

## **Wedding**

*Word Count: 2192*

### **9:06 AM**

The string of decorative LED lights had been recently and carelessly taken down and was lying in a heap by the doorway. As the door opened and she walked inside, cardboard box in tow, the lights snagged her left foot in revenge, sending her tumbling down the foyer and onto the living room floor. Apart from a loud *THUD!*, there wasn't a peep out of her, and she simply stood up, grabbed the string of lights and shoved it back into its corner, grabbed a knife, and opened up the cardboard box. As she pulled out the shimmery golden dress, her eyes reflected its warm amber glow for an instant before their owner's attention returned to her daily life and the mess surrounding her. She tossed the dress aside before sitting down on the floor, the dismantled furniture stacked up in one corner, threatening to fall over at any moment but, at least until today, never following through.

### **6:52 PM**

As she packed up her fourth suitcase, her phone began to buzz on the bedside table. She considered ignoring it, but eventually picked up. After listening to the message on the other end, she sighed and switched off the phone, giving way to just an instant of hesitation before shakily opening up the back and pulling the SIM card out. She snapped the card in half and tossed it onto the floor, then grabbed the last set of clothes and stuffed them into the suitcase. She opened up the bedside table's top drawer and took out a photo album, flipping past the first two pages, barely even looking as her hand reached into her pocket and pulled out a young man's picture, automatically sliding it into the fifth slot in the album. Her fingers lingered, for just an instant—barely even that—before she abruptly slammed the album shut and shoved it into the suitcase.

**9:21 PM**

She'd been in the parking lot of the wedding venue for nearly ten minutes already, her little black car filled to the brim with her suitcases, miscellaneous plastic bags, herself, and even her loose string of LEDs. It wasn't a terribly comfortable place to hang out, unless the hanger-outer in question was hemming and hawing over whether she was doing the right thing for the twenty-fourth time.

She took a deep breath as she adjusted the rear-view mirror and found two large, golden eyes sparkling in the light from her shimmery dress. Her fingers were shaking as she did some small, last-minute fixes to her hair and reapplied her lip gloss, but she didn't seem to notice, fixated on her own gaze in the rear-view mirror. It began to seem compulsive, her fingers shaking more and more as she kept reapplying the lip gloss and kept tucking in invisible stray hairs, never tearing her gaze away once from her own eyes. Finally, she let out an exasperated grunt as she tossed the lip gloss aside and leaned back, slamming her eyes shut. A deep breath in, a long breath out.

She threw open the car door before she could think about it a second longer, and stepped out, steeling herself as she walked past the colourful poster hung up on the fence that read *Lily weds Jonathan*, all the way over to the wooden platform on which the happy couple stood, her eyes flickering but her expression unchanged as she watched the young man on the platform with his future wife.

Despite not being recognizable to just about anyone at the venue, she was very much welcome by almost everyone. On a good day, she'd revel in the wistful glances thrown her way, in the jealousy and the chaos that she left in her wake, in the mystery and enigma that surrounded her, as though she were a character in a movie.

On a bad day, every whisper and every glance would serve to rile her up, fuel her entitlement, and make her wonder why this was her fate.

But today, she barely noticed any of it. And this was the fifth such day that she'd had, but was the first such day that she was spending at a wedding.

The only person she noticed was the middle-aged man in the suit and tie who stood by the bar, his attention seemingly focused on his to-be-wed son and his future daughter-in-law.

But, as she knew, he was keeping an eye on her. Unwitting and trying to place her.

He pasted a smile on his face as she got within courtesy distance.

"May I offer you a drink?" he asked, his tone unwavering. She forced a smile on her own face, and watched him melt-- just a little bit-- in response.

"No thank you," she said, "I don't drink."

He nodded and smiled as he took a sip of his own drink.

They stood there in silence. She looked almost perfectly as composed and tranquil as he did, her only giveaway being the way her hands wrapped and clawed at each other restlessly.

And his only giveaway was the fact that he was the first to speak.

"Are you one of Lily's friends?"

"... no."

His expression showed absolutely zero change, but she could see his body language shift slightly. He kept quiet.

Her arm instinctively twitched as she tried to reach out and smoothen her hair, but her other arm held it firmly in place.

"I'm... I'm one of the ground staff. From the company."

He sighed and put his glass down.

"What do you want? I paid up."

"I know, I know... the company didn't send me. I came... I came on my own volition."

"I could have you forcibly removed, and complain to your company."

"I promise, I'm not here to fight. I'm not here to antagonize you. I just want to talk."

Finally, for the first time since she'd laid eyes on him, he finally, genuinely, looked at her.

She stared back at him, her eyes resisting the urge to dart back to the festivities around them, to check if anyone was watching. He put his hands in his pant pockets and instinctively looked around him before looking back at her.

"Look, you seem like a nice girl. I get it, you just want to talk. How about we go grab a coffee later and sort this out?"

"The company won't let me stay here any longer. I was supposed to be out five hours ago."

He opened his mouth to say something, but she put a hand up.

"Please. I promise. I've never been able to talk about this before. I just want five minutes."

He closed his mouth, then nodded.

