Room 1204

Her sister's wedding, a blizzard that shuts down Manhattan, one hotel room left, and the best man she's been mad at for eight years.

The snow started at 9:14 in the morning, which Claire knew because her sister announced it like a death in the family.

"It's snowing," Emily said. She was standing at the window of the bridal suite in a white robe that said BRIDE on the back in rhinestones, a gift from her work friends that she had sworn she would never wear. "Claire. It's snowing on my wedding."

"It's flurries," Claire said. "It's decorative. The city's doing it for you."

"The app says eight to twelve inches."

"The app also told you it would be sixty degrees on the Fourth of July and we wore parkas to the fireworks."

Emily turned around. Her hair was in rollers the size of soda cans and her face was half done, one eye winged and perfect, the other bare. She looked about twelve years old and about to cry, which was a combination Claire had been handling since Emily was actually twelve.

"Come here," Claire said, and Emily came and sat on the edge of the bed, and Claire held her hand while the makeup artist, a tiny woman named Rosa who had already threatened two bridesmaids with a mascara wand, finished the other eye.

The hotel sat on the far west edge of Chelsea, right where the city ran out of blocks and turned into the Hudson. From the twentieth floor you could see the whole river, gray and wide and moving fast, and the Jersey side going soft behind the falling snow. The High Line was a strip of white below them, empty except for one man walking a corgi

in a raincoat.

"It's extremely beautiful. Your photos are going to look like a perfume ad."

Her phone buzzed on the nightstand.

> *Ryan says the best man lost a cufflink. Is that a crisis or*

It was from Emily's friend Jess, who was supposed to be running the groom's timeline from the suite down the hall.

Claire typed back.

> *Tell the best man to find it. He's a grown adult.*

Then, after a second, because she couldn't help herself:

> *Allegedly.*

"Who's that?" Emily asked.

"Nobody. Jess. Something about a cufflink."

Emily gave her a look in the mirror. It was the look of a person who had known her for twenty-six years. "Is it Dylan's cufflink?"

"I don't know whose cufflink it is."

"It's Dylan's. It's always Dylan. He lost his ID at the rehearsal dinner and found it in his own shoe."

"Then he'll find this one in his other shoe."

"Claire."

"What."

"Please don't fight with him today."

"I don't fight with him. We have a dynamic."

"You threw a dinner roll at him last night."

"He said my toast notes looked like a ransom note."

Emily squeezed her hand. Her voice went small and serious. "I just want one day where my two favorite people who aren't Ryan can be in the same room without it being a hostage situation."

Claire looked at her. At the one finished eye and the one bare one, and the rollers, and the rhinestones that said BRIDE. She thought about Dylan Hart losing a cufflink two doors down, probably in a white shirt and no jacket yet, probably making Ryan laugh about it instead of panicking. That was the thing about Dylan. He never panicked. He just smiled until the problem got embarrassed and left.

"Fine," Claire said. "One day. I'll be nice."

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The dress was champagne silk, bias cut, with a low back and a zipper that ran from between her shoulder blades all the way down to the base of her spine. Emily had picked it for all six bridesmaids, but Claire's was the maid of honor version, which meant it was a slightly different shade and had a slightly more dramatic back and had taken two people to get her into it.

"How am I supposed to get out of this later?" she asked, while Jess and a cousin named Hannah tugged the zipper up an inch at a time.

"You don't," Hannah said. "You live in it now."

By noon the snow had stopped being decorative. It came down thick and steady and sideways off the river, piling up on the window ledges in soft white loaves. Someone's aunt called from the Holland Tunnel to say traffic wasn't moving. The wedding planner, a woman named Denise with a headset and a clipboard and the energy of a Navy SEAL, walked through the suite twice and said, "We are fine. We are totally fine. Nobody panic," in a voice that made everyone want to panic.

Then the photographer said it was time, and Emily stepped out from behind the screen.

Claire had been ready for it. She'd seen the dress at three fittings. She knew exactly what it looked like.

She still had to sit down on the arm of the couch.

"Oh, Em," she said.

"You look like you," Claire said. "Just the most you you've ever looked."

Emily's eyes filled up and Rosa came at both of them with a tissue like a fencer.

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The ceremony was in the hotel's glass room on the fourteenth floor, a long bright space with floor-to-ceiling windows on three sides and the river laid out behind the altar like a painted backdrop. Denise had wanted sunset over New Jersey. What they got was a wall of white, snow falling so heavy past the glass that the room felt like it was floating inside a cloud.

It was, Claire had to admit, better than sunset.

