

First Stop, Costume Shopping

LIAM

When I was a kid, my older sister taught me one important lesson – there's always a gay wedding to crash at Romeo & Julian's around 9 PM.

So here we are, heading downtown to kill some time. It's 7:53, and I have Emilia pull up their website to check tonight's dress code. The city outside is a blur of headlights and neon, flashing across the windshield as she scrolls. Whatever she sees makes her snort so loudly that I almost swerve.

"This is a horrible idea, Liam."

I grin, glancing at her out of the corner of my eye. She's shaking her head, but there's a smile pulling at her lips.

"Those are my favourite words."

"No, like - this is an actual horrible idea. Aren't we supposed to be fixing your image?"

She keeps scrolling, biting her lip between bursts of laughter, and something in my chest warms up. At least she's not in that weird, depressing mood anymore.

"Nothing screams 'serious relationship' more than attending a wedding."

"Crashing. We're crashing a wedding, Liam!"

I shrug, tapping my fingers against the steering wheel. "Is there a difference?"

She doesn't dignify that with an answer, just keeps staring at the screen like it personally offended her. "The theme is Corpse Bride-like the movie."

"Well, at least we know they have great taste."

That gets a full-on laugh out of her, the kind that makes her whole body shake. I find myself grinning before I can stop it.

"So," she says, turning to me with a spark in her eye, "where exactly are we going?"

"First, we need outfits that match the theme. If we're crashing, we're doing it right. Then, we get the makeup done - commit to the bit."

She raises an eyebrow. "It's late, though. I doubt we'll find a place still open."

I smirk. "You might not know this, but this is New York. I'd be surprised if we didn't find somewhere. Besides, I'm not an amateur - I know exactly where to go."

She watches me for a beat, eyes flickering with something unreadable. Then she shakes her head, letting out a soft laugh. "You're taking this really seriously, huh? Do you do this often?"

I hesitate, drumming my fingers against the wheel. "I used to. When we were teenagers, my sister and I would do this all the time. It was kind of our escape from everything else."

She shifts slightly in her seat, turning to face me fully. She's waiting for me to continue, so I do.

"Growing up rich has its perks, but it gets really lonely when you have to second-guess whether your friends actually like you or just want

something from you. I mean, I was fine with always paying when we went out—my parents have enough money to buy every restaurant in North America." I chuckle, but Emilia doesn't. Her frown deepens with every word I say.

"But sometimes, it went too far. It's one thing when Cam calls me his 'walking wallet' as a joke—he's made enough from endorsements this year alone to retire. But when I was younger? That was actually what I was to some people. It felt like the only reason they kept me around was for what I could give them."

She nods, serious. "And the face. That definitely helps."

I laugh. "Of course, can't forget the face."

She snorts, shaking her head, but I catch the way her eyes soften.

I pause, trying to remember where I left off, then keep going. "At the end of the day, my sister and I only had each other. We were thick as thieves. Our parents thought having a whole soccer team of kids would fix that, though."

She tilts her head, a curl slipping loose from behind her ear. I have to fight the urge to reach over and tuck it back in place. Instead, I grip the wheel a little tighter.

"How many siblings do you have?"

"Seven."

Her eyes widen. "Pardon?"

I grin. "Let's just say I grew up in The Loud House, except with two brothers."

She's still looking at me like I just confessed to being in a cult when I add, "Isn't this the kind of getting-to-know-each-other talk we're supposed to be having? Not all this deep soul-searching stuff? How many siblings do you have?"

She hesitates. "Two. Well... one now. My brother passed away when I was seventeen."

Ah. I said the wrong thing again.

She shifts in her seat, pulling the sleeves of my jacket down over her wrists. Her posture changes—stiff, closed off. I can feel her shutting down.

"I'm really sorry for your loss, Emilia."

She tries to smile, but it's so obviously forced that I almost wish she didn't bother. "It's fine, really. I've had years to get over it."

I don't believe her for a second, but I don't push.

We make a quick stop at a 24-hour costume shop in the East Village—the kind of place that smells like fabric glue and incense, with racks stuffed full of everything from Victorian gowns to alien bodysuits.

The mood shifts when Emilia spots the dresses. Her eyes practically sparkle as we sift through every rack, searching for something that screams Emily.

She holds up a dusty blue dress with a corset top and layers of tulle. "I don't know whether to be impressed or concerned that they actually have Corpse Bride-themed outfits."

"I told you—New York never disappoints." I pull out a skeleton-printed suit and hold it up. "What do you think? Too much?"

She eyes it, lips twitching. "I think you'll look ridiculous."

"That's the point."

I barely have time to react when two teenage girls walk up, phone in hand, eyes wide.

"Hey, um - sorry to bother you, but... are you Liam Calloway?"

Emilia raises an eyebrow. I glance at her with a look that says, See? Basically A-list.

I flash my best media smile, and the redhead flushes. "The one and only. You a fan?"

"I am!" she says excitedly, tugging her friend closer. "She doesn't watch hockey, but she's a Titans fan because of me. Can we take a picture?"

"Of course. What's your name?"

I can feel Emilia trying to fade into the background, but I don't let her. I grab her arm and pull her beside me, intertwining our fingers.

A spark shoots up my spine at the contact. Emilia's fingers tense for a split second before she flushes. I keep my attention on the girls, ignoring the redhead's stunned expression.

Ah. She's definitely a fan.

"I'm Tina, and she's Monica," she says.

I nod, grabbing Monica's phone to set up the shot. Since I'm the tallest, I angle it just right, throw my arm around Emilia's shoulders, and grin at the camera.

"Ready?"

We all pose, and I make sure to hold Emilia just a little closer.

After one of the girls sends me the photo and I confirm I'm fine with them posting it - hopefully, they actually do - we grab some shoes to match our costumes and head for checkout.

Fifteen minutes later, Emilia is still giggling as she scrolls through the most ridiculous wedding cakes she's ever seen (one has a full recreation of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*).

Next stop - makeup.

I take her to an all-night drag salon my sister and I used to go to. The second we step inside, her eyes go wide at the shimmering walls, rows of wigs, and the kind of energy that makes it feel like it's permanently 3 AM in Vegas.

"Liam Calloway," a deep voice croons from behind the counter.

I turn to see a towering figure in a purple sequined jumpsuit, hands on their hips. A thick curl of smoke from a cigarette drifts t

hrough the air, mixing with the scent of hairspray and something sweet - maybe vanilla.

I grin. "Raven, I need you to make us look like we walked straight out of a Tim Burton film."

Raven eyes Emilia up and down, then claps their hands together. "Oh, honey. This is going to be fun."