



IVY

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New York City

And *that's* when I knew we were going to be friends forever," Holly says, holding up a glass of Sancerre to toast Ivy, her maid of honor. Ivy thinks her friend looks so happy and gorgeous, standing there at the head of the table in the holly-leaf-green dress they found on sale at Saks. The same shopping trip where Ivy had discovered the perfect cranberry-hued jumpsuit on a clearance rack. They had laughed at the absurdity of it: two people who were ambivalent about Christmas dressing in coordinating holiday outfits.

Ivy feels emotion gathering like a glowing ball of stardust in her sternum. Holly looks so hopeful and expectant,

standing there with her glass raised. Ivy feels the urge to make the biggest wish possible with all that stardust inside her, a wish that her friend will have the charmed life she deserves, the one she's always wanted, the one she's been planning for the past decade.

"I already had my soulmate in Matt," Holly continues—and now Ivy has to fight to keep the supportive, well-wishing smile on her face. To her, Holly has no flaws—at least none that are deal-breaking and friendship-ending; Ivy knows no one is *actually* perfect—but she has never been able to grasp what Holly sees in Matt. This is the one secret she has kept from her best friend since deciding the first night they met that radical honesty was going to be their policy. It's kind of a big one, though. Considering the ways in which disliking your best friend's partner might cause more and more complications over the years makes the ball of starry joy in Ivy's chest morph and twist as it slinks its way down to the pit of her stomach. "And after the night I met you," Holly is saying, "I had a soulmate best friend, too. How lucky can one person be? Thank you for always being there for me, Ivy, through the planning of this wedding, and literally everything else for the past eight years. I can't imagine my life withou—"

"To Matt and Holly!" Holly's mother, Barbara, cries, jumping from her seat and cutting her daughter short. "Cheers, cheers, *santé*—or should I say *San-ta!* To the happy couple and their Christmas wedding!" There's a shocked beat of

silence as the guests process the fact that the mother of the bride has interrupted her daughter's rehearsal dinner speech like she's orchestra music and Holly is Matthew McConaughey at the 2014 Oscars. Ivy keeps a big smile pasted on her face, but the nerves in her stomach start doing a wild dance. She has always felt protective of Holly, but at moments like this she feels helpless to protect her. Then Holly's brother, Ted, seated to Ivy's left, nudges her gently. "Typical Barbara power move," he says out of the corner of his mouth. "You know she's just jealous that you've always been there for Holly in a way she's never allowed herself to." Ted's wife, Mingzhu, shoots Ivy a sympathetic, knowing smile, and Ivy is reminded that Holly does, in fact, have some excellent people in her corner. She manages to lift her glass and toast along with everyone else at the table, while forcing herself to believe that a happy ending for Holly really is possible.

Except Holly is now banging a knife on her wineglass and looking a little mad. The dissonant sound quiets the guests around the large harvest table at Cote. "No, no, *wait*," she says determinedly. "I'm not finished. I'm the bride, everyone has to do what I say for the next twenty-four hours, *at least*."

"Cheers to *that*!" Ivy calls out.

"Ivy," Holly says firmly, "planning the most festive, most Christmassy wedding possible with you at my side has been a dream come true and *so much fun*." She holds her friend's gaze for a moment, her eyes dancing. Ivy knows what she's

really saying. It should have been torture, but eventually the shock wore off that Holly had agreed to get married at Christmas. Her reasoning had been that if she went along with the December date Matt and her mother were pushing, she'd be able to have a holiday season honeymoon and spend Christmas in Hawaii with her new husband, thus managing to forgo all the Beech family Christmas parties and events she always finds so disappointing. Plus, she would get home from the honeymoon in time for New Year's Eve with her bestie, meaning this wedding date offered the best of all worlds. After that, Ivy threw herself into helping to plan a festive wedding with joyful, somewhat ironic abandon. A mini mince pie and mulled wine cocktail hour while a gospel choir sang Christmas carols? Check. Secret Santa wedding favors that guests could fight over? *Yes*. Hiring an actor to make a surprise Santa visit at midnight? Happening. Filling the venue—Lotte New York Palace—with bauble-strung Christmas trees? You know it. Hiring two acrobats to perform in a giant thirteen-foot snow globe, glitter falling constantly over the pair as they put on a showstopping routine? Okay, so Holly and Ivy couldn't make that one happen, but all Holly had to do was whisper the words "giant snow globe" and they'd both start laughing uncontrollably.

