Before I Fell

by Alison Reid

Her mind drifted back to five years ago—a night she wished she could forget but never truly had.

James had just broken up with his girlfriend, and to eighteen-year-old Marissa, he might as well have hung the stars. She'd admired him from a distance for years, secretly hoping that one day he might actually see her—not just as Ian's little sister, but as a woman.

That night, Ian had taken her and Shelby out—a rare evening where she felt grown-up, sophisticated. She learned later that it was the very night Ian began to pursue her best friend, though at the time she was too busy feeling the rush of the city lights to notice.

The music thumped loudly through the packed club, the dance floor pulsing with energy. Marissa was in her element—laughing freely, spinning with abandon, lost in the rhythm. Men noticed her, as they always did, but she wasn't interested in any of them. She simply loved to dance, and if someone asked her, she said yes. It was just dancing.

But some of the men were too bold, their hands lingering where they shouldn't. She brushed them off with a polite smile and stepped back when

needed. She hadn't encouraged any of it—but James, walking in partway through the night, saw something else entirely.

When she finally stepped off the dance floor, breathless and flushed, she spotted him sitting alone at the edge of the room, his dark expression as sharp as a blade. She smoothed her hair, nerves fluttering in her stomach, and crossed to him, determined to at least say hello.

"Hey," she greeted softly, sliding into the seat beside him.

He turned his head, his gaze hard, jaw clenched. "You're acting like a hussy," he said, the words low but biting.

For a second, she didn't even process it—the insult landing like a slap she hadn't expected. Then the sting hit, sharp and deep, stealing the air from her lungs.

Her smile faltered. "Excuse me?"

His eyes didn't soften. "You know exactly what I mean."

She stared at him, hurt blooming in her chest, the kind that lodged there and stayed. He hadn't seen her brushing hands away, stepping back, laughing off unwanted advances. He'd only seen what he wanted to see.

And in that moment, whatever pedestal she'd once put him on shattered.

From that day on, she never looked at James Calder the same way. Whatever soft, secret admiration she'd once held for him had been buried beneath the sting of his words.

If he wanted to think she was a flirt, then she'd give him exactly what he expected. Every chance she got, she played the part—laughing a little too brightly, letting her gaze linger on some man just long enough for James to notice, accepting a dance when she saw him watching. It was never about the men themselves. It was about him. About proving that he didn't know her at all.

But she never took it too far. She never let it become cruel, never toyed with a man's feelings just for sport. That wasn't who Marissa was. Beneath the teasing smiles and the perfectly timed glances, she was still kind—to everyone except, perhaps, James.

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