She walked down the aisle in front of Emily, holding a bouquet of white ranunculus and trying to remember Denise's instructions about pace. Slow. Slower than you think. Smile at the guests on the left, then the right. Do not look at your feet.

She did not look at her feet. She looked up at the altar, and that was a mistake, because Dylan Hart was standing next to Ryan in a charcoal suit, and he was looking straight at her.

He'd found the cufflink. She could see it from halfway down the aisle, a small silver knot catching the light at his wrist. His hair was shorter than it had been in college, and his face had gotten more serious around the jaw, but his mouth was doing the exact same thing it had been doing since they were nineteen. That small tilt at one corner, like he knew the punchline to a joke she hadn't heard yet.

He raised one eyebrow. Just slightly. Just for her.

Claire raised hers back, very slightly, and kept walking.

Then the string quartet changed songs and the whole room stood up, and Claire forgot about him completely, because her sister was coming down the aisle on their dad's arm with snow behind her and her face wide open with happiness, and Ryan made a sound at the altar like the air had been knocked out of him.

Claire cried. She'd known she would. She'd tucked two tissues into the stems of her bouquet for exactly this reason, and she had them both out before Emily made it to the third row.

Across from her, Ryan was crying too, big honest tears. And Dylan, standing just behind him, reached up and put one hand on his best friend's shoulder and left it there. He didn't say anything. He just held on, steady, while Ryan pulled himself together enough to take Emily's hands.

Claire watched that hand on Ryan's shoulder for longer than she meant to.

The officiant was Ryan's college roommate, who had gotten ordained online and took the job very seriously. He told the story about Ryan driving to Philadelphia at two in the morning for a specific cheesesteak. Emily said her vows in a shaky voice and Ryan said his in a steady one, and when they kissed, the snow seemed to fall harder, as if somebody up there was showing off.

When the guests cheered, Claire looked across the aisle without deciding to.

Dylan was already looking at her. He wasn't smiling this time. He just looked at her, his eyes soft and a little red, and for one second she couldn't remember a single reason she'd ever been mad at him.

Then he mouthed, "Ransom note," and she remembered all of them.

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The reception was one floor up, in a ballroom with dark wood floors and a hundred candles and a bar along one wall that the hotel called the Hudson Room, as if anyone could forget which river they were next to. Out the windows the snow kept coming. You couldn't see Jersey anymore. You couldn't see the river. The world had shrunk

down to this room and the white beyond it, and somehow that made everyone a little louder and a little more reckless, the way people get in a blackout or a power outage, like the normal rules were suspended until further notice.

Claire was seated at the head table, which meant she was seated next to Dylan, because Emily had made the seating chart and Emily had a sense of humor she claimed was an accident.

"She did this on purpose," Claire said, sitting down.

"She absolutely did," Dylan said. He'd taken off his jacket and rolled his sleeves to the elbow. The cufflinks sat on the tablecloth next to his bread plate like two tiny trophies.

"Where was it?"

"Where was what?"

"The cufflink. Jess said you lost it."

He looked at her with an expression of deep injury. "I didn't lose it. I misplaced it temporarily."

"Where."

"In my shoe."

She laughed before she could stop herself. A real one, loud enough that Emily looked over from the center of the table and smiled like she'd won something.

"Don't," Claire said, when she saw his face.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were going to."

"I was going to say you have a nice laugh. I forgot about it."

She reached for her champagne. "You forgot about it because I've never laughed at anything you said."

"You laughed at my haircut in 2017."

"That doesn't count. Everyone laughed at your haircut in 2017."

He grinned at her, and she grinned back, and then they both noticed, at the same moment, that they were smiling at each other. And they both looked away, at the same moment, like two people who'd touched a hot stove.

"You nervous?" Dylan asked, low, while the servers cleared the plates.

"No."

"Your knee is bouncing so hard the table's moving."

She stopped her knee. "I'm fine. Are you nervous?"

"Terrified."

She looked at him. He was staring straight ahead at the dance floor, and his jaw was tight, and he was turning his water glass in slow circles on the tablecloth.

"Really?" she said.

"He's my best friend," Dylan said. "I've got four minutes to tell two hundred people why. That's not a lot of minutes."

Something in her chest moved. She didn't like it. She reached over and stopped his glass from turning, her fingers over his for a second,

and then she took her hand back.

"You'll be fine," she said. "Just don't do any voices."

"I don't do voices."

"You have several."

He laughed, and his shoulders came down half an inch, and then Denise was tapping a microphone and saying his name.

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He didn't use notes.

That was the first thing that annoyed her. He just stood up, took the microphone from Denise, waited for the room to go quiet, and then talked like he was telling the story to one person at a bar.