"I'm so grateful for you, Ivy," Holly says. "And I know that you, like Matt, are going to be in my life forever." Now her

eyes shine with tears. “I couldn’t imagine my life without you, Ivy. Thanks for everything.” Once this round of glass clinking is over, Holly turns to Matt, who is sitting to her right. But he’s fidgeting with his dessert fork and there’s a sheen of sweat on his forehead. Ivy wonders if he’s still hungover from his bachelor party a few nights earlier, when, she happens to know, he ended up naked at the top of the Empire State Building. *He’s such a schmuck*, Ivy can’t help but think. Except Holly is staring down at her sweaty, uncomfortable-looking fiancé like he’s the *Mona Lisa* and she’s just arrived in Paris for the first time and rushed straight to the Louvre. “Matt, tomorrow is the day we’ve dreamed about practically since the moment we met—when we just . . .” She places a hand on her heart, and her berry-red nails shine in the candlelight. “We knew. We gazed at each other over that mud pit and we *knew*. I’m so excited to become Mrs. Carter. Well, I’m not going to take your name, but I’ll be Mrs. Carter in my heart, okay? I’m so excited to spend the rest of our lives together, starting tomorrow. I love you.” She looks down at him expectantly, clearly waiting for him to stand and join her, lift his own glass, make his own speech—but Matt just keeps flipping his fork over on top of the tablecloth like it’s a competitive sport. As the awkward silence stretches, he finally looks up at Holly. He looks startled, as if he just noticed her there.

“*Oh*. Thanks. That was really nice. Um, I . . .” He clears his

throat, loosens his tie as if it's suddenly choking him. "Right. Yeah. Shit. I'm supposed to make a speech tonight, too." He stands and grips the back of his seat. Ivy can't help but notice his knuckles have gone white. Across the table, D'Arcy, still his best friend, looks sweaty and uncomfortable, too. But when he sees Ivy looking at him, he shoots her a suggestive eyebrow waggle. Although they only dated for a few weeks eight years ago, and the best thing about their relationship was that it led Ivy to Holly, D'Arcy still goes around telling anyone who will listen that Ivy is his ex. After a few drinks, he also says she's "the one who got away" and "an absolute minx in the sack." Ivy looks away from him, fights hard to get back that sense of happy hopefulness for her friend. Meanwhile, Matt is still clearing his throat and fiddling with his tie.

"Mom, Dad, thank you for planning this dinner." His parents beam at him proudly. "It was great. Eight courses, all meat or meat-adjacent. My dream meal." Ivy, meanwhile, being the only vegetarian in attendance, got six courses of green salad and one very sad stuffed pepper. Even the dessert contained gelatin, and she'd had to leave it untouched. "And Ed and Barb, thank you for . . . well, you know, everything. You've been so great." His voice wobbles, and Ivy is surprised by the sudden show of emotion. He's acting weird, even for Matt. He dashes at a tear with a clenched fist, holds up his glass, says "Cheers, I love you all!" in a wobbling

voice. The table clinks glasses again, and no one seems to notice that Matt's glass is empty—and that he didn't even address his bride-to-be. No one except Ivy. She sees it all and feels sick to her stomach.

"Uh-oh, I'm a bit tipsy," Holly says as they get in the back of the town car that will take them to Ivy's apartment. "My face will be all puffy tomorrow for my wedding."

"Please—you could drink all night and walk down the aisle in flannel pajamas, and you'd still be the most beautiful bride in the world."

"Aw, Ivy." Holly leans her head against her friend's shoulder and Ivy pats her hair. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Back at ya," Ivy says.

"We're going to be friends for life."

"I know we are." And Ivy does. She knows married life is going to change things, but also that they can survive it. When Holly went to Yale for law school and Ivy stayed in New York City to start a grueling internship at the ad firm where she's now a senior graphic designer, they sometimes went weeks without seeing each other—but never let it go longer than a month before one of them would take the train either into the city or to New Haven for a girls' weekend.

