

His First and Only: A Love Story for Halloween

by Jim Harrington

Bryce stood on the sidewalk, wearing a clown mask, his hands in his pockets, and studied her as she dropped candy into the plastic pumpkins and white pillow cases and brown paper bags. She smiled at him and waved, thinking he was the father. He waved back, even though he had no idea who the brats were standing on her porch. It was the woman, Mary Lou Compton, that he cared about. They would've been happily married by now if Bryce hadn't killed his Uncle Ned.

It was after Bryce took Mary Lou home from a date that he walked in on Uncle Ned slapping his sister, Bryce's mother. Bryce grabbed an iron from the fireplace and forced Uncle Ned into a corner. "Here's some of your own medicine, you bastard," Bryce yelled. He continued to swing away until his uncle stopped fighting back.

But that wasn't the memory Bryce needed in his head tonight. He wanted to focus on Mary Lou and what they meant to each other. He'd often thought about their life as husband and wife, with lots of little kids running around the backyard playing with the dog--a Rottweiler named Gus.

He wrote her twice from prison. She didn't respond. He was disappointed but not surprised--nor worried. He knew he could win her back. It wasn't until yesterday when he returned home after twenty-one years in prison and a two day bus ride, that he learned she'd married Peter Gorshen and had two kids. He didn't recognize the name Gorshen and pictured them with a couple of scrawny girls who didn't know how to throw a ball and some yappy little dog that wasn't worth a damn.

He followed the costumed kids to the next house, but continued to watch Mary Lou hand out packages of M&Ms to a new group. Her

smile was the same one he remembered, and she still liked to wear dresses, even on a chilly October evening. The last time he saw her in a dress was the night they made out in his mom's Chrysler New Yorker, the night he decided he would ask her to marry him. The night he killed Uncle Ned. He glanced at her left ankle. He couldn't see the tattoo clearly from this distance, but he knew it was a miniature dragon that matched his. He took that as a sign she still loved him.

With no more trick or treaters in sight, Mary Lou went inside and closed the door. Bryce moved on with his group so as not to draw unwanted attention. He'd come back later after all the children were home and pay Mary Lou a visit.

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An hour later, he rang Mary Lou's doorbell, anxious to see the look on her face when he revealed himself.

"Trick or treat," he said when she opened the door.

The smile turned to a chuckle. "Aren't you a little old to be trick or treating?"

"Maybe," he said, "but I'm not here for the candy." He removed the mask.

"Bryce?" she said. "Bryce Mullens? What are you doing here?"

Bryce felt his hands get sweaty. He stared into those familiar hazel eyes and felt the same as he had on the night he picked her up in his mom's car. The night she professed her love for him.

"I got out of jail a few days ago and thought I'd stop by and see how you're doin'." His studied his fingers, as they crumbled the mask. "I . . . I missed you."

Mary Lou stood with one hand on the door. Her other hand fingered the material of her dress.

"Maybe I should have called first," he said.

Mary Lou remained silent.

Bryce cocked his head and peeked into the house. "Mind if I come in?"

"That probably wouldn't be a good idea," she said. "My husband will be home anytime now, and he might not like you being here."

She stepped behind the door and started to close it. "Maybe you could come back another time."

"But I want to talk now." Bryce pushed the door open and grabbed her arm. The roots of a headache began to take hold. They'd started during the trial when his so-called friends and neighbors, even his mother, told lies about him.

Mary Lou tried to pull away, her eyes wide. He maintained his grip.

"Please, Bryce."

He released her arm and exhaled, like the prison doctor suggested he do when the pain started. "I couldn't hurt you," he said. "Don't you know that?"

She rubbed her arm and stepped back.

"I know it's been a while." He pointed to the living room. "Can we sit?"

She looked over his shoulder into the darkness. Seeing no one, she walked into the room and sat on a chair near the fireplace. A book lay on the adjacent end table. A pair of men's reading glasses sat perched on top of the tan cover. Bryce sat on the edge of the sofa.

"You've got a nice place here."

"Bryce," she said, her fingers interlaced in her lap. "It's been a long time, and I never said I'd wait for you, or anything like that."

He noticed her glance at the family picture hanging over the mantle.

"It wasn't like we were committed to each other," she continued.

"But you said you loved me," Bryce said, a puzzled look on his face.

"We were kids." She turned toward him. "You were the first guy who paid attention to me. I was a fifteen-year-old girl who didn't know what love was."

Bryce clutched the mask harder and twisted the plastic into a grotesque shape. "Is that why you never responded to my letters?"

"Letters?"

"I sent you two."

She paused. "My parents must have thrown them out."

"I see you still have the tattoo."

"They're hard to get rid of."

"Or maybe you still have feelings for me." Bryce smiled.

"No." She glared at Bryce. "I don't. How many times do I have to say it?"

"But you could--"

"Bryce, I'm happily married. I have no intention of leaving my husband and children."

"Lots of people get divorces. I bet if we spend some time together--"

"No." She stood and walked to the fireplace, her back to Bryce. "You should leave now."

The pain in his head increased, and he rubbed his temples. He couldn't believe this was happening. It wasn't right. She had to still love him. It was what had kept him sane. He rubbed harder, but it didn't help.

"I suppose you're married to some rich banker, or something."

"Bryce. Please listen." She took a deep breath. "You went to prison, which I never thought was right, and I moved on with my life. Lots of kids date in high school and don't end up together. That was our fate too." She nodded toward the front door. "It's time for you to go."

The pain felt like it did the day he attacked his new cellmate after the man tried to rape Bryce, a beating that earned him added time in that hell hole of a prison. He knew the violence was wrong, but he couldn't help himself. It was the only way to lessen the throbbing. Unable to constrain himself, Bryce lunged toward Mary Lou.

Mary Lou screamed.

Bryce grasped her shoulders, twisted her around, and slapped her. Mary Lou's head struck the mantle. Her legs buckled, and she fell to the floor.

"I'm sorry, Mary Lou," Bryce said, leaning down. "I'm so sorry."

He wiped a strand of hair from her face. A tear rolled down his cheek. "I just wanted. . . ." He cradled her head in the crook of his arm and gently rocked and felt the pain subside.

"I need you, Mary Lou." He looked at the family picture. "Maybe more than them."

Mary Lou groaned and stopped breathing.

Bryce kissed her forehead and lowered her to the floor. He stared again at the family portrait hanging over the fireplace and tried to imagine himself in it. When he couldn't, he rose and walked to the table near the doorway where the phone waited. He dialed 911 and explained the situation. The operator instructed him to wait until the ambulance arrived. He said he would. He was going back to prison, this time for becoming Uncle Ned.

