#

Lies

Behind me the sun is starting to dip down to the horizon. It will be dark soon. Like all of the others, the wedding I'm about to crash is in full swing, I hear the music clear out here in the parking lot. Almost sounding ominous. A wash of salmon pink light bathes the sky, but I don’t notice it’s beauty.

I’ve never been so terrified in my life. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. It shouldn’t be happening now. None of this should be real. Getting out of my car, I hesitate, closing my eyes to the constant pain spiking though my head, I lean heavily on the door for another moment to steady my trembling legs.

“Just go!” I mumble, urging myself to figure out what is going on before it really is too late.

The headache, that I’ve had for a week now, intensifies with every step I take toward the reception center. I can hear not only the music from inside, now I hear the laughter, and for the barest second I remember the excitement I used to feel being a wedding crasher. Smoothing my skirt, I take a deep breath to settle the vulture sized butterflies in my stomach.

Wracked with guilt, I am here again, crashing another wedding. But it's not for fun, not this time. I’m afraid that my time is running out and I need answers, fast. As much as I hate being here, I had to come, this might be the only place where I can find out why this is happening to me.

The usher looks at me as I enter the building. My eyes look up,up,up. He seems taller than I remember and for the first time, I realize, so alarmingly skinny. Unnerved, I shudder. We’ve seen each other before and, as he stares me down I expect him to demand that I leave. We both know that I have been lying to him.

Instead of anger or annoyance in his eyes, something else flickers briefly. Do I see pity, remorse? No! Though he disguises it well, there is something absolutely heinous hiding there. He has been lying to me too. He blinks and a blank look is now in place. Hiding what? I don’t know but he’s giving me the creeps.

Involuntarily I take a step back, still staring at him until he finally haughtily looks away. My shoulders slump in relief and I turn to look around hoping to find what I am seeking.

I leave the somber, almost cadaverous, usher behind. He does nothing to stop me, not this time.

My feet take me deeper into the room. Absently, I observe how amazing the reception hall is decorated. This is another creative bride, I hope she is happy with how things turned out. I’m suddenly saddened by the idea, I know it doesn’t matter, and I wonder why I would even notice any of this… now.

Shaking the gloomy thoughts from my head, my eyes scour the room. There is only thing I want to see. And there it is.

The obligatory photo booth is practically hidden behind a forest of trees glittering in the corner. I almost smile, apparently, this was the brides way of making her groom happy by letting him choose something for their big day. My amusement immediately fades, replaced with deepening shades of horror . She has no idea what she has done.

Another conversation joins the agonizing pain pounding in my head. “Get over there,” I tell myself. “We need to know.” It’s getting worse, I need to hurry. A quick glance back at the usher confirms my fear. He knows. Now, from his perch at the entryway, he is almost smiling at me and I cringe.

My eyes break free from his glare as I whip my head around, antagonizing my already splitting headache. He is the embodiment of evil and a huge knot in my stomach tightens at that revelation. Aghast, bile fills my throat and I’m finding it hard to breath.

Suddenly grim thoughts circle around unbidden in my mind. How did I never notice how skeletal his features are, how foreboding his black lifeless eyes always seemed to be. And perhaps most unnerving of all, how could he have been the usher at every single wedding we crashed this summer?

Would it have made any difference if I had noticed? For me or Tess or Rob or Becca or Heather and how many other countless wedding crashers? Oh, why didn’t I see it before? Another dark wave of depression hits me, and I sway from the force, a desperate sob escaping my lips.

I shake my head, and wipe tears from my eyes, it doesn’t matter now. Finding this answer to a question I hadn’t even asked, never even considered, leaves me horrorstruck. Dread fills me but I can’t stop now. I make a beeline for the sinister box.

As I get closer, I am shocked at what I see and the conversation changes in my painwracked mind. Unlike the bright shiny box that beckoned us before, it now appears to be ancient. Grimy and battered. I’m shocked. This horrible booth never looked like this before. No longer happy and innocent, instead it's grim and dark, and menacing.

And yet, still it lures everyone into the sepulchral opening.

