

The Wedding

The girl took a deep breath as she adjusted her rearview mirror and found two large, dark, rather blank eyes staring at her. She made sure her hair was neatly parted at the centre, and that the eyeliner that she'd carefully applied was still okay. Satisfied, she opened the car door and stepped out, closing the door behind her and smoothening out her dress.

Don't get distracted, she thought to herself, *make sure you get the damn job done*.

She took a deep breath again before walking past the colourful poster hung up on the fence that said, *Lily weds Jonathan*.

She walked past people making merry by the chocolate fountain, and watched expressionless as two women appeared to be engaged in some kind of ultimate unspoken competition: whose dress was better, whose husband was better, whose wealth was better... She was above all of that. Not really, if you went all the way down to her very much human core, but the job forced her to be better than she might've been on her own. Anyway, she preferred not to think much about what she could've been. Such thoughts served to horrify her on some days, and leave her feeling empty on others.

She walked over to the wooden platform on which Lily and Jonathan stood, shooting nervous glances at each other. At one point, Jonathan looked up and met the girl's eyes. The girl froze. She looked from Lily, to Jonathan, then back to Lily, then back to Jonathan. Finally, she swallowed, smiled, and extended an arm.

Her smile was radiant. It was one of the many reasons she'd been picked for this job, other than the fact that she'd kinda-sorta been born into it. When she smiled, the whole world appeared to dim in comparison. When she smiled, people believed her. Imagine, a simple smile rendering a person dumb, unable to see the sharpness of the teeth that composed it. Jonathan smiled back at her, cocking his head slightly to one side. Good. He didn't recognize her. Not that he would, considering how many people his wannabe-socialite parents made him meet every single day. Lily was more likely to remember, and at this time, she was engaged in arranging flowers around some pot nearby.

The girl smiled inwardly; a real smile. Lily was obsessive that way; it was a part of what fuelled her renowned, supposedly almost-photographic memory. The girl knew better, though. Lily had normal memory, but a larger attention span than most. And what do you know, sometimes paying attention makes all the difference, a fact that most people could not pay enough attention to to grasp.

"Hello," said Jonathan to the girl as he shook her hand firmly, "do I know you?"

The girl shook her head as she brushed her hair out of her face.

"No," she said, "I'm your father's friend's daughter. Sita from college. I'm her daughter."

Jonathan's eyes brightened in recognition, although the girl knew that he was thinking of Seema from college; his father's old sweetheart, whom he'd remained friends with even after his marriage.

Sita from college didn't exist.

"Oh," he said, "that's lovely! My father's right over there, by the fountain there...to your right...yep!"

"Oh, thank you," said the girl, "Maybe I'll go over and say hi to him."

Jonathan nodded enthusiastically. At this time, Lily turned around and locked eyes with the girl. Lily furrowed her brow slightly, trying to place the girl's face, but before she could begin to process this, Jonathan had shyly explained something to her that made her lose interest, just as the girl ducked out of Lily's view and made her way towards Jonathan's father.

Jonathan's father's name was William. The girl knew that well. Beckett, Lily's father, had paid up as promised, but somehow William thought he was all that.

"Hello, sir," she said at the first opportune moment that she got. William looked up at her, then sighed.

"So they've sent a collector after me," he declared, an eyebrow raised. The girl smiled.

"You seem to know your business well."

William laughed and offered her a drink. She politely refused. He took a sip of his own as he watched his son and Lily on the wooden platform.

"Look at them," he said softly, "look how happy they are."

The girl scoffed lightly.

"Don't play the emotions game with me. You'll lose."

William cleared his throat and turned to face her.

"Do you really not get any satisfaction? Hmm? Knowing that your research, your work, your dedication is what got two lonely people into a happy union?"

The girl sighed and shook her head.

"Beckett paid up," she said, her tone flat, "and if you don't pay up, I swear to God, I can and will use every bit of my research, my work and my dedication to charm your married son out of his marriage in the most disgraceful way anybody at this gathering can think of."

William grimaced.

"Okay," he said, "I'm threatened."

The girl shrugged and turned back to Jonathan.

"I do like your son," she said, "but I've liked a couple of guys before him. I've liked a couple of girls before him, too."

William looked at her. She looked at William.

Yep, she thought. The boss was right. William would pay up. He was simply negotiating.

For now, it looks like the girl had won round one.

"I want the cash by tomorrow," she said, "noon. I'll give you a grace period of two hours after."

William slowly nodded as he turned back to watch his son and to-be-daughter-in-law. The girl could've left at this point.

"Do you really feel like you're a hero?" she asked. William turned to look at her, then shrugged.

"If they're not going to be influenced by me, they're going to be influenced by some other shit from some other idiot, some idiot who doesn't want the best for them, or for their families. You've influenced them into the right decision."

The girl smiled slightly; for real, this time, and it looked more like a grimace.

"And their freedom? How would you explain to your son that you hired a girl to manufacture a love for Lily in him?"

William laughed softly and shook his head.

"You presented Lily to him, bit by bit, like the way they present characters in movies. Are we forced to love characters in movies? Or do we love them on our own?"

The girl paused, then looked at her feet.

"But that's television. This is real life."

William smiled.

"True love is television. Romance is television. But reliability and family? That's real life."

The girl laughed.

"We're real life, then," she said. William grinned.

"We're real life."

The girl turned to go, then turned back again.

“Hey, don’t forget,” she said, her tone flat, “money at noon. Beckett’s paid.”