He talked about meeting Ryan on the first day of freshman year, when Ryan had shown up to their dorm on 114th Street with a mini fridge, a box of cereal, and no sheets. He talked about the time Ryan tried to make Thanksgiving dinner in their apartment on Amsterdam and set off every smoke alarm on the floor, and how the firefighters had stayed for pie.

Then his voice changed.

"I want to tell you about the night Ryan called me after his first date with Emily," he said. "It was a Tuesday. It was late. I was asleep. He called me four times."

People laughed. Ryan put his face in his hands.

"I picked up on the fourth one because I thought somebody died. And he said, 'Dylan. I'm going to marry her.' And I said, 'Ryan, you've known her for three hours.' And he said, 'Yeah. I know. I'm going to marry her anyway.'" Dylan looked at the table where Ryan and Emily were sitting, holding hands so tight their knuckles were white. "I've known Ryan for ten years, and that was the only time I ever heard him sure about something before it happened. Usually he finds out what he wants about a week after it's too late. He's like that with sandwiches. He's like that with apartments. I'm a little like that too, honestly."

He paused. Claire, sitting two seats away, saw him glance down the table. Not at Ryan. At her. Just for a second.

"But he wasn't late with her," Dylan said. "He knew right away, and he didn't waste a single day pretending he didn't. I think that's the bravest thing I've ever watched anybody do. So if you'll raise your glasses. To Ryan, for knowing. And to Emily, for letting him."

Emily was sobbing. Ryan was sobbing. Ryan's mom was sobbing into a cloth napkin.

And Claire was crying too, quietly, behind her champagne glass, which she would deny under oath.

He sat back down. He didn't look at her. He just reached over and, without a word, handed her the folded handkerchief from his jacket pocket on the back of his chair.

She took it. It smelled like cedar.

"It was fine," she said, when she could talk. "Your speech."

"Fine," he said.

"I have to go do mine now. Don't look at me while I'm doing it."

Her toast went well, mostly. She told the story about Emily at seven, insisting on marrying the mailman, and the story about Emily at twenty-two, calling from a bathroom at a bar on Ludlow to say she'd met a guy who knew all the words to every Fleetwood Mac album and it was frankly upsetting. She got a big laugh on the Fleetwood Mac part. She got a smaller laugh on a joke she'd been proud of. She got through the last line, about how her sister had always been the brave one, without her voice cracking more than once.

When she sat down, Dylan was looking out at the blizzard. His mouth was doing the thing at the corner.

"You looked," she said.

"I did not look."

"You looked during the mailman part."

"Everyone looked during the mailman part. It was a strong opener."

She drank her champagne. She didn't say thank you. But she didn't give the handkerchief back, either.

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The dancing started around nine. By ten it was a full-blown snow-day party. The bridesmaids had kicked their shoes into a pile by the DJ booth. Ryan's college roommate, the officiant, was teaching a group of aunts a line dance he was clearly making up as he went.

Around eleven she went out to the terrace to breathe.

The terrace was technically closed. There was a velvet rope and a sign. But the door wasn't locked, and the overhang kept a narrow strip near the building mostly dry, and the cold felt incredible after the heat of the ballroom. She stood with her back against the brick and watched the snow come down past the lights. Somewhere below, the West Side Highway was a long silent line of red taillights. Nobody was going anywhere.

The door opened behind her.

"You're going to freeze," Dylan said.

"I'm from Buffalo."

"You're from a suburb of Buffalo. That's like being from a suburb of a glacier. It's different."

He came and stood next to her against the wall anyway. He'd brought his jacket. He didn't ask, just held it out, and she thought about saying no for about half a second before she took it and put it on. It was warm from the ballroom. It went down to the middle of her thighs.

They didn't say anything for a while. The music thumped through the glass behind them. The snow was so thick that the light from the building turned it gold before it disappeared.

"Your speech," she said finally. "The part about being late. About finding out what you want a week after."

"Yeah."

"Was that a real thing or a speech thing?"

He was quiet for a second. "It was a real thing."

She looked at him. He was looking at the snow. There was snow in his hair.

"Late about what?" she asked.

He turned his head and looked at her. And for one long second she thought he was going to tell her. His face was open in a way she hadn't seen in eight years, not since a kitchen on West 113th Street, not since a Halloween party and a plastic cup and his hand at her waist.

Then the terrace door banged open and Jess yelled, "Claire! They're doing the cake! Emily's looking for you!"

And Dylan smiled the old smile, the one with all the doors shut, and said, "Cake," like it was a perfectly good answer.

