

the back row
by riley lashea

“She’s perfectly beautiful, don’t you think?” That’s what the woman asked me.

I wonder who she thought she was talking to. Some old friend you hadn’t seen in years, a second or third cousin, your favorite teller at the bank. I could only be one of those people, a distant acquaintance, someone of little importance, to be relegated to the back row with the caterer, the guy who did the flowers, and this woman, the one who sold you the dress.

I don’t remember how I answered. I must have said something reasonably polite and acceptable, because she smiled and looked back to the aisle where you were standing in the doorway, waiting with your hand on your dad’s arm for the maid of honor to make it to the front and the change in music.

In that tux, your dad looked even more like a Republican.

Why did I do it? Why did I fucking do this to myself? Why was I standing there like a moron, in an assigned seat in the back row, between the woman who made the pigs-in-blankets, and still smelled faintly of them, and the one who kept bringing you different gowns to try on, letting you have your own little fashion show at the fucking Bridal Boutique, feeding into this ridiculous notion of the 'perfect wedding, perfect life' scenario.

You looked around, smiling, and took a deep breath. Your eyes ran down the row, a thank-you to all of the people who’d played a part in your big day. Then your smile faltered. Guess you’d forgotten about me. Sent the invitation off and hoped it didn’t get to where it was going. Somehow managed to push from your mind the six-hour drive you made in secret to beg me to come to your wedding to show you that I wouldn’t hate you for the rest of your life.

Your smile never returned, and you started shaking when the Wedding March started to play. I couldn’t blame you. That fucking song should have been put out of its misery long ago. Your dad turned to you then, asked if you were okay. You nodded and smiled again, but it was phony. It was performance. Just like the wedding, just like the marriage was going to be.

See, I knew it then. I knew it before really. It was hardly a secret why you wanted me there. I mean, when you push someone down on the floor in her living room after making her swear to be at your wedding, when you rip into her clothes in a way that leaves them dust rags, and prove repeatedly that the hands are really the most vital sexual organs. When you whisper 'I love you' over and over, tears dripping from your cheeks and salting her lips, and don’t even realize you’re saying anything, it becomes pretty apparent that you don’t want her at your wedding to say goodbye.

You want her to save you.

You demanded that I come and rescue you. It was your way of saying that you weren’t daring, and you needed me be courageous for you and steal you away from this mess you had gotten yourself into.

But that wasn’t why I was there.

I was there to watch you walk down the aisle, to see you say ‘I do’ to a man you didn’t love and never would, to make you suffer. To make us both suffer.

I didn’t want to be your hero. I wanted you to love me. Love me enough to tell everyone in that room that you loved me, the way that you were going to lie and say that

you loved him. That's what I wanted. And you couldn't give that to me. You were too weak, you told me so yourself. You said that you were afraid.

I was afraid too. But I was afraid of the right things.

I was afraid of losing you. I was afraid of the intensity of my love for you. I was afraid of what it would have been like to never have had those feelings. Mine were the fears of one who is strong. Your fears were pathetic. You didn't deserve my saving. That's why, when your father started down the aisle and your eyes turned to me again, I looked away. Why I clenched my jaw and twisted the ring you had given me on my finger, seriously contemplating taking it off and throwing it at you.

Unlike you, I was there to say goodbye. I wasn't there to save you.

So, why I pushed past the dress lady and started up the aisle, why I didn't even let the preacher get to the part about objections, was beyond me. I surprised a hell of a lot of people in that church, I thought your mother was going apoplectic, but no one was more surprised than me.

I had come to punish, not reward. I wanted you to hurt. That's why I grabbed your arm a little too hard when I pulled you around to face me, why the gratitude and exhilaration in your expression didn't draw a smile, and why, when I put my hand on your neck and pulled you into a kiss, I pulled your hair.

You probably thought it was an accident, but I did it on purpose.

I can't help but theorize as to what kept your father from stopping us immediately. Was it something that deep down he was expecting? Was he momentarily paralyzed? Maybe just his leg was asleep. I'm sure it was just shock, but it's amusing to speculate.

It hurt like hell when I landed on the floor. That was a hard push. The old man was stronger than he looked. And I don't know who the fuck designed that church, but it was solid cement beneath that thin, crappy carpet.

It served me right for giving in. Every time I tried to save you, I ended up getting hurt. I'm a fucking martyr, and you are apparently my favorite cause.

I really should have written down what your father said to me then. It was just so incredibly cruel and scathing, I was certain I would always remember it verbatim, but it wasn't long ago at all, not even two full days, and I can't remember a word. Though, I'm sure 'you' was in there somewhere, like "You stupid dyke, stay away from my daughter." But I'm pretty sure he didn't say that.

Now, here is where I was positive that I would have to pick myself up off of the floor and stand wobbling, or else drag myself to the exit, probably receiving a kick straight to my ass from your father on the way out. That's the way it would work. I knew this, because I had wanted to save you in the past, and whenever I tried you wouldn't let me. And I was so stupid, because all I wanted you to do was love me enough to love me in the open. And that was just something that you were not brave enough to do.

So, imagine my surprise when you dropped your expensive bouquet on the floor and slid onto your knees in your extravagant white dress. That would have been a good way to hurt you and your Republican father. I should have looked up at him and said, "Sorry, Dad, she ain't no virgin." But the feel of your fingers on my chin drawing my eyes up to yours, the tone of your voice when you asked if I was hurt, I could hear the love in it, and I knew that everyone else in the room could too, whether they wanted to or not.

But then you said it for real, 'I love you,' in case anyone missed it.

As you helped me up (I didn't tell you, but standing was excruciating), I don't know what your father was saying, or your mother, or the fake groom's parents for that matter, who had all started down the aisle toward us. All I heard was 'blah, blah, blah,' and all I

could think was that you just told me you loved me in front of everyone and that my ass was going to bruise for sure.

“God dammit!” you screamed finally and everyone shut up, except for me. That's when I started laughing. Nothing else could have possibly humored me at that very moment, but blasphemy in the middle of a church with all kinds of pious people sitting around was the one thing that could.

Your face was pink from your yell and your chest was heaving beneath the beaded lace in your gown, but when you looked over at me you couldn't help laughing too. Did my laugh break the tension for you? Or did you just figure that what we had done so far couldn't be taken back and when we left the church together we may as well do it amused?

So, I was wrong before. Your mother didn't go apoplectic, not then. It wasn't until this moment that she went into a real fit, the moment you grabbed my hand and started to abscond with me, a ten thousand dollar wedding dress, and all of your parents' hopes and demands.

I wish I could have seen their faces, the traumatized expressions, but I had to settle for the sounds of disbelief that serenaded our exit. My eyes were on the door, where I knew that you would be mine forever as soon as we passed the threshold, and I knew that was what you wanted too, because you had just told everyone.

I saved you. You loved me. We both got what we needed. All we had to do was walk away.

So why did I stop, that's what you asked right? It's kind of hard to concentrate with your fingers doing that...

One more time, what is it again? Why did I pause to whisper to a stranger in the midst of our getaway?

Well –

“She's perfectly beautiful, don't you think?” That's what the woman asked me.

She was truly disturbed when I leaned down too, but I think it was more the dirt on the white satin than anything. She would probably be talking about it for weeks with her therapist.

“Not perfect,” I answered her. “Flawed, but, yeah... beautiful.”