Holly leans forward and looks at the clock on the dash of

the town car. “Forty-five more minutes until midnight, and then the day will be here. My wedding day.”

“The countdown is on. Less than sixteen more single-girl hours for you.”

“What’s the plan for the rest of the evening?”

“Sheet masks and a movie.”

“Perfect. Which movie?”

“It’s a surprise. And I agonized. I mean, just *one* movie and not an entire marathon? Tough to pick just one. But I did it. I found the most romantic, but also the weirdest, but also one of our most favorite movies of all time—”

“*Meet Joe Black!*”

Ivy laughs. “You guessed it. For movie snacks, I have collagen water, this Aztec chocolate that’s supposed to make your skin look like a newborn baby’s, *and* maybe the smallest, tiniest bit of top-shelf tequila—because everyone knows you don’t get a hangover with the good stuff. And a bubble bath for you, and then . . . one last sleep before you’re officially a married lady!”

“Married lady,” Holly repeats. Then she sighs. “I’m not going to turn into my mother, am I?”

“Holly, I promise, there is zero chance of that.”

“I’m sorry she was so rude tonight. It’s not that she doesn’t like you . . .”

“It’s just that she hates me,” Ivy finishes. “And that’s fine. Really, Hol. You know I’m not sensitive about it. She wishes you two had the relationship we do—”

“And we can’t because she’s such an asshole all the time.”

Ivy snort-laughs. “That is exactly why.”

“One day, it will be you getting married,” Holly says. “And I can only hope I’m half the maid of honor you are.”

“Maybe,” Ivy says.

“Maybe I’ll be half the maid of honor you are?”

“Oh, God, no, you’ll totally nail it the way you nail everything. You’ll leave me in your dust. Just, you might never get the chance.”

“It’s going to happen. One day, you’ll find love that makes you levitate . . . dance like a dervish . . .”

“Screw like a horny titmouse?”

“The full package. Horny titmice and everything.”

The car arrives at Ivy’s Greenwich Village apartment building. “I’m so glad I can be myself with you,” Holly says as they tumble out of the car and link arms.

“I’m glad I can, too, and that you love me for it.” Ivy is generally herself with everyone, and sometimes not everyone’s cup of tea. But with Holly, she doesn’t have to worry about being considered abrupt, or offbeat, or too honest, or too frank about sex. Holly likes her just the way she is. And, Ivy can’t help but think, shouldn’t that be the case in Holly’s life, too? Weren’t you supposed to be yourself with the person you were marrying?

“Hey, you okay?” Holly asks as they stand, waiting for the elevator.

“I’m great.”

“It’ll happen,” Holly says, misinterpreting her friend’s morose expression. “He’s out there somewhere right now, just waiting to meet you. I wonder where he is.”

Ivy unlocks the door to her apartment, and they step inside as Holly keeps talking, her voice dreamy. “He could be anywhere. In this city or . . . maybe a dude ranch in Montana . . .”

“Now there’s an idea. I’ve never slept with a cowboy, maybe I need to?”

“Not sleep with, *marry*,” Holly corrects, following Ivy into her tiny galley kitchen, where Ivy pours pints of water from the tap, and tequila from a blue-and-white ceramic bottle. They head into the living room, where she’s set up the coffee table with makeup remover, cotton pads, sheet masks, and snacks. She cues up the movie as Holly starts removing her eye makeup.

Once she’s done, she sips her tequila. “So good,” she says.

“Only the best for the bride-to-be.”

“I love that we both drink good booze. I’ve never seen the point of drinking just to get drunk.”

“*Al-though*, every once in a while, getting lightly buttered—”

“Gently toasted.”

“One and a half sheets to the wind.”

“—is really a lot of fun. And as you said, this chocolate is going to reverse-age me—”

“Plus, you’re already perfect—”

“These sheet masks are going to restore and rejuvenate me, and despite the drinking, I’ll look fine tomorrow.”

“Better than fine, Holly. You’re going to be the most beautiful bride in the world. With the best heart. Also, the smartest.”

“Thanks, friend. Movie time?”