"Go on," he said. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

"What would happen if Jonathan was in love with someone else?"

He furrowed his brow, then looked at his glass for a moment before reaching out for it.

"Look around you. He can adjust to this life."

"Forgive me for my judgement, but it feels like manipulation. It feels like we're forcing life into a neat little bow. Like we aren't accepting anything different."

He took a sip of his drink, shifting his gaze back to her and resting it there. A tense, yet understanding, silence reigned for the next few seconds.

"It's ultimately for the best," he said, "why have something different when you know exactly what you want?"

He gestured to the couple on the platform.

"You're looking in from the outside. But what if you didn't even know that a different world existed? Why would you be unhappy?"

She closed her eyes in a quiet grimace.

"You can't protect someone from themselves by manufacturing what you think is the perfect world for them."

"You're being dramatic. You're looking at this from your own point of view. You didn't *lie* to them. You simply advertised them to each other. Like a character in a movie."

She kept quiet. He went on.

"Is it *your choice* to fall in love with a fictional character?"

"But that's different. That's television, that's..."

She fell silent. He gently gestured for her to continue. She stared down at the ground.

"Television is one side of the story," she said, "it's what people want you to see, it's a way of reckoning with your own emotions, it's not... it's not the way that you'd look at a three-dimensional human."

He scoffed slightly.

"Okay, then," he responded, "how would you look at a three-dimensional human?"

"...with grace, and understanding, and... as someone who's out of your control, but that's okay."

He paused, his expression changing as he regarded her.

"... have you seen the difference, then? Between true love and... television?"

“...I don’t know.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I...”

She looked around, then looked at her feet. He knew.

“There was a girl who worked as a... broker, of sorts,” she said, “she would scope people out and learn their dark secrets and their brightest hopes. She could spot trends in their behaviour.

And people trusted her—”

“—why did people trust her?”

She sighed and closed her eyes.

“People trusted her because she was pretty.”

“And?”

“And she knew what they were looking for.”

“And what were they looking for?”

“... a way to wrap things up in a neat little bow, just like what they see on television.”

“... and there you have it.”

“But she loved people for who they truly were, not just for what they portrayed or advertised.”

“Because she *needs* love. Because she’s afraid of being alone. Because she thinks she’s the only one who’s alone, and that getting “true love” from someone—anyone-- will solve all her problems.”

“I...”

“... “true love” and “God’s will” exist so that people can deflect blame. Think of this: my son bumps into some girl on the street. He has a million things to do, doesn’t he? He has a million priorities. What makes him decide to take the time to pursue this girl? Why not that other girl whom he bumped into that other day? His friends egg him on, and then guess where they go after the marriage. Sometime, somewhere, he saw someone vaguely like her on television, but

guess where that standard goes after the marriage. Who's responsible for the fallout when they realize that they're only together because they both fell for something bright and shiny and were told that "true love" would *solve all their goddamn problems?!"*

She said nothing.

"If Lily divorces him, I'll answer to it. I am *his father*. I *should* be the one to blame. Not some actress on a Sunday Night lineup or some kid who shares two classes with him. The only way to escape blame is to do nothing. And I'm not about to sit here and watch my son's life pass me by."

Silence.

"I... understand that you care for your son very much."

He didn't look in her direction. She continued.

"But...it seems to me like you're preserving Jonathan's comfort. Not his happiness."

He smiled slightly.

"Comfort is long-term. Happiness is a transient and fickle emotion. Comfort is an expression of equilibrium, it's an expression of human survival. You only choose happiness when you're uncomfortable."

She looked at him. He looked back at her.

"*You're* uncomfortable. But Jonathan has never been. And if he has Lily, why would he ever choose you?"

Silence. His expression remained unchanged; soft and yet cold, calculating and yet remorseful, barely victorious but still on edge.

She took a sharp intake of breath before glancing back at the festivities that surrounded them: the frazzled mothers running after their playful children near the chocolate fountain, the group of

colourfully dressed people swirling their drinks in their glasses. She watched Lily fiddle with the ring on her finger, and Jonathan gently place an arm around Lily's shoulders. She watched Lily look up, just a little surprised, and smile at Jonathan.

She watched Jonathan smile back.

She finally allowed her lower lip to tremble, but just for a moment. She reached out and smoothed her hair before turning around and walking back towards her little black car in the parking lot. She grabbed the door handle, and, after feeling slight resistance, impatiently yanked the door open.

*Rrrrrriipp.*

Her heart froze as she saw the string of LED lights sprawled out on the ground, having become *two* strings of LED lights. She reached out to pick them up, and watched her own hands shake viciously as the strings kept threatening to slip out of her grip.

Her expression began to change. She suddenly slammed the strings on the ground and stomped on them twice with her high heels before entering the car, locking her arms in a death grip around the steering wheel, and crumpling into a sobbing mess.

Crying over LEDs in a pretty golden dress was perfect for television, wasn't it? Maybe that's why she pushed things this far. Because the happy wedding after wedding after wedding after wedding... that was quiet, with no gratification and no payoff, no drama and no catharsis.

And that was real life.