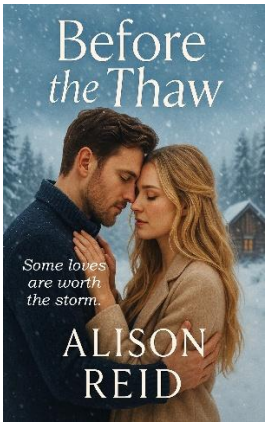
Before the Thaw

by Alison Reid



Duncan set his glass down—slowly, deliberately—because he didn't trust his grip not to shatter it.

"You told her it was for the best?"

Dean blinked at him, unbothered. "Well, yeah. What was I supposed to say? I'm not gonna pretend I was excited. She's been all over the place lately. Emotional. Overreacting."

Duncan stood.

He didn't remember deciding to. His body just moved, charged with heat.

"She lost a baby, Dean. Your baby. And you couldn't even be decent to her."

Dean's face tightened just a little. "Don't do that. Don't turn this into one of your 'white knight' speeches."

"No," Duncan said quietly, "this has nothing to do with playing the hero. This is about being a decent human being. You were supposed to care. At the very least, you were supposed to give a damn."

"I'm moving on anyway."

Duncan blinked. "What?"

"I got a better offer this afternoon," Dean said, a self-satisfied smirk playing on his lips. "Spending the weekend with my secretary."

Silence stretched between them.

When Duncan finally spoke, his voice was lower, heavier.

"But Jade's waiting for you. In Glenridding."

Dean shrugged, completely unbothered. "She'll work it out."

Duncan stared at him in disbelief. His blood turned cold, then hot.

"You're cheating on her? How long?" He already knew the answer. But hearing it aloud made it real—and so much worse.

Dean took another slow sip of his drink, utterly unfazed. "Couple of weeks. It's no big deal. She'll get over it."

"Bloody hell, Dean." Duncan's voice was louder now, sharper. "You're unbelievable."

Dean scoffed. "Mate, not everyone's built like you. You fall in love with every doe-eyed woman who brings you coffee. I'm not wired that way."

Duncan's hands curled into fists at his sides.

"I loved her," he said, each word sharp, controlled, seething. "I loved her, and you knew it. And you went after her anyway."

Dean stood too now, still holding his drink, still smug. "Oh, come off it. She wasn't yours. She never was."

Duncan's jaw clenched. "You didn't even want her until you saw I did."

Dean's eyes darkened, his smirk sliding toward cruelty. "So what? You're still carrying a torch? You want me to step aside now and give you a shot? Is that what this is?"

Duncan shook his head slowly, the disgust plain on his face. "This isn't about me. It's about her. She deserves better than this."

Dean let out a bitter laugh. "Then go tell her."

He looked Duncan square in the eye; voice laced with contempt. "You think she'll fall into your arms after three years with me? Be my guest." He leaned back. "She's up at the cabin on Greystones Lane. Waiting."

A beat passed. Then, with a cruel twist of his mouth, he added,

"You can both cry about the miscarriage together."

Something inside Duncan snapped.

He took a step back, his jaw set, rage trembling just beneath the surface. Not just anger at Dean—but regret. Guilt. And all the words he should have said to Jade but never did.

His voice came out low, shaking.

"You don't just not deserve her," Duncan said, turning toward the door. "You never did."

Dean straightened, the smugness fading from his face. His voice tightened.

"Where are you going?"

Duncan didn't hesitate. "We're done, Dean. You're selfish, cruel and a complete ass."

Then he turned, walked to the door, and left the flat without another word.

The cold hit him like a slap as he stepped out into the grey Manchester evening.

But it did nothing to cool the fire burning in his chest.

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