Ivy hits play, and the moment Brad Pitt gets randomly walloped by a car while crossing the street, Holly dissolves into laughter and they rewind and replay it, the way they always do. “I’m so sorry,” she says, trying to catch her breath. “I know it’s not supposed to be funny, but . . .” Pitt flies through the air again, and she buries her face in a throw pillow that comes away damp from her tears of mirth.

Then they reach the moment when Pitt’s character tries peanut butter for the first time. As usual, Holly says, “This part *always* makes me crave a peanut butter sandwich,” and Ivy goes into the kitchen to make her one—just as Ivy’s door buzzer goes off.

Holly raises an eyebrow. “Is this one of your booty calls?”

“God, I hope not,” Ivy says. “The guy I’ve been sort of seeing is an emergency room doctor, though, so he does keep odd hours. Maybe if I ignore him, he’ll go away.”

But the buzzing continues until Ivy stands, exasperated. “Hello?” she says into the intercom.

“It’s Matt. I need to see Holly.”

“Matt? Awww,” Holly says. “This is so sweet! So un-Matt-like!” She stands—but then her eyes widen with alarm. “This is so un-Matt-like, to just show up, all spontaneous and romantic. Do you think something is wrong?”

Ivy was wondering the same thing. But she smiles and says, “Of course not. Your groom is so madly in love with you, he needs to see his bride-to-be the night before the wedding. For a passionate good-night kiss.”

But when Holly is gone, Ivy slumps against her front door, her sense of forboding intensifying. Matt seemed so off tonight. Something isn't right, and Ivy knows it. She distracts herself by going into the living room and picking up her cell phone. There's some work stuff she ignores given that she is now officially on vacation, and a new email from Aiden Coleman, the host of the eco-cabin in the Hudson Valley she has rented for the two weeks following Holly's wedding. This is her annual art honeymoon, which she takes every Christmas season. Ivy studied visual art in college, and even got a partial scholarship at Cooper Union because of her talents. Her professors encouraged her to pursue making a living with the lush oil pastel landscapes that were her art school signature. But while her unconventional, bohemian upbringing is one she looks back upon fondly, Ivy has always craved more stability for herself. Making a living trading landscape art, the way her father had insisted she surely could, held zero appeal. So, in her last year of college, she took some graphic design courses and found she was good at it. She graduated, and the final art show of the year was the last she ever did. She left her art behind, surprising everyone except herself by taking an internship

at Imagenue, one of New York's most prestigious branding studios. Now she uses her artistic skills and visual-storytelling abilities to help build brands. She doesn't love her job, but she likes it. It pays the bills, which is important given that living in New York City as a single woman is not nearly as effortless as Carrie Bradshaw made it look in the '90s. Ivy had student loans to pay off, and after that was done, paying rent in her favorite neighborhood—Greenwich Village, which she fell in love with during college—was expensive. She needs her job.

Except that during her first two years in the corporate world, Ivy found herself falling into a mental, spiritual malaise that veered far too close to full-blown depression for her comfort. So, she decided to take her first ever “art honeymoon” during her third year working at Imagenue. She booked a cabin in the Catskills, and spent fourteen glorious days eating instant ramen and sketching the landscape, which was at once pastoral and rugged, stark and luscious. Eventually, all the oil pastels she brought had been reduced to colorful stubs, her fingertips tattooed rainbows. She gave the pieces to friends and family, hung some in her apartment, and felt better. It was enough. It got her through the year. So she did it again, and kept on doing it. In fact, this year was going to be her fifth art honeymoon.

She taps out a quick reply to Aiden, telling him her estimated arrival time in two days, and allows herself a moment

of anticipatory excitement about two weeks spent solely focused on creativity before she goes back to worrying about Holly, and why Matt's here.

When she hears her friend's key in the door a mere seven minutes later, her body floods with relief. No one breaks off an engagement the night before the wedding in *seven* minutes. He really did just want to kiss his bride-to-be good night. Maybe Husband Matt will be more palatable to Ivy than Boyfriend Matt has been.

Except, when Holly enters the living room, the laughing, silly, slightly tipsy friend Ivy saw seven minutes ago is gone.

"Holly!" Ivy jumps up from the couch "What happened? Are you okay?"

