

WHEN THE BALL DROPS

Tick. Tick. Tick.

If the clock took any longer to change hours, Liam was going to throw it from his thirty-seventh-floor window. Besides, who had to work on New Year's Eve anyway? It was completely ridiculous. He peeked over his cubicle to see who else was stuck in the office for the evening. From the looks of it, it was only him and three other unfortunate souls.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

He groaned and shoved his keyboard aside, staring up at the clock again. It felt like he was back in high school waiting for the last class of the day to get out. Just then, his phone rang and he sighed in relief. He answered quickly and the excited babble of a crowd met his ear before his girlfriend's voice overrode it.

"Liam! Hi!"

"Hey, baby! Man, am I glad you called. Work is so boring, as usual."

"I miss you, babe!"

"I miss you too. I wish I could be there tonight, but you know..."

"I know, your boring job. I just can't believe you're going to miss New Year's! It's our first year together and..." She trailed off and Liam's eyes wandered to the clock again.

"And what?" he asked, spinning a paperclip in circles with his finger.

"Well, you know, I've never had a New Year's kiss before and I really wanted you to be my first."

"Aww, baby, I'm sorry. I wish I could. How's the party?"

"It's great! You know what Lisa's parties are like. And of course, Molly threw up in the sink again. But babe, isn't there anything you can do to get out of work tonight? I really want to see you."

"I don't think so. You know I'd much rather be with you, but the boss is pushing hard for us to finish this project."

"Okay, at least promise me something."

"Anything, baby."

"I can see the New Year's ball from here if I go up on the roof. What if you take a break at midnight and call me? Then we can still kind of be together!"

"Yeah, I bet I can make that work. Tell you what: you call me in case I actually get caught up in my work for once."

She laughed. "Okay babe, I'll call you when the ball drops."

The hands on the clock finally ticked their way to the top of the hour and Liam stood up. "Oh man, I think the boss is coming! Gotta go! Have fun at the party! I'll talk to you later!" He hung up the phone before she could get another word in.

He gathered his papers, stuffing them into his briefcase and sliding into his coat. "See you guys later!" He called to his coworkers, rushing to the elevator. He pressed the button for down and waited, shifting his weight from side to side. It was nine o'clock. He had exactly three hours to run his errand and get home. Plenty

of time.

Or at least, it would be if the elevator would ever arrive. He jabbed the button again and the elevator blared an alarm tone.

A janitor passing by nodded at him. "Elevator's out, buddy."

"Great." Thirty-seven flights of stairs to walk down. "Guess I better get started." He turned towards the stairs instead.

He was panting slightly by the time he reached the bottom. "I need to exercise more," he said to the doorman, who only grunted and waved him out onto the street. New York truly was the city that never slept. The traffic was as atrocious now as it was during the day. Liam raised his hand, flagging down a passing taxi.

It pulled up alongside him, but just as he was about to slide in, a man in an expensive suit dove through the door. "Sorry chief. I need it more than you." He barked his destination at the cabbie, who took off, leaving Liam standing alone in the cold.

"Are you kidding me?" he shouted, causing several passersby to stare.

It was fifteen minutes before another cab stopped. Liam was shivering as he clambered inside. He gave an address to the driver who caught his eye in the mirror.

"It's gonna be a long ride if you wanna go there. Traffic is a nightmare tonight."

Liam hesitated, then sighed. "Yeah, go ahead. I need to get flowers for my girl. I'm surprising her tonight so we can watch the ball drop together. She thinks I'm still at work." The cabbie shrugged and drove off.

True to his word, the taxi driver had been right about the traffic. It took forever to go sixteen blocks. Liam paid quickly and jumped out when they arrived at the florist's shop. To his dismay, the line for flowers led out the door and onto the street. He turned back to grab the car door, but the taxi had already driven away. He swore under his breath. Well, there was no point in leaving now. Grudgingly, he got in line to wait.

It wasn't so bad, he decided, as the line slowly shuffled forward. True, it was twelve degrees out, he'd had to work all night, and some jerk had stolen his taxi, but he was guaranteed to have a great night later. And he still had plenty of time. He checked his phone. It was a little after ten fifteen. He had over an hour and a half before the ball dropped.

At ten thirty-three, he left with a bouquet of gorgeous purple and blue flowers, his girlfriend's favorite colors. After glancing at the streets full of honking cars and screeching tires, he opted instead to walk. His girlfriend's apartment wasn't that far, after all, and he *had* told the doorman he needed more exercise. He might as well start now.

Hands in his pockets to ward off the bitter cold and the flowers under his arm, Liam started down the streets of New York City. Everyone seemed excited, and he realized how close he was to Times Square. Happy shouting and shrieking sounded all around. He even thought he heard someone calling his own name.

"Liam!" A hand grasped his shoulder and spun him around.

"Whoa, what the-" Liam's confusion turned to delight and he shot his friend a grin. "Nick!" They clasped hands briefly. "What's up? What are you doing out here?"