Again, panic nearly paralyzes me. I stand there watching as a crowd of people stand around, they can’t see it for what it is.. No, they are willingly waiting for their turns, laughing and trying out the props they will use in their pictures.

I shudder to see them wearing the big Piccinchio nose that Tess used because I have come to believe that it was cursed… it was cursed and it made her suffocate. And so was the clown hat with the bald head cap that Rob put on. Cursed. It made all of his hair fall out. Or the oversized cat eye glasses that ruined Becca and made her go blind.

I’m appalled, overwhelmed at the sight. And for a very long moment I am scared stiff , shivering as the frozen fingers of fear slither up my spine.

Should I scream at them to leave it all alone? To run away from it as fast as they can? Would they listen to me? Instantly I decide that I have to try.

“Stop!” My attempt to warn them is nothing but a strangled croak that results in an embarrassing coughing fit. Wheezing and sputtering, I can’t breath and panic tightens its grip on me. What is happening? “No!” I try again but I don’t have my voice anymore. This time I choke on the breath I tried to suck into my lungs and now everyone is just staring at me while I hack and cough and try to get everything under control.

I’m now hunched over with the effort but I hold up my hand to indicate that I’ll be alright. Another lie and I know it, all too well. Eyes around me focus on my hand. My gasp joins the others when I look too.

A new wave of shock overcomes me… my hand is gray. And my arm and... my hands fly to my face. I can’t see myself but I know that I must look like the picture at the bottom of that menacing little strip of photos that slid out of the horrible machine several weddings ago.

At the time the black and white photo was comical, unexpected. But now I know... it was a morbid omen. Only a few photos had come out in b&w, in fact most of the picture were normal, in perfect color. But I distinctly remember how Tess, Rob, Becca, Heather and I all laughed about how funny it was that the machine must have run out of color ink for our last shot. I’m sick with fear. I know I’m next to go.

My face, like my hands, feels cold. The pain in my head sharpens and i wonder if that means that there are only a few minutes left for me now. Fleetingly I wonder if this is how the others felt... at the end. I straighten up as best I can and walk toward the booth.

The pounding in my head nearly stops me, but I push forward with all the strength I can muster.. I’m losing the ability to control my muscles now and all I can do is lurch forward scattering the paraphanalia all over the floor as I collapse onto the table. That's the best thing I can think of... to try and save them, since I can’t explain to them how everything is cursed. How Tess died of suffocation after wearing Pinocchio's nose or how Rob died of infections caused by having no hair, anywhere on his body, after the clown head.

My head is splitting, the pain making me nauseous…

I feel like I am fading fast. A glimpse at my hand confirms my fears. Even the gray seems to have become almost transparent. I’m horrified at what I see. Still I came here for a reason and I try to corral the thoughts spinning around inside of my head.

Suddenly, six people pour out of the heinous booth, I turn to look at them. They are laughing. Teasing each other. Still wearing the ridiculous props, the dangerous props. I helplessly watch as they all stand around, anticipating the strip of photos that will emerge. I look at the girl with the blade of a knife seemingly sticking through her head. She is laughing, just laughing. Laughing! They don’t know, how could they? How could we?

“Having fun now?” I hear one of the girls asking her friend. The one with the knife.

Chuckling now the girl answers. “Yeah, this is great! I’m glad you talked me into this, I’ve never been a wedding crasher before!” she says.

Suddenly I have one of the answers I came here to find. And no, it's not what I had imagined. There’s no curse on the props we used. I understand that now. And I realize that I did this to myself.

My heart sinks, and I know before the pictures pop out that there will be one in black and white. Strength leaves my legs and I crumple to the floor again.

The laughing stops for a moment, the photos are done. The sharp pain slices through my head again, with finality. Their voices start to fade. Nothing I can do now. “Look at that last shot!” I hear someone say.

The curse continues, I changed nothing by coming here. The usher’s shoes are in my vision now, and though I cannot hear him, his words come into my head. “Are you with the bride or the groom?”

One last time the fateful photo pops into my mind. I was laughing, knife sticking out of my head. We were all laughing. None of us are laughing anymore.

The others will find out what happens when you lie but now, at least for me, everything is black.