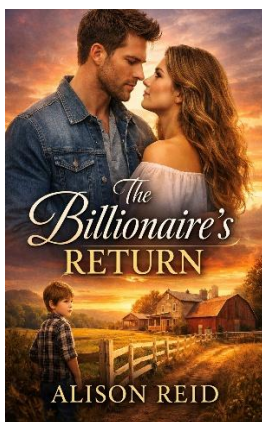


The Billionaire's Return

by Alison Reid



Luke Calder stood on her porch.

He looked wrong here—too big, too expensive, too sharp around the edges. Like a man carved out of city steel and dropped into Maple Hollow by mistake. Dark coat. Unshaven jaw. Bloodshot eyes that didn't match the rest of him.

But those eyes—

Those were the same.

Steel-grey. Intense. Haunted.

His gaze locked onto her like he'd been holding his breath for six years and only just remembered how to inhale.

“Can we talk?” he asked.

His voice was rough. Raw.

Emma didn't answer.

She simply stepped back and opened the door wider.

Luke hesitated, like he didn't trust the invitation.

Then he walked inside.

Emma closed the door behind him.

The latch clicked.

And the sound felt final.

A line drawn.

A door shutting on the past and trapping it in the same room with her.

She was grateful—desperately grateful—that Noah was a heavy sleeper.

She wasn't ready.

Not for Luke and Noah in the same space again.

Not for Noah to see her like this.

Luke stopped in the middle of the living room like he'd forgotten how houses worked.

Like he expected the walls to close in.

His gaze swept the space—familiar furniture, family photos, the soft, lived-in warmth.

Her life.

The life he hadn't been part of.

Then he turned back to her.

His hands were clenched at his sides, knuckles white—his only visible tell.

Like control was the one thing keeping him upright.

His voice trembled, just barely.

“Is he... mine?”

Even before she spoke, he already knew. He could see it in her face. In the way her shoulders lifted, like she'd been carrying the weight of this moment for years.

Emma didn't blink.

“Yes.”

Luke exhaled slowly.

The truth hit like a punch.

His eyes went glassy.

“Why... didn’t you tell me?”

For a heartbeat, Emma couldn’t even process the question.

It landed wrong.

Like an accusation dressed up as confusion.

Then something in her snapped.

“Tell you?” she repeated, the word sharp. “Tell you?”

Luke flinched—small, almost imperceptible.

Emma stepped forward, anger coiling tight in her chest.

“You left,” she hissed. “You vanished. You didn’t call. You didn’t write.

You didn’t come back.”

Luke swallowed hard. “I tried—”

Emma laughed.

Sharp. Bitter. All teeth and no humour.

“No,” she said. “You didn’t.”

Luke stared at her like she’d stripped him bare.

Helpless.

Stripped of the control he wore like armour.

Emma had spent years forging herself into someone unbreakable. Someone who didn’t need him. Someone who could stand in the same room as Luke Caldwell and not fall apart.

And yet her voice trembled anyway.

“I didn’t know where you were,” she said, and the words came out rough, dragged from somewhere deep. “Do you have any idea how many nights I sat with my phone in my hand, staring at it like it might ring if I wished hard enough?”

Luke’s shoulders locked.

Pain flashed across his face—quick and ugly, like an old wound ripping open.

Emma didn't stop. She couldn't.

“I asked everyone,” she said. “Everyone. Your friends. People who barely remembered your name.” Her laugh broke out again, sharp and bitter. “I even looked into hiring someone to find you.”

Luke's eyes flicked up. “A PI?”

Emma's throat tightened.

“I couldn't afford it,” she admitted. “Not even close.”

The words landed between them like a slap.

A raw reminder.

He had everything now. He could buy a person's entire life with a signature.

And she'd been alone, scraping by, raising their son on nothing but stubbornness and fear.

Click here to Buy or Read for FREE with Kindle Unlimited

 [The Billionaire's Return](#)