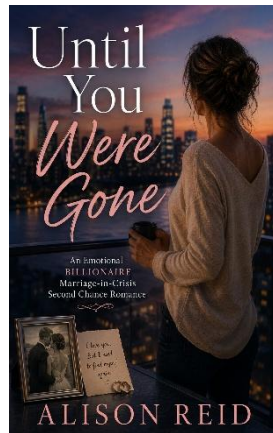


Until You Were Gone

by Alison Reid



It was the realisation that he'd planned the perfect gift months in advance... yet hadn't managed to give her two uninterrupted hours.

Dessert arrived. They shared a slice of chocolate torte. For twenty-three wonderful minutes, his phone remained silent. She almost forgot the interruptions. Then it rang again.

Harrison looked at the display. This time, he didn't apologise immediately. Instead, he stared at it. The phone continued vibrating against the table.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

Paige looked at him. Then at the phone. Then back at him.

"Go."

"You sure?"

She nodded with a practiced smile.

"I'll still be here."

He kissed her forehead before answering.

"I'll only be a minute."

She watched him disappear through the restaurant doors. One minute became ten. Then fifteen. The waiter quietly refilled her water glass.

“Would madam like coffee while she waits?”

Paige smiled.

“Yes, thank you.”

She sat alone beneath the glow of the chandelier, turning the diamond bracelet slowly around her wrist. It was stunning. Thoughtful. Worth a fortune. Yet if someone had offered her a choice between the bracelet and two uninterrupted hours with her husband...

She would have chosen the two hours.

Every single time.

* * * * *

The drive home was quiet. Not uncomfortable. Just... familiar. Harrison reached across the centre console and intertwined his fingers with hers.

“I’m really sorry about tonight.”

Paige looked over at him and smiled.

“I know.”

“I hate that work keeps interrupting us.”

“I know.”

He squeezed her hand.

“I’ll do better.”

She wanted to believe him. God, she wanted to.

The gates to their estate opened automatically, and Harrison steered the car toward the sprawling house that had once echoed with laughter, music, and two children forever racing up and down the staircase. Now it was silent.

He opened her door before she had the chance.

“Happy anniversary,” he said again.

She smiled.

“Happy anniversary.”

As soon as they stepped inside, he slipped his arms around her waist.

She laughed softly.

“What?”

“I’ve barely had you to myself all night.”

“Whose fault was that?”

He winced.

“Fair.”

She rested her hands against his chest.

“I missed you tonight.”

“I’m here now.”

He lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss was slow. Unhurried. Nothing like the quick pecks they’d exchanged over the past few years between meetings and business trips. His hand cupped her face. She melted into him.

For the first time all evening, she allowed herself to hope.

He deepened the kiss, drawing her closer until there wasn’t a breath between them.

“I love you,” he murmured.

“I love you too.”

He brushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

“You look so beautiful.”

She smiled against his lips.

“So do you.”

He laughed.

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“It does tonight.”

He kissed her again. Longer this time. His hands settled gently at her waist before sliding around her back. Her heart fluttered. This was what she'd wanted. Not diamonds. Not expensive dinners. Just this. His full attention. Just as she began to believe the evening might still end the way she'd hoped...

His phone rang. Neither of them moved. It rang again. Then again. Harrison closed his eyes.

"No..."

The phone continued vibrating inside his jacket pocket. Paige slowly stepped back.

"You should answer it."

"I don't want to."

"But you will."

He looked at her, guilt already written across his face.

"I'm sorry."

She managed a small smile.

"I know."

He answered the call with obvious reluctance.

"Harrison Matthews."

The change was immediate. His expression sharpened. His voice became all business.

"Slow down... tell me exactly what's happened."

Paige stood there for another few seconds, watching the husband she'd almost had disappear behind the CEO she knew so well. Without saying a word, she turned and walked upstairs.

Their bedroom was dimly lit by the bedside lamp she'd left on before dinner. She slipped out of her dress, folded it carefully over the chair and

changed into one of Harrison's old T-shirts she'd claimed years ago. It still smelled faintly of him. She climbed beneath the covers and stared at the ceiling.

Downstairs she could hear his voice. Firm. Confident. Giving instructions.

Twenty minutes passed. Then the bedroom door opened quietly.

Paige closed her eyes. She heard him loosen his tie. The soft rustle of clothes hitting the chair. The bathroom tap running briefly. Finally, the mattress dipped as he climbed into bed beside her. He shifted closer until she felt the warmth of his body.

Very gently, he pressed a kiss against her bare shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

The words were so soft she almost wished she hadn't heard them. A moment later he rolled onto his back. Within minutes, his breathing became slow and even. Asleep.

Paige kept her eyes closed. She listened to the steady rhythm of the man she'd loved for more than half her life. The man who worked every day to give her everything.

Everything...

Except himself.

A tear slipped silently onto the pillow. Then another. She cried without making a sound, careful not to wake him. Because tomorrow morning, he'd ask if she'd slept well. She'd smile. She'd say yes.

And neither of them would mention that she'd spent another night lying awake beside her husband... feeling completely alone.

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