EXCLUSIVE
BONUS EPILOGUE

Before I Fell

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by Alison Reid

Ten Years Later…

The house was unusually quiet.

For the first time in months, there were no little feet racing down the hallway before sunrise. No arguments over cereal. No cartoons echoing through the living room.

Their daughters had insisted on a sleepover with Uncle Ian and Aunt Shelby, declaring themselves "far too grown up" to spend every weekend at home.

Marissa wasn't entirely convinced.

She smiled to herself as she stood in the kitchen, waiting for the coffee machine to finish brewing.

Morning sunlight streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows, bathing the room in warm gold. She wore a silk chemise in pure white beneath a matching robe loosely tied at her waist, the soft fabric skimming her figure as she reached for two mugs.

Ten years.

Ten wonderful, chaotic, exhausting, beautiful years. She had married her best friend. She'd become the mother of two incredible little girls. And somehow, despite everything life had thrown at them, James still looked at her as though she was the only woman in the world.

She heard his footsteps before she saw him. Slow. Unhurried. Purposeful. James wandered into the kitchen wearing nothing more than a pair of charcoal lounge pants, his dark hair still slightly tousled from sleep.

He stopped. Completely. His eyes settled on her, and for several long seconds, he simply stared. Marissa didn't turn around straight away. She knew that look. She'd been catching him looking at her like that for ten years.

"You know," she said as she topped up the second coffee, "it's considered rude to stare."

His voice was warm, rough with sleep.

"I wasn't aware there was a rule against appreciating my wife."

A smile tugged at her lips.

"There probably should be."

"There definitely shouldn't."

She finally turned to face him. Even after all these years, his expression made her heart skip. It wasn't merely desire. It was wonder. As though, somehow, he still couldn't quite believe she was standing in his kitchen. Still couldn't quite believe she'd chosen him.

James slowly crossed the room until only a step separated them.

"You have any idea how unfair you are?"

She blinked innocently.

"What have I done now?"

He looked her over without the slightest attempt to hide it, his gaze lingering for just a moment before returning to her eyes.

"You wake up looking like..." He shook his head with a quiet laugh. "Like every fantasy I ever had somehow became my real life."

Colour warmed her cheeks despite herself.

"That's an awfully dramatic thing to say before coffee."

"It's an accurate thing to say."

She handed him one of the mugs. Instead of taking it, he reached for her hand first, his fingers brushing hers before accepting the coffee. His thumb lingered against her skin.

Ten years.

He still looked for excuses to touch her.

Marissa smiled.

"I was beginning to think you only married me because I make good coffee."

James laughed.

"I married you because you drove me completely insane."

"I still do."

"Every single day."

She lifted an eyebrow.

"And yet you're still here."

"I'll always be here."

The words were simple. Matter-of-fact. But after everything they'd survived together, they still settled around her heart like a promise.

She took a sip of her coffee.

"So..." she said casually, "...what shall we do with an entire child-free weekend?"

James nearly choked on his coffee. Marissa bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself laughing.

"What?" she asked, all innocence.

"You know exactly what."

She leaned against the kitchen island, the silk of her robe catching the morning light.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Liar.”

“I’ve matured considerably over the last ten years.”

His eyebrows lifted.

“Oh?”

“I hardly tease you anymore.”

James laughed outright.

“You teased me before I’d even had my first sip of coffee.”

She grinned.

“I wanted to make sure you were awake.”

“I was awake the second I walked into this kitchen.”

His gaze drifted over her once more before settling on her face again.

“Marissa...”

“Hmm?”

“I have loved you every day for the last ten years.”

Her smile softened.

“And?”

He stepped closer, close enough that she could see the affection shining behind the familiar heat in his eyes.

“I swear...” he murmured, “...you only get more beautiful.”

She reached up, smoothing a hand against his cheek.

“And you,” she whispered with a smile, “still have absolutely no self-control.”

“No,” he admitted without the slightest embarrassment.

“Not where you’re concerned.”

She laughed, the sound filling the quiet kitchen.

“What you’re wearing should be illegal.”

Her smile widened. "Really?" she teased. "I seem to remember wearing something very similar once before."

His eyebrow lifted.

"The morning after Ian and Shelby's wedding," she continued. "You marched into the kitchen and asked if I *had* to walk around the house like that."

A slow smile spread across James's face.

"I remember."

"I believe your exact words were..." She lowered her voice in imitation of his younger, sterner self. "*'Do you have to walk around the house like that?'*"

He chuckled, shaking his head. "I was trying very hard to behave."

"And now?"

"Now," he said, "you're my wife."

He set his coffee mug on the kitchen bench before gently taking hers from her hands and placing it beside his. Without taking his eyes off her, he reached for the loose sash tied around her waist.

His fingers moved unhurriedly, easing the knot free until the silk relaxed against her. The robe remained draped over her shoulders, but his hands settled lightly at her waist, smoothing over the soft fabric before drawing her closer.

Marissa rested her palms against his chest, smiling up at him.

"Still distracted?" she asked softly.

His eyes travelled over her face with unmistakable affection.

"After ten years?"

He gave a quiet laugh.

"I don't think I've ever recovered."

His hands came to rest at the small of her back, holding her with the easy familiarity of a man who had loved the same woman every day for a decade.

“I still look at you,” he murmured, “and wonder how I got this lucky.”

Her expression softened.

“You’ve become quite the romantic.”

“I’ve always been one.”

She smiled knowingly.

“You just hid it well.”

“I never hid it from you.”

James leaned down and brushed his lips against hers in a slow, lingering kiss that carried ten years of shared laughter, quiet mornings, late-night conversations, and a love that had only grown stronger with time.

When he finally drew back, their foreheads rested together. Marissa smiled, her fingers slipping into his.

