lingered between them—not painful anymore but remembered.

The heartbreak. The separation. The misunderstandings. The years they had wasted apart.

Flynn looked down at her.

"I used to think that letter was the worst thing that ever happened to me."

Pippa winced softly. Even after all these years, the memory still carried regret and pain.

Then Flynn shook his head.

"But if I'd never lost you..." His gaze moved back to the family scattered across the lawn. "I don't think I would have understood what getting you back really meant."

Emotion flickered across her face. Her eyes brightened instantly.

"You always know how to make me cry."

A smile tugged at his mouth.

"I wasn't trying to."

"You absolutely were."

"I wasn't."

"Flynn."

"Maybe a little."

Pippa laughed through suspiciously bright eyes. The sound settled deep inside his chest.

Home.

That was what it felt like.

Not the estate. Not the house. Not even Oakland Park.

Her.

It had always been her.

Below them, Deborah suddenly broke away from the crowd and sprinted toward the terrace.

"Grandpa!"

Flynn groaned.

Pippa laughed.

Their granddaughter launched herself at them with all the force and enthusiasm of a small cannonball.

"Grandma! Grandpa! We need judges!"

"For what?" Pippa asked.

Deborah pointed dramatically toward the lawn.

"Oliver says dinosaurs would beat dragons."

Flynn considered this carefully.

"That's impossible."

Deborah's eyes widened hopefully.

"Really?"

"Of course. Dragons can fly."

The little girl gasped.

"I knew it!"

A furious protest immediately erupted from somewhere near the fountain.

"Grandpa!"

Oliver's outraged voice carried all the way across the lawn.

Pippa shook her head.

"You realise you've just started a war."

Flynn looked entirely unapologetic.

"An important war."

She rolled her eyes.

Deborah grabbed both their hands.

"Come on!"

Before either could object, she began dragging them toward the lawn. Flynn allowed himself to be pulled along. Halfway down the terrace steps, he glanced back one last time.

The evening sun cast long shadows across Oakland Park. Across the gardens. Across the lake. Across the summerhouse where a young man and a young woman had once dreamed about a future they feared they would never have.

For years, Flynn had believed those dreams were shattered forever. Now he looked at the family waiting for them below. At the children. The grandchildren. The woman he still loved with every part of his heart. And he smiled.

He had never been happier to be wrong.

— The End —

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