"It's New Year's Eve! We're at the Red Bottle celebrating! Come have a drink with us!"

It was tempting. After the long day he'd had, Liam could really use one. But he waved his hand. "Nah,

thanks, but I can't."

"What? Liam's too good to drink with us?" Another man came bounding out of the bar entrance, slurring his words. "I've never heard such a ridiculous thing in my life!"

"I see Dustin has had enough drinks for all of us," Liam said, laughing.

"As usual," Nick groaned.

Dustin took Liam's shoulder. "C'mon bro, Alex, Mike, and Carter are inside!" He steered Liam into the bar.

"Alright, alright, *one* drink and then I really have to go!"

Nick waved the bartender over and Liam ordered a beer. "So what's so important?" he asked once Liam received his drink.

He took a gulp, wiping a bit of foam from his nose, then waved his bouquet at Nick. "I'm going to surprise Jess tonight."

Nick frowned. "Jess?"

"Yeah, you know, my girlfriend?"

"Right... But wait, I thought-"

Before Nick could say any more, Dustin stumbled over with Alex, Mike, and Carter in tow. "What up, my man?"

They took a few minutes to catch up before the group wandered off towards the pool tables. Liam pulled up a stool, offering one to Nick, who sat. "Man, it's been a bad day," Liam said. "Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong. I'm trying to go see Jess and the world seems to want to stop me."

"Maybe you should listen to it, then," Nick replied, shooting him a pointed look.

Liam scoffed and waved a hand dismissively. "And what does the world know, anyways?"

Nick opened his mouth to speak again but his words were drowned out by a roar of rage at the pool tables. Dustin, it seemed, had helped himself to another man's beer and it had not gone over well. Liam ducked as a pool ball went flying over his head. "Dustin!" He grabbed his friend's shoulder, only to tumble backwards with his hands over his nose. They came away bloody. "What are you hitting *me* for?" he yelled at the irate man Dustin had offended.

Half an hour later, the police had arrived to sort out the brawl. "Do you want to press charges?" One of the officers asked Liam.

"No, no that won't be necessary. I just want to get home to my girlfriend."

"Not so fast. We'll need you to remain on site until we sort out who did what. I'm sure you understand."

Liam sighed. "Yes, officer."

At last, once he was cleared of any wrongdoing, Liam waved a hasty goodbye to his friends and booked it out the door. He had less than thirty minutes to reach his girlfriend. His flowers were a bit ruffled, but not a lost cause. He tried to reorganize them as he ran, and also made sure to wipe away the blood from his nose. Today had been an all-around terrible day. But he was almost there! At least one thing could go right tonight.

A few small flakes of snow were drifting from the sky by the time he reached the apartment building. He rang the buzzer of several other apartments, waiting for one to let him in. He was determined to surprise Jess. He

had eight minutes before the ball dropped.

The door buzzed open and he dashed inside, forgoing the elevator in favor of the stairs, just in case. She was only on the sixth floor anyways. His chest heaving and clutching a stitch in his side, he was finally outside his girlfriend's door with four minutes to spare. He knocked and heard footsteps inside the apartment.

The door swung open and Liam was greeted with Jess's shocked face, which quickly turned to joy. She flung her arms around him. "Liam! I can't believe it! I thought you had to work!"

"Hey baby, I got out at nine. I wanted to surprise you!"

"That is so sweet!"

Liam handed her the flowers from behind his back and her eyes filled with happy tears. "They're beautiful! I'm so excited, I was sure I would be sitting here all alone with my cats and hot chocolate!"

Liam smiled and leaned in to kiss her, but Jess put her hand over his mouth. "Not until midnight!" she giggled and took his hand, dragging him over to the couch. The TV was already on, showing the massive celebration in Times Square. The New Year's ball, glittering and bedazzled with light, sat on the pole, ready to drop in less than one minute. "Let's count down!" Jess said, still holding Liam's hand.

"Five... four... three... two... one!"

Liam pulled Jess in at 'one' and pressed his lips to hers in a deep, passionate kiss.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

His phone went off in his pocket and he fumbled around to make it stop. "Happy New Year," he said when he and Jess broke apart.

"Starting my new year with you?" Jess said, kissing him again. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Liam's phone vibrated again and he sighed. "It's work," he said. "You know how they are. I've got to take this."

Jess groaned and flopped over onto the couch dramatically. "They're always calling you. Can't they at least leave you alone on New Year's?"

Liam shrugged. "I guess not. I'll take it out on the balcony. See you in a minute, baby. Love you."

"I love you too."

He went outside, sliding the door shut before answering the phone. "Baby, I'm so sorry! I was in a conference call and couldn't make it."

The sounds of a party filtered through his speaker. "I can't believe you missed it. You promised you'd call me when the ball dropped!"

"I know, I know, but I swear I'll make it up to you. Valentine's Day is coming up. I promise, I'll make sure we have the best day ever."

"Well, okay babe. I love you."

"Love you too."