She gave him back his jacket on the way in. He held the door for her. She walked past him close enough to feel him there and kept going.

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By midnight the city had officially given up.

The mayor was on every phone in the ballroom, standing in front of a podium saying words like travel ban and essential vehicles only. The tunnels were closed. The bridges were closed to everything but emergency traffic. The subway was running, technically, on a schedule that Ryan's cousin described as spiritual. Ninth Avenue, fifteen floors down, had disappeared under a smooth white sheet with one lone delivery guy pushing his bike through it like a man walking across the Arctic.

Claire was not supposed to be staying at the hotel. She lived in a fourth-floor walkup in Astoria with a radiator that clanked like a ghost and a roommate who was in Lisbon until Tuesday. The plan had been a car at midnight, a quiet ride over the Queensboro, her own bed by one.

The plan was dead.

The hotel had blocked thirty rooms for the wedding. All thirty were full. Emily and Ryan had disappeared upstairs to the honeymoon suite an hour earlier, after a send-off with sparklers that Denise had refused to allow on the terrace and had instead held, very carefully, in the lobby.

So Claire went down to the front desk.

The lobby was all brass and green marble and a huge arrangement of white branches in a vase taller than she was. The man behind the desk had a name tag that said MARCUS and the face of someone who'd been told no by the universe forty times since seven o'clock.

"I'm so sorry," Marcus said, before she'd finished her sentence. "We're completely full. Everyone in Manhattan is trying to get a room tonight."

"Anything," Claire said. "A closet. A cot in a ballroom. I'll sleep on the luggage cart."

He typed something. He typed something else. His eyebrows went up.

"I do have one," he said. "Somebody just called down. A couple in from Boston, they got stuck in Connecticut and turned around. It's a

king, twelfth floor, river view."

"I'll take it."

"Great. And, uh." He looked past her shoulder. "Are you together?"

Claire turned around.

Dylan Hart was standing behind her with a leather overnight bag over his shoulder and his tie loose around his neck and an expression of polite, rumpled patience.

"What are you doing here?" she said.

"Same thing you're doing. My plan was the PATH train. The PATH train has other plans."

"You live in Hoboken?"

"I've lived in Hoboken for three years. You'd know that if you ever asked me anything that wasn't an insult."

Marcus cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. That really is the last room. I've got a waitlist of nine people. If you'd both like it, I can put it under either name."

"I'll sleep in the lobby," Claire said.

"The lobby closes," Marcus said, apologetic. "Fire code. And it's snowing."

"I'm aware it's snowing, Marcus."

Behind her, Dylan set his bag down on the marble and said, "I'm fine with it if you are," in the voice he'd been using to annoy her since sophomore year.

She was not fine with it. She was not even in the same zip code as fine with it.

She took the key anyway.

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The elevator was mirrored on all sides, which meant there were six of him and six of her, standing in silence, watching the numbers.

"I'll take the floor," he said around the eighth floor.

"You're not taking the floor. You're six-one. You'll throw your back out and Ryan will blame me."

He didn't argue, which was somehow worse.

The doors opened on twelve. The hallway was quiet and carpeted in a dark blue pattern that looked like waves. They walked down it without talking until they got to the end.

Room 1204 had one bed, one armchair, and a view of the Hudson so beautiful it felt like a personal insult.

The curtains were open. The whole far wall was window, and beyond it the snow was falling past the glass in slow heavy flakes, gold where the building lights caught them and blue where they didn't. Below, the river was a black ribbon. On the far side, a few lights in Jersey City glowed through the storm like they were underwater.

Claire dropped her clutch and her overnight tote on the bed to claim it. Dylan dropped into the armchair and loosened his tie the rest of the way, the tie he'd worn for the speech that had made her sister cry and, though she would never admit it, made Claire cry too.

The room was quiet. The radiator ticked.

"Your speech was fine," she said.

"Fine."

"Good. It was good."

He smiled at the ceiling. "That almost killed you."

"A little."

She went into the bathroom to take off her makeup. It was a big bathroom, white marble and brass fixtures and a tub deep enough to drown in, and the mirror over the sink was so bright it showed every single thing that had happened to her face in the last fourteen hours. She took out her earrings. She pulled the pins out of her hair, one by one, and dropped them into a little glass dish that had clearly been designed for exactly that. She wiped off most of Rosa's mascara.

Then she reached behind her for the zipper.

She realized, staring at herself in the mirror, that it went all the way down her back and she could not reach it. Two people had put her into this dress. It was apparently going to take two people to get her out.