"I . . ." Holly stands still in the middle of the room. ". . . don't know."

"What happened?" she repeats.

Holly opens her mouth and closes it.

"You're scaring me. What's going on?"

"He ended it." Holly's voice is the sound wave equivalent of a marble statue. "There's someone else."

Ivy pulls Holly toward the couch, pouring her a shot of tequila, knowing this is going to call for a lot more than one and a half sheets to the wind. All three sheets are going to be hanging on the line tonight, if only to get Holly to unleash the torrent of emotion she's clearly holding in, making her eyes look like she's one of the zombies in *The Walking Dead*.

“What did he say?”

Holly shakes her head. “Something like . . . something that sounded an awful *fucking* lot like he was quoting Anthony Hopkins in *Meet Joe Black*.” Holly shakes her head, her eyes dazed. “How falling in love feels different than what we have. He said the sparks you’re supposed to feel . . . never really happened with us. He said . . . that maybe we got together because we felt like we were ticking boxes on a list our families had made for us.”

Ivy hates that she agrees with Matt. She holds her best friend’s hands and hopes her expression is not betraying her, but Holly sees nothing as she stares straight ahead like an automaton. “I don’t think he actually came out and said he never loved me, but he didn’t have to. It was unspoken. He doesn’t love me, he doesn’t want to marry me. And I *do* love him, Ivy. I do.” She pauses and rakes her hand through her hair, which is flowing in shiny waves down her back, the result of a recent pre-wedding keratin treatment. “Don’t I? I can’t have been planning to marry a person just because we fit. And besides, isn’t fitting a good thing? Aren’t you supposed to find your missing puzzle piece and marry that person?”

“Yes,” Ivy says. “Yes, you are.” She does not say that she refuses and has always refused to believe Matt is Holly’s missing puzzle piece. Now is not the time. She just keeps squeezing her friend’s hand.

“I mean yes, we work well together as a concept, and our families get along.” Holly stops talking and stares down at her glass, then slugs it back and holds it out. This is a drastic scenario, so Ivy pours more tequila and gets her friend a glass of water, too.

“What else did he say?”

“He met someone at work and he doesn’t know where it’s going to go, but he has to . . . explore it.”

“And you? What did you say?”

“Okay.’ That’s all I said. ‘*Okay.*’ I just stood there thinking I should be screaming, crying, begging. But I didn’t feel anything, and I still don’t. I just . . . feel empty.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“When I turned around and started walking back into your building, he called out to me. And I thought, ‘Oh, he didn’t mean it.’”

“What did he want?”

“He asked me if I still wanted to go on our honeymoon. He said the trip was nonrefundable and nontransferable, and my parents had spent so much money on it, and it would be such a waste not to use it. He said, given the shock of everything, I should really go and just spend two weeks . . . I forget the word he used. ‘Decompressing’? ‘Processing’?”

“What did you say to that?” Ivy manages.

“I said no, of course. That would be way too painful. Then I came back up here.” She puts her face in her hands, but

when she looks up again, she's still dry-eyed. "I mean, it really *is* such a waste. He's not wrong. Not just the honeymoon, but all of it."

"Oh, honey." Ivy keeps rubbing her friend's back gently, trying to channel her own mother. "I'm here, okay? Whatever you need me to do, I will."

"I don't even know what I need to do, though! Do I have to tell everyone?" She looks panicked at this.

"Of course not. You don't have to do anything, okay? I'll call your parents and let them know what has happened. And then I'll call a few of our friends who we can trust to get the message out."

"Okay. Thank you. I just can't."

"Of course. Are you sure you want me to call them now? We could wait until morning. Maybe Matt will come to his senses."

"I can't marry someone who is so unsure this is the right thing to do. He said what he said. There's no going back. Just call them. Please."

Ivy leans forward and hugs her friend, then stands. "I'm going to call them from my room. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"I'm good," Holly says, with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. She lifts the bottle. "I have Don Julio to keep me company."

