

Until You Loved Me

by Alison Reid



“What are your plans?” he asked, calm, detached.

She wanted to snap at him—to tell him to stay out of her life—but she didn’t. He had been her father’s partner. And regardless of how she felt about him, there was no denying that when the Lewis half of the firm was sold off, John Sneddon would be left holding all the cards. He already owned most of the company. The rest had just been a formality.

“I’ll stay at Rosewood until the house is sold—or until someone tells me I can’t.” She lifted her shoulders in a weary shrug. “In the meantime, I’ll start looking for a flat. Something small but big enough for Jenny and me. It’ll have to be in London... I won’t be able to afford too many train fares, not for a while.”

She gave a little half-laugh, soft and bitter. “Not that I have the faintest idea how long it’ll take before things start getting sorted. I mean...”

“You mean you’ve never had to deal with anything sordid before,” he said, flatly.

Her head came up like he'd struck her. "Did you expect me to have experience with this kind of thing?" Her voice sharpened. "I thought I was just a lightweight, remember?"

Her face flushed, her anger surfacing in waves, but he didn't rise to it. He merely watched her, steady and unreadable.

"You're not involved in anything, Grace," he said coolly. "The press is just flailing around, trying to stir up scandal because my name is linked to the company. If it had only been your father's, his death would have passed with a few polite notices. But now..." He gave a faint shrug. "Now there's a scent of blood. A few days of wild headlines, maybe some colourful speculation. A woman or two willing to sell their story. But that's it."

She blinked. "What are you saying?" He wasn't a man to speak lightly. If he was claiming everything was resolved... she didn't understand how. Or why.

He waved one hand dismissively, as if it were already old news. "Weeks before he died, your father asked to see me. And Dennis—your solicitor. We met; we talked. We made a deal."

Her heart began to pound. "A... a deal?"

He nodded. "On the day he died, it was finalised. I bought out your father's share of the firm. It's done. The cheques went out immediately. There are no debts now."

She stared at him. "But... even that wouldn't have been enough."

"I also bought the house," he said evenly. "Rosewood is mine."

The words hit like a slap. She shot to her feet, fury flooding her body in a searing wave. "So, you did it. You finally got everything."

Her face went bloodless, the words spilling out like poison. "The moment I saw you, I knew you were dangerous. I warned him. He wouldn't listen. You must've known what was happening, seen the signs. But you just waited—"

calm, patient—until the perfect moment to strike. Now he’s dead, and you’ve got it all.”

She was shaking, barely aware of what she was saying until she saw the flicker of something shift in his face—something hard and savage. He rose slowly to his full, imposing height, and when his eyes met hers, they were glacial.

“Be very careful how you speak to me, Miss Lewis,” he said, his voice dangerously low. “I don’t indulge hysteria.”

He stepped toward her, towering now, radiating fury barely held in check. “What exactly did I do? Did I buy that damned yacht—Dream World? Did I take him to every casino along the Riviera? Did I supply the women?”

Grace recoiled, her anger splintering into something rawer. Her face twisted with grief as she turned away, but he wasn’t finished. His hand gripped her shoulders, not gently, and spun her back to face him.

“Yes. That’s what stings the most, doesn’t it? The women.”

Her voice was a whisper. “My mother was beautiful...”

“Like you,” he rasped. “I know. Brian kept her photograph in every place he touched—a shrine, almost.”

He strode to the desk, yanked open the top drawer, and pulled out the silver-framed portrait. He thrust it into her hands, the image as familiar as her own face—Marie, smiling softly, her fair hair shining like Grace’s.

“Marie,” he said hoarsely. “I knew her. Through him. She never left him, not really. She died, yes—but not to him. Every time he looked at you, he saw her. That kind of love... it’s a life sentence.”

Grace clutched the frame, barely breathing. “Then why the others?” she asked, her voice breaking. “Why betray her like that?”

He exhaled, sharp with frustration, his tone rough. “Because it was easier than grief. They were nothing. An anaesthetic. There was only ever her. And you. I imagine seeing you every day—so like her—was both a comfort and a slow torture. Eventually, something inside him must have... snapped.”

For a moment, the room was silent, her breath the only sound as she stared at the photo. But he turned back, all impatience and steel once more.

“This isn’t getting us anywhere. Your father didn’t even realise how sick he was until it was almost too late. And when he did, he panicked—for you. That’s what the deal was really about.”

She looked up, still dazed, as he continued.

“I agreed to three conditions. One, the firm retains its name—Sneddon-Lewis. Two, you have access to Rosewood for as long as you wish.”

She laughed bitterly. “As if I’d want that.” Her voice trembled with a mixture of shame and defiance. “You’ve taken everything. I’ve gone from ease to... this. I’m nothing. Don’t pretend I have choices.”

Her pride stung more than her losses. The thought of staying under his roof, his protection, was unbearable.

“I’ll leave tomorrow,” she finished stiffly.

He didn’t flinch. Didn’t rise to her emotion. Just gave a shrug, cold and unreadable. “As I told you when we arrived—it’s up to you.”

“So... what’s the last condition?” Grace’s voice was tight with pride, though every instinct screamed at her to run. Instead, she lifted her chin and held his gaze. “I might as well know the full extent of the deal.”

John’s expression didn’t shift. His voice came cool and clipped.

“That condition depends on you. He wanted a future for you—a secure one. I agreed... to marry you.”

The words hit like a hammer, so blunt and devoid of feeling that for a moment she just blinked at him, stunned.

“You... what?” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “You agreed... to...?”

“It suited him. And it suits me,” he said with the same cold detachment. “It gave him peace at the end, and I have no particular objection.”

The blood drained from her face. Horror and disbelief surged through her like ice water. She stepped back instinctively, her legs suddenly boneless. “No...” The word barely passed her lips before her knees buckled and everything slipped away.

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