She tried anyway. She tried over the shoulder. She got her fingertips on the pull once and lost it. She tried for a long time. Her arms started to hurt. A pin she'd missed fell out of her hair and pinged off the sink.

She opened the door.

Dylan was still in the armchair, tie hanging open, one shoe off. He looked up.

"Don't," she said. "Don't say a single word."

Dylan stood up without saying a single word.

. . .

He took his time with it. That was the problem.

If he'd just yanked it down she could have stayed annoyed. She could have said thanks, Hart, and shut the bathroom door and spent the rest of the night in the tub with a towel for a pillow. Instead he crossed the room slowly, like she was something that might spook, and stopped behind her in the bathroom doorway.

He moved her hair over her shoulder first. Gently. His knuckles brushed the side of her neck, and every nerve in her body went to that one spot like iron filings to a magnet. Then he found the zipper, and she heard him breathe out, and he drew it down so slowly she could hear every single tooth of it.

The silk loosened. Cool air touched her spine, an inch at a time.

She could feel his breath between her shoulder blades. She was very aware that she had stopped breathing.

In the mirror over the sink, she could see the two of them. Her in champagne silk with her hair down and her mascara half gone. Him behind her, taller, his head bent, his face serious in a way it almost never was. He wasn't looking at the mirror. He was looking at her back, at the zipper, at his own hand, like it was the most important job anyone had ever given him.

The zipper stopped at the base of her spine. He didn't move away.

"Claire."

"What."

"Why do you hate me?"

It came out quiet. It wasn't a joke. There was nothing in his voice she could throw a dinner roll at. She held the front of her dress against herself and didn't turn around.

She could have lied. She'd had eight years of practice. She could have said something about his haircut, or the debate tournament sophomore year when he'd beaten her in the final on a technicality, or the time he'd taken the last copy of the econ textbook from the library reserve desk and kept it for three days. She had a whole list. She'd been maintaining it like a hobby.

But it was one in the morning and the city was buried and her sister was married and her back was bare, and she was so tired of the list.

"Junior year," she said. "The Halloween party. You kissed me in the kitchen and then you never called."

Silence.

Then, behind her, a sound like he'd been punched.

"You were with Matt Keller," he said. "The next morning. Everyone said you went home with Matt Keller."

She closed her eyes. She could see it all, sharp as yesterday. The apartment on West 113th Street with the broken fridge door and the fake cobwebs on the light fixtures. Her in a homemade Velma costume, the orange sweater itchy, the glasses fake. Him in a bedsheet ghost costume he'd already taken off. The way he'd leaned against the

counter next to her and said, out of nowhere, "I don't actually think you're annoying, you know. I just like arguing with you." And how she'd said, "Same," and he'd laughed, and then he'd kissed her, right there next to a bowl of Jell-O shots, and the whole world had gone bright.

And then he'd said, "I'll call you tomorrow," and she'd floated around that party for an hour, and then she couldn't find him, and then she'd waited.

All Saturday. All Sunday. All week.

"Matt Keller drove me home," she said, "because I was crying about you in his car."

She turned around.

Dylan Hart looked at her like eight years had just fallen on his head.

"He drove you home," he said slowly.

"He had his mom's Camry. He was the only sober person at the party. I couldn't find you and I thought you'd left with someone, and I was a mess, and Matt said he'd drop me off on his way to Riverdale. He gave me a granola bar and talked about the Mets the whole way so I wouldn't have to."

"Mike Russo told me the next morning," Dylan said. "He said he saw you get into Matt's car at two in the morning. He said, and I quote, that's done, man. Let it go." He pushed a hand through his hair. "I went to call you anyway. I had the phone in my hand. And then I thought, she went home with Matt Keller an hour after she kissed me. I thought I was a joke to you. I thought you were kind of making a

point."

"I thought you didn't want it," he said. "I've thought that the whole time."

"Well." Her voice wasn't working right. "You were wrong."

He laughed once, without any humor in it, and looked at the ceiling. "Eight years."

"Eight years."

She made a sound that was almost a laugh and pressed the back of her hand to her nose. Her dress was slipping. She hitched it back up. His eyes followed the movement and then came back to her face, fast, like he'd caught himself.

"I sat next to you in four classes after that," she said. "You never said anything."

"You never said anything either."

"You started dating that girl from the Spectator."

"For three weeks. Because I was trying to make you jealous."

"It worked."

"It did?"

"I keyed a mean comment into the margins of her op-ed. In the library copy. In pen."

He stared at her. "That was you?"

"It was a very bad op-ed."