“So...” she whispered, unable to hide the amusement in her voice.

“So?”

“Still think what I’m wearing should be illegal?”

James laughed quietly.

“No.”

His eyes met hers, warm with both love and admiration.

“I think it’s one of my favourite sights in the world.” His smile turned slow and decidedly mischievous. “Although... I do think it would look even better on our bedroom floor.”

Marissa’s cheeks warmed, but she couldn’t suppress the smile tugging at her lips.

“You’re impossible.”

“So I’ve been told.”

She lifted her hands to his face, her fingertips brushing the familiar stubble along his jaw before slipping into his thick, dark hair. Slowly, she combed her fingers through the silky strands, her nails lightly grazing his scalp.

James's eyes drifted closed.

A quiet groan escaped him, followed by a contented smile that made her heart skip, even after all these years.

"You know," he murmured, his voice low, "you've always known exactly how to distract me."

She smiled, continuing the gentle caress.

"I learned from experience."

His eyes opened again, filled with the same mixture of affection and unmistakable admiration she'd fallen in love with years ago.

"You certainly did."

A smile touched James's lips before he leaned in, brushing a trail of gentle kisses along the side of her neck. Marissa's breath caught. Without thinking, she tilted her head, giving him easier access, her fingers still threaded through his dark hair.

"This," she murmured with a soft laugh, "is hardly helping me think."

"I'm not trying to help you think."

"I noticed."

His smile brushed against her skin as he laughed quietly. After a lingering moment, Marissa rested her forehead lightly against his temple.

"So," she asked, her voice warm with amusement, "have you decided what we're doing today... or are you going to keep me in suspense?"

James didn't answer straight away.

Instead, his lips drifted to the curve of her collarbone while his hands settled comfortably at her waist, drawing her closer until she could feel his

growing arousal. She pressed closer seductively and he let out a groan against her bare shoulder.

She smiled, letting out a contented sigh. He finally lifted his head to meet her eyes.

"I had a whole day planned."

"Oh?"

"Breakfast together. A drive along the coast. Lunch somewhere overlooking the ocean. Then we'd come home, open a bottle of wine, and spend the evening watching one of those old movies you pretend not to like."

"I don't pretend."

"You quote every line."

"I quote the good ones."

His grin widened.

"And somewhere in between all of that..." He paused just long enough for her curiosity to grow. "...I was hoping I might convince my beautiful wife to spend as much of the day as possible in my arms."

Marissa laughed, her blue eyes sparkling.

"Well," she said, slipping her arms around his neck once more, "that sounds like a very good start to the weekend."

James's smile turned positively wicked.

"I have an even better start."

Before she could ask what he meant, he bent, slipped one arm beneath her knees and the other around her back, and effortlessly swept her into his arms.

Marissa let out a surprised laugh, instinctively looping her arms around his neck.

"James!"

"What?" he asked innocently.

"You know exactly what."

"I do."

He leaned in and kissed her, slow and unhurried, the kind of kiss that still had the power to steal her breath after ten years of marriage. When they finally parted, he rested his forehead against hers, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"I believe," he murmured, "this requires that we adjourn to the bedroom posthaste."

Marissa laughed, shaking her head.

"You are unbelievable."

"So I've been told."

"And what about our coffees?"

James glanced toward the two forgotten mugs waiting patiently on the kitchen bench.

"They'll still be there in half an hour."

She raised an amused eyebrow.

"Only half an hour?"

A slow grin spread across his face.

"I can certainly take longer if you'd prefer."

Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Oh, I would."

He chuckled, tightening his hold on her just a little.

"Your wish is my command."

She laughed again, the sound warm and infectious.

"Confident, aren't we?"

"I've had ten wonderful years to learn exactly what my wife likes."

Heat crept into her cheeks despite herself.

"You are impossible."

"And yet," he said, turning toward the hallway with her still cradled securely in his arms, "you've never once complained."

Marissa's eyes danced with mischief.

"I don't intend to..." She let the words hang for a beat before adding with a teasing smile, "provided you live up to the hype."

James laughed, the deep, familiar sound rumbling through his chest.

"Challenge accepted."

Still carrying her as though she weighed nothing at all, he turned and headed toward their bedroom.

Marissa wrapped her arms a little tighter around his neck. As they reached the hallway, she brushed a gentle kiss against his neck before whispering softly, "I love you."

He looked down at her.

"I'm so glad I married you."

His smile softened instantly, every trace of teasing giving way to the unmistakable love that had never faded.

"Best decision either of us ever made."

Marissa smiled back, her heart every bit as full as it had been on the day she'd walked down the aisle toward him.

"I couldn't agree more."

James nudged the bedroom door open with his shoulder before gently kicking it closed behind them. He crossed the room and carefully lowered her onto the bed before lying beside her. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

He reached up and brushed a loose strand of auburn hair away from her face, his fingertips lingering against her cheek as he looked into the blue eyes that had captivated him so many years ago.

"I love you, Marissa," he said quietly. "More with every passing day."

Her expression softened. She slipped her arms around his neck, drawing him closer until their foreheads touched.

"I love you too."

She kissed him slowly, lingering just long enough to make him smile when they finally drew apart.

Then, with a teasing glint in her eyes, she murmured against his lips, "No more talking... more action."

James laughed, the sound warm and full of happiness.

"Yes, ma'am."

Their laughter echoed softly through the room before the rest of the world quietly disappeared beyond the bedroom door. Ten years had passed since they'd first fallen in love.

Time had given them laughter, heartbreak, forgiveness, two beautiful daughters, and a lifetime of memories. But it had never dulled the spark between them.

If anything, it had only made it stronger. They both knew what they shared was rare. A love built on trust, friendship, forgiveness, and unwavering devotion.

And it was something neither of them would ever take for granted.

—The End—

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