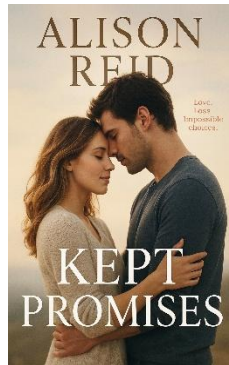


Kept Promises

by Alison Reid



Monday morning, Stephanie dabbed concealer beneath her eye, layering her navy skirt suit over the lingering softness of her silk nightgown. Control mattered. She couldn't afford to look fragile—especially not after the weekend. Especially not now.

At her desk, she tried to lose herself in spreadsheets, fingers flying over the keyboard, counting, calculating, focusing on something—anything—to drown the ache in her chest. But then—

“Morning, Ms. Vale.”

The deep timbre of Trey's voice sliced through the office hum, freezing her mid-keystroke. She looked up, heart hammering against her ribs, pulse leaping.

“Morning, Mr. Grayson,” she said tightly, forcing evenness into her tone.

His warm smile never appeared. Jaw tight, eyes sharp, he studied her like he could see through every carefully constructed layer she'd worn to hide the truth. “My office. Now.”

Stephanie's throat went dry. “I—”

“Now, Stephanie.”

The command left no room for argument. A flush of heat rose beneath her concealer, awareness of how poorly she'd masked herself impossible to hide. She rose, gripping her notebook like a shield, and followed him into his office.

Each step echoed in her ears, her heartbeat thrumming in tandem with the click of her heels. Trey had seen through her. Of course he had.

The office door closed behind them with a soft click. Trey set his briefcase down with a deliberate thud and moved toward her. One hand lifted her chin, tilting her face toward the light.

“Did he do this to you?” His voice was low, raw, edged with fury that made the air between them tense.

Stephanie froze, breath catching. “I—I hit a cupboard door,” she whispered.

Trey’s jaw clenched, eyes scanning her face with merciless precision. “Stephanie,” he said, the words sharp as a blade, “don’t lie to me. Not about this.”

Her lips parted, then closed. Heart hammering, she couldn’t look away.

“If he laid a hand on you—if Ryan so much as breathed wrong—you tell me now,” he pressed, thumb brushing the edge of the bruise, gaze darkening further.

“I swear... it was an accident.”

His hand lingered, hovering like a sentinel, before sliding away, yet his eyes never left hers. “Then why,” he asked, softer now but no less intense, “do you look like you’re carrying the weight of the world?”

Her throat tightened. “I’m... confused.”

“About what?”

Her voice trembled, fragile but urgent. “You.”

The silence that followed was electric, charged with everything she’d been too afraid to name. Trey’s expression shifted—imperceptibly, yet enough. The edge of anger softened, giving way to something darker, more dangerous.

“Stephanie... do you even realise what you’re saying?” His voice was low, rough, tasting the words.

Her chest rose and fell with shallow breaths. She wanted to retreat into confusion, to laugh it off—but the ache wouldn’t let her. “I don’t know what I’m saying. I just... when you’re near me, everything feels different. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Trey’s jaw tightened, a flicker of something dangerous sparking across his features before he drew back slightly, leaving just enough space to remind her of boundaries he wouldn’t cross—yet. Restraint radiated from him, taut and palpable, written in every line of his body.

“Stephanie,” he said, voice low, steady, agonisingly careful.

Her pulse thundered. Words hovered between confession and fear. He’d stepped back—of course he had. She had no right to speak her feelings; he was her boss. Shame stung sharper than the lingering bruise on her cheek.

Turning, she let her heels click against the hardwood, gripping the door like a lifeline. “Sorry, Mr. Grayson. Please... ignore what I just said.”

“Stephanie—wait,” Trey’s voice came, rougher now, threaded with frustration and something far deeper.

Her breath caught, but she didn’t turn. If she faced him now, she’d shatter.

Finally, he spoke again, measured, gentle, carrying the weight of unspoken truths. “Don’t ever think what you feel is something to be ashamed of.”

Kind. Nothing more. Nothing she could claim. She nodded stiffly, throat tight for words, and slipped out before her carefully constructed resolve could crumble.

Her steps echoed in the empty hallway. Behind her, Trey’s office remained still, the weight of his gaze lingering like smoke. Outside, the world continued as usual—but for Stephanie, nothing would ever feel the same again.

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