He was smiling now, a little, but it was a different smile from all the old ones. It was small and cracked open and kind of devastated. He took a step toward her and stopped.

"Claire," he said. "I've been in love with you since you told our entire microeconomics section that my argument was a crime against supply and demand."

"It was."

"I know. It was so hot."

. . .

He crossed the room in two steps, and then his hands were on her face, and he stopped, an inch away, giving her every chance.

She could feel the heat of him. She could see the snow-light from the window on one side of his face, and the warm gold of the bathroom on the other. His thumbs rested on her cheekbones so lightly she could barely feel them. His eyes went back and forth between hers, looking for something.

"Say it," he said. "If you want me to stop."

She didn't say it. She pulled him down by his ridiculous tie instead.

It was nothing like the kitchen at that party. That had been clumsy and quick and tasted like cheap beer and orange Jell-O. This was slow and deep and certain, eight years of being wrong poured into it. He kissed her like he'd been thinking about how to do it for a very long time and wanted to get every part right. One hand slid into her hair. The other moved down her bare back where the zipper had opened, his palm warm and flat against her skin, and she made a sound into

his mouth she had never once made in front of Dylan Hart.

Her dress forgot completely that it was supposed to stay up.

He pulled back half an inch. His breathing was rough. "Claire."

"Don't you dare stop to talk right now."

"I just want to say one thing."

"You always want to say one thing."

"I just want to say," he said, and kissed the corner of her mouth, "that I'm extremely glad," and kissed her jaw, "that the PATH train," and kissed the place under her ear where his knuckles had brushed earlier, "is a disaster."

She laughed against his shoulder. Then he did that thing again, the slow thing, his mouth at her neck, and she stopped laughing.

She got his shirt untucked. She got three of the buttons open and lost patience with the rest. He made a low sound when her hands found his chest, and his grip tightened on her waist, and the backs of her knees hit the edge of the bed before she'd even noticed they were moving.

"Is this okay?" he said against her mouth. "I'm asking."

"Yes," she said. "It's been okay for eight years. Keep up."

He laughed, low and unsteady, and pressed her down into the white duvet, and the cufflinks he'd been so proud of went skittering somewhere across the hardwood floor, and neither of them looked to see where.

His mouth found her collarbone. Her fingers found the back of his neck, the short hair there, the warm skin. Everything she'd ever said to him, every argument, every eye roll across a seminar table, every dinner roll, every time she'd walked into a room and looked for him first so she'd know where not to look, all of it went quiet. There was only this. The weight of him. The snow at the window. His voice saying her name like he'd been saving it.

Snow kept falling over the river. Somewhere down the hall a door slammed and someone laughed.

In room 1204, nobody took the armchair.

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She woke up at 7:40 to a silence so complete she thought for a second she'd gone deaf.

No traffic. No horns. No sirens on Ninth. The city outside the window had been erased and redrawn in white. The river was still there, dark and steaming a little in the cold, but everything else was soft edges. The piers, the roofs, the bare trees along the bike path, each branch outlined like somebody had gone over it with a white pen.

Dylan was asleep on his stomach next to her with one arm thrown across her waist and his face mashed into the pillow. His hair was sticking up on one side. He looked about nineteen.

Claire lay very still and let herself panic a little.

She had slept with Dylan Hart. She had slept with Dylan Hart at her sister's wedding, in a hotel room she'd claimed she'd rather die than

share, after eight years of a carefully maintained grudge that had been, it turned out, built entirely on Matt Keller's mom's Camry. Her dress was on the floor by the bathroom in a champagne puddle. One of her shoes was on the windowsill. She had no memory of how it had gotten on the windowsill.

What if it was the snow? What if it was the champagne and the speeches and the whole city shut down around them like a snow globe, and in the daylight he'd go back to being the guy who smiled with all the doors shut? What if they walked out of this room and he said, well, that was fun, and she had to sit next to him at Emily and Ryan's first anniversary and every Thanksgiving for the rest of her life and pretend she was fine?

She was very good at pretending she was fine. She'd been doing it since junior year.

"You're thinking so loud," Dylan said into the pillow.

She jumped. "I thought you were asleep."

"I was. Then your brain woke me up. It sounds like a dishwasher." He turned his head and opened his eyes and looked at her. In the gray snow light his eyes were very clear. "Hi."

"Hi."

"You're panicking."

"I'm not panicking."

"You're holding the sheet up to your chin like there's a shark in the bed."

She lowered the sheet one inch. "That's a normal sheet position."