As Ivy enters her room, she fights the urge to call Matt

and tear a strip off of him for hurting her friend. Instead, she closes the door and takes a deep, shaky breath—which snags when she sees Holly’s wedding dress hanging on her closet door. It’s snowy white, with a square neckline and wide straps that frame her collarbones perfectly, a plunging back and a ball-style skirt with deep pockets that are the best part of the dress—all made of the softest silk. Holly looks like a literal Disney princess in this dress, and somehow not in a bad way. Ivy quickly pushes it inside her closet and slams the door on the train. No one needs to see that dress right now.

Barbara doesn’t answer, so Holly tries again. It goes straight to voicemail. “Mrs. Beech, this is Ivy. I’m calling to let you know that Matt has just informed Holly that he no longer wants to go through with the wedding. It’s off. Holly is understandably devastated. I can email the caterer and text the hairdressers and makeup artists. Could you call the venue in the morning to let them know what has happened, and perhaps send out an email as soon as you get this message? I’m working on trying to let as many guests know as possible in our friend circle, and I’m counting on you to let your family know. Could you also please get in touch with Matt’s family, if he hasn’t done so already, to make sure they spread the word, too? Call me when you get this. Please. I’ll be up all night. We can get our girl through this. Thanks.”

She hangs up and goes back out into the living room just in time to hear Holly’s phone ring. Holly holds it up. “Barb.”

Ivy grabs the phone. “Hello?”

“Holly, is that you? What does Ivy mean, the wedding is off? Is she drunk? Is she high? That *can't* be true. It would be such an embarrassment, I don't know if we'd ever live it down. We've spent so much money, we'll never get any of the deposits back, plus the honeymoon, plus the—”

For a woman from a family who often talks about how their ancestors arrived on the *Mayflower* with actual chests of gold—and whose husband inherited a healthy chunk of a shipyard fortune—Holly's mother is surprisingly opposed to “wasting” cash. Sure, she once spent almost six figures on the abalone for her father-in-law's retirement party, but Barb had made certain she got the *best possible deal* on that rarest of shellfish.

“Mrs. Beech? This is Ivy. Holly can't talk right now.”

“Put my daughter on the phone!”

“Did you listen to my entire message? Will you call the venue in the morning? And notify the guests you have contact information for—”

“This is not happening!”

Ivy is angry, and she is sad for her friend, and she will probably never understand how someone as lovely as Holly—and her brother, Ted, for that matter—could have been raised by a mother like Barbara, and her father, Ed, who is about as emotionally supportive as an empty lobster tank at Grand Central Oyster Bar. She is also determined not to let her emotions get in the way of doing what she promised she

would do for Holly: Take care of everything. Shield her from these details. “I’m afraid it is happening. And we need to be here for Holly. I’ll work on getting the word out to our friends. You will contact your family members and friends. We’ll divide up the vendors and we’ll talk tomorrow.”

“But—”

“*We will talk again tomorrow.*” Ivy ends the call.

“You know,” Holly says, her laugh shaky, “sometimes, you scare me. For someone raised by the most peace-loving hippies I’ve ever met—I mean, aside from when your dad starts on one of his rants about corporate America—you do one hell of an impression of Margaret Thatcher.”

Ivy laughs, too, equally shaky. “I will be the Iron Lady for you if I need to be.”

Holly smiles another one of those sad smiles. She picks up the tequila bottle, then puts it down. “This isn’t helping.”

“I’ll make some tea,” Ivy says. “We’re going to get through this, okay? I won’t leave your side until you’re okay again.”

Holly looks thoughtful. “No,” she finally says. “That’s not true. You need to leave for your art retreat, day after tomorrow. You *can’t* stay by my side. You *love* those trips. You *need* your art honeymoon.”

Ivy shakes her head. “I’m not going anywhere without you. That’s final.”

“But—”

Ivy holds up a hand. “I would do anything for you. You

know this. But leaving you on your own right now is where I draw the line.”

“Agree to disagree,” Holly says, which is what they always say instead of arguing. “We can talk about it tomorrow. For now, some tea would be great.”

As Ivy walks into the kitchen to turn on the kettle, she feels her eyes fill with tears, but she tamps them down. If Holly hasn’t cried yet, she isn’t going to, either. She will be as strong as her friend—and when Holly inevitably breaks, Ivy will be by her side to hold her up.