

The Corpse Bride

With less than twenty minutes to go, I'm certain Liam breaks traffic laws because we make it there, a 24/7 Sweets & Treats shop, in record time. We grab our order and after a quick argument, decide to place them on the backseat.

"They're going to fall over," Liam warns as I set the cake boxes carefully on the seat.

I roll my eyes. "They'll be fine if you drive like a normal person."

Liam raises an eyebrow, looking way too smug for someone who definitely should've gotten a speeding ticket five minutes ago. "Normal is subjective."

Before I can argue, he opens the passenger door for me with a mock bow. "Your chariot, m'lady."

I sigh but slide in anyway, and as soon as he shuts the door and rounds the car, I reach back, bracing the boxes with one hand. Just in case.

Liam gets in and scoffs. "See? You don't trust them either."

"I don't trust you."

He lets out a low chuckle and starts the car. The streets are quiet at this hour, the glow of streetlights casting long shadows as we drive. I check the GPS - our last stop isn't too far.

"So," Liam says, tapping the wheel. "Do you think wedding crashing is actually illegal?"

I shoot him a look. "You didn't think of that before?"

He grins. "Nope."

"Unbelievable."

He shrugs. "It's fine. As long as we don't get caught."

I shake my head, half amused, half exasperated. "And if we do?"

Liam flashes a devil-may-care grin. "Then we run."

I must look horrified because he chuckles and reaches over to pat my head - only for me to slap his hand away.

"Relax," he says, unfazed. "I'm kidding. It's perfectly legal. Besides, you can't technically crash a wedding at Romeo & Julian's."

I narrow my eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Invitation is by dress code," he explains. "If you follow the theme, you're in. No questions asked. If you don't, well... you're obviously not on the list."

I glance out the window as the flashy building with its slanted Romeo & Julian's logo comes into view. The entrance is a riot of colour - guests decked out in extravagant outfits, looking like they've stepped out of a masquerade ball on acid.

I snort. "So, what? If your grandma isn't into costumes, she just doesn't get to come?"

Liam shrugs. "Pretty much."

We pull into the parking lot and circle for a bit before finally finding a spot. Liam grabs the cake boxes while I contribute absolutely nothing except moral support.

Still, something nags at me. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

He rolls his eyes, shifting the boxes in his arms as we head toward the entrance. "You worry too much. Besides, I know the groom."

I blink. "You do?"


For the first time, Liam hesitates. Then, with a casual shrug that's anything but casual, he mutters, "It's complicated."

Well, that's quite reassuring.

True to his word, the security barely spares us a glance before stepping aside and letting us in. I half expect them to stop us and ask for an actual invitation, but they don't even blink. Just a subtle once-over—probably checking if we fit the dress code—before nodding us through.

Liam shoots me a smug look that says "Told you so".

I roll my eyes but follow him inside, holding onto the edge of my dress like it might somehow help with my anxiety. Liam won't have any of that. With his free hand, he taps the back of mine—once, twice, three times—until I let go. Then, without hesitation, he laces his fingers through mine and tugs me closer.

"Don't worry so much," he murmurs, his breath warm against my cheek. "If it gets too much, just squeeze my hand, and we're out of here." 

It can't possibly be comfortable, holding two boxes in one hand and mine in the other, but I'm too stunned to argue. I nod, and he takes it as agreement, leading me forward.

The second we step through the doors, the world shifts.

The air is thick with music, laughter, and the sharp fizz of champagne.

Chandeliers draped in shimmering fabric cast a golden glow over the room, illuminating a sea of extravagant costumes. Dark velvets, elaborate masks, corsets laced tighter than I thought physically possible. It's like stepping onto the set of a gothic fairytale where every guest was obviously inspired by Corpse Bride.

I can't help but stare. Each outfit is more outrageous than the last. At the front of the room, an elderly woman chats happily, her skin painted a striking shade of blue and seems to be a sensual rendition of Mrs. Plum.

Her neckline hangs so dangerously low that I quickly look away.

Liam follows my gaze, takes one look, and snorts -loudly. The sound startles a passing waiter, nearly sending a tray of champagne flutes crashing to the floor.

I slip my hand from Liam's, grab two glasses, and mutter a quick apology. Then, without hesitation, I down the first one. The bubbly burn rushes straight to my head, quickly turning the awkwardness I feel into something distant and unimportant.

Liam tries to take the second flute from me. I drink that one too. Then, with a flick of my wrist, I deposit both glasses back onto the waiter's tray like nothing happened.

I ignore the look Liam gives me. "If you want a drink, get your own."

"I didn't even say anything," he mutters under his breath.

After we drop off the cakes at the banquet table, stacked high with gifts for the newlyweds, Liam grabs a champagne flute for himself. When I reach for another, he slaps my hand away.

"You shouldn't be drinking so much. It's just a wedding, love."

Ah.

The words settle over me, and suddenly, I understand why I feel so off-balance here.

It's a wedding. The thing I spent ten years dreaming about. The thing I spent three years planning. The thing Zane spent three years avoiding.

I'd brushed off the tightness in my chest, convinced it was just the awkwardness of being at a party we weren't technically invited to. But that's not it, is it?

It's envy. A deep, bitter green.

Liam's tone is so casual, so thoughtless, like this is just another celebration. Like it isn't something sacred. Like it isn't something I spent a decade wanting, only to watch it slip through my fingers.

I scoff, the bitterness slipping out before I can stop it.

"Yeah," I say, voice tight. "Just a wedding."

He catches the shift in my tone, but it's too late. In my head, I've already undone every bit of camaraderie we built today. Maybe I'm strong enough to use Liam to get back at Zane, but I'm not strong enough to stomach the sight of him walking down the aisle with a better version of me. Not strong enough to feel anything but jealousy toward the newlyweds.

And, as if summoned by my own resentment, they appear.

Two men approach us, hand in hand. My breath catches when I take in the one on the right—his dress is almost identical to Emily's, but the resemblance is even more uncanny than my own. A sheer veil, held up by a crown of dead flowers, cascades down his back. A sash draped across his

chest reads I'm Married! in loopy, glittering script.

I swallow the lump of rage clawing up my throat and glance at Liam, wondering if he sees what I do. But his expression is locked in something cold, his jaw so tight it looks like he might break his teeth. And it's not because of the Corpse Bride-no, his attention is fixed on the man standing beside him.

At first glance, he looks like Victor come to life. But as they close the distance between us, the illusion shatters.

He's taller, sharper. Black hair, dark brown eyes, a chiseled jaw that would make him devastatingly handsome if not for the quiet fury in his gaze. A fury that matches Liam's.

They stop right in front of us, the Corpse Bride glowing with happiness so infectious it almost makes me forget the tension crackling in the air. Almost.

Then the groom turns to Liam with a tight, pointed smile.

"Liam," he says smoothly. "What an unpleasant surprise."

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