"Claire." He moved his arm from her waist and found her hand under the covers and held it. Just held it, his thumb moving over her knuckles. "I'm not going anywhere. I want to be extremely clear about that, because I've learned the hard way that you and I are terrible at assuming things. I'm not going anywhere. I don't think last night was the snow. I'd like to take you to dinner on a night when it's not snowing, to prove it."

She looked at him for a long time.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay?"

"I want to be extremely clear too, then." Her voice came out steadier than she expected. "I don't think it was the snow either."

He smiled. It was the cracked open one from last night. It turned out it looked even better in the morning.

"Good," he said. "Now can we order room service, because I'm about to pass out, and also I need to find my cufflinks before Ryan's mom finds out I lost them twice."

. . .

Room service took fifty minutes because the kitchen was running on a skeleton crew of whoever had been stranded overnight, and the guy who brought it up, a young guy named Andre with snow still melting on his shoulders, said he'd slept in the laundry room on a pile of clean towels and it was honestly the best sleep he'd had all year.

They ate in bed. Eggs, toast, a pot of coffee, pancakes, and a little bottle of maple syrup Dylan poured over everything, including the

bacon.

"That's disgusting," Claire said.

"It's sweet and salty. It's a balanced flavor profile."

"It's a crime."

"Against what?"

"Supply and demand."

He threw a piece of toast at her. She caught it. It felt like the most natural thing in the world, and also like something she'd been wanting to do for eight years without knowing it.

She was wearing his white dress shirt from the wedding, sleeves rolled four times, because the only other options were a silk gown that required two people and a tote bag with a toothbrush and a phone charger in it. He'd watched her put it on with an expression she was going to think about for a long time.

Her phone, which she'd left face down on the nightstand, had been buzzing on and off for an hour. She turned it over.

> *Brunch is still on!!! 11am Hudson Room!!! Nobody can leave anyway lol*

> *Claire where are you, Hannah said your room is on 12??? Since when do you have a room*

> *CLAIRE*

> *Ok Jess says Dylan also had nowhere to go last night. I'm just saying. I'm just noting that.*

> *I'm not mad I'm just NOTING IT*

Claire put the phone face down again.

"Your sister?" Dylan asked.

"She's noting it."

"Noting what?"

"Us. Apparently Jess talks."

He winced. "Do we tell them?"

She thought about it. She thought about Emily at the brunch, the morning after her wedding, glowing and exhausted and wearing Ryan's college sweatshirt over her dress probably, and how it should be her day. Her morning. Her story everyone was telling.

"Not yet," she said. "Let's give her today. We act normal at brunch."

· · ·

Brunch was in the Hudson Room again, which had been cleared of last night's tables and filled with long buffet stations and coffee urns and about seventy guests in various states of borrowed clothing. Ryan's grandmother was in a hotel bathrobe with her pearls on. One of the groomsmen was wearing a bridesmaid's cardigan.

Claire walked in first, in the leggings and sweater from her tote, which she'd fortunately packed for the morning before she'd known she'd need them. Dylan waited four full minutes, as agreed, and walked in after.

Emily saw her and came across the room at a speed that should have been impossible for someone who'd danced in heels until one in the morning.

"Where were you," Emily said.

"Asleep."

"Where."

"Room 1204."

"With who."

"By myself."

Emily narrowed her eyes. She was, as Claire had predicted, wearing Ryan's Columbia sweatshirt over her wedding dress, and her hair was coming out of its pins, and she looked so happy it was almost hard to lie to her. Almost.

"Dylan got a room too," Claire said. "Somewhere. I think. The front desk said."

"The front desk said there was one room."

"Then I guess he slept in the lobby."

"The lobby closes, Claire. Fire code."

At that exact moment Dylan walked past them toward the coffee urn in the same suit pants from last night and a hotel T-shirt that said HUDSON across the chest. He did not look at Claire. He said, "Morning, Em, congratulations again, you look beautiful," and kissed Emily on the cheek, and then turned to Claire and said, very coolly, "Claire."

"Dylan," she said, equally cool.

"Sleep well?"

"Fine. You?"

"Terrible. I was in the laundry room. Andre snores."

He walked off. Claire turned back to her sister, who was staring at her with her mouth slightly open.

"What," Claire said.

"Nothing," Emily said. "Literally nothing. I'm just going to get a mimosa." She walked away, and then turned around, and then walked back, and said in a fierce whisper, "You're wearing his cologne. I can smell it from here. It's cedar. I bought him that cologne for Christmas," and then left again before Claire could answer.

Claire stood there, burning, in the middle of the Hudson Room.

They got through the rest of brunch. Barely. She sat at one end of a long table and he sat at the other, and every time she looked up he was looking at her, and every time he looked up she was looking at him, and they both kept doing the stove thing, looking away fast, over and over, like two people who'd forgotten that the stove was supposed to be hot.

At one point he got up to get more coffee and passed behind her chair and, without breaking stride, let one finger trail across the back of her neck, right where the zipper had started. She knocked a fork onto the floor. Ryan's grandmother picked it up for her with a look that said she had seen all of this before.

. . .

Afterward, while the aunts organized a group snowball fight on the High Line and Denise tried to stop them, Claire slipped out onto the terrace again.

The rope was still up. The snow had stopped. The sky over Jersey was a pale, washed-out blue, and the river was full of light, and everything was so bright it hurt to look at.

The door opened behind her. She didn't turn around. She knew the footsteps.

"You're going to freeze," he said.

"Buffalo."

"Suburb of a glacier."

He stood next to her against the brick, in his HUDSON shirt and a hotel bathrobe he'd stolen from somewhere, and they looked at the river.

"Can I tell you something real?" she said.

"Always."

"I'm kind of mad."

He turned to look at her. "At me?"

"At both of us. At Mike Russo. At Matt Keller, a little, which isn't fair, because he gave me a granola bar." She pulled the sleeves of her sweater down over her hands. "Eight years, Dylan. I did a whole life in that time. I moved three times. I dated a guy who played the

ukulele. And every single big night, every time something good happened, there was this one little part of me that wanted to call you and tell you about it so you could argue with me about it. And I never did, because I thought you'd laughed at me. I spent eight years being proud of not calling you."

He didn't say anything for a while. When he did, his voice was rough.

"My dad got sick, three years ago," he said. "That's why I moved to Hoboken. To be closer to him. He's okay now. But there was a night in the hospital, really late, and I had my phone out, and I scrolled down to your name. I still had your number from college. I didn't even know if it worked." He laughed a little. "I stood in the hallway of Hoboken University Medical Center for twenty minutes with my thumb over it. And I thought, she went home with Matt Keller. And I put it away."

Claire felt something in her throat close up.

"It still works," she said. "The number. I never changed it."

"I know that now."

"I would have picked up."

"I know that now, too." He looked at her, and his eyes were wet, and he didn't bother hiding it. "That's the part that's going to bother me for a while. Not the eight years. The twenty minutes."

She reached over and took his hand. It was cold. She held it anyway, both of hers around it, the way he'd held Ryan's shoulder at the altar. Steady.

"Okay," she said. "So here's what we do. We stop keeping score. Nobody won. We both lost, really badly, for a really long time, and it was dumb. And we don't get the eight years back. But I'm thirty. You're thirty-one. Your speech said the bravest thing is knowing what you want and not wasting a day pretending you don't."

"You were listening."

"I'm always listening to you. That's the whole problem. I listen so I can argue." She squeezed his hand. "So I'm not wasting a day. Not even this one."

He looked at her for a long time. Then he leaned down and kissed her, out on the closed terrace, in the bright cold, with the snow melting off the railing and dripping onto the stone and a tugboat on the river blowing its horn twice, as if somebody had told it to.

Behind them, the terrace door opened and then shut very fast.

"Oh my God," Emily's voice said through the glass. "Ryan. RYAN. Come here. I knew it. I KNEW it."

Dylan rested his forehead against Claire's. "So much for acting normal."

"We were terrible at it."

"We were the worst. Andre snores. What was that?"

"It was committed. I'll give you that."

Through the glass, they could hear Emily telling Ryan, telling Jess, telling Ryan's grandmother, telling what sounded like the entire brunch. Somebody started clapping. Somebody else, probably the officiant, yelled, "I can marry you right now, I'm still ordained!"

Claire laughed into his chest.

"Dinner," Dylan said. "Friday. Somewhere in Astoria. You pick. I'll take the N."

"The N goes past Queensboro Plaza on Fridays."

"Then I'll walk across the bridge if I have to."

"It's a long bridge."

"I've waited longer."

She looked up at him. At the snow in his hair, which he still hadn't noticed. At the corner of his mouth doing the old familiar thing, only now she knew what the joke was. She'd always known, really. She'd just been waiting for him to tell her.

"Friday," she said. "And Dylan?"

"Yeah?"

"Call me."

He laughed, and pulled his phone out of the bathrobe pocket, and right there on the terrace, with her sister pressed up against the glass and half the wedding behind her, he scrolled down to her name and pressed it.

In her pocket, her phone started to ring.

She let it ring twice, just to make a point. Then she answered.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," he said, two feet away. "It's me. I'm sorry it took so long."

– Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.