

Hitched

For over thirty years, The Intermission has served as a refuge for travelers: weary vacationers, hungry night owls, and lonely truckers alike. However, no one loved the Intermission like Mac Bradkey did. After driving his usual route, hauling lumber between distribution centers, Mac would always stop in for a bite. His favorite seat was at the counter, catching up with the employees and joking with fellow patrons. He did this every night for ten years, until he met *her*.

One night, after finishing his Italian beef and closing his tab, Mac said goodbye to his friends, and walked out the door. As he left, the lights of the diner and conjoined gas station flickered, triggering concerned mumbling from inside.

“Damn storm. Haven’t had a power surge like that in a while,” the waiter commented.

Thinking nothing of it, Mac filled up his tank, hopped into the cab of his truck, and set course for his next destination. As the rain beat down on his windshield, Mac squinted, trying to get a clearer view. As if out of nowhere, a pale figure emerged from the nearby cornfield, a bolt of lightning illuminating her silhouette. Mac stopped as quickly as he could, trying not to hydroplane. He looked out his window to see a girl in a white dress staring back at him. He motioned for her to join him. She jumped up and opened the door, smiling sheepishly at him.

“Miss, you okay?” Mac asked as she slammed the door shut.

The girl was drenched, shivering from the downpour. Mac reached behind his seat, pulling out a blanket and draping it over her shoulders.

“Y-yeah, just a little wet”, she smirked.

“What were ya doin’ out there all alone?”

She sighed as she used the blanket to scrunch her hair dry.

“Oh, you know, just the classic ‘girl pisses off her fiancé, fiancé abandons her in the middle of nowhere’...”

“Oh, shit. He just...left ya out there?”

“Yeah, it’s whatever. He does this kinda thing all the time. I would’ve been fine if it wasn’t for this damn cyclone.”

“Yeah, I guess ya chose the wrong time to piss him off, huh?” Mac laughed before realizing his mistake. “Oh my god, no. I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to-”

After looking at him in disbelief, the girl gave him the sweetest smile he’d ever seen, teeth so white they were practically glowing..

“Don’t worry, that really *is* just my luck,” she giggled.

A moment later, their laughter faded into an uncomfortable stillness.

“Oh, I’m Mac, by the way.” He reached his left hand across his body.

“Lilly,” she responded, returning the handshake.

“That’s a really pretty name, it suits ya,” he glanced over, noticing her blush. She noticed him too, immediately straightening up.

“Thanks. Your name’s...kinda on the nose, isn’t it?”

“What d’ya mean?”

She stared at him, before motioning all around them, “You’re a *truck* driver named *Mac*...”

“Oh, yeah, guess you’re right.”

There was a moment of silence between the two of them, only interrupted by the hammering of the rain and soft radio static.

“So, uh, where exactly am I takin’ ya?”

“Oh, uh, wherever you want, I guess.”

Mac looked over at her, puzzled, “What? No, where d’ya live?”

Lilly shrugged, watching as the road slightly flooded before draining into the ditches.

“I’m more of a ‘nomad’, lately. We got evicted a while back, so I kinda just float around these days.”

“Oh, okay.” he nodded awkwardly, “but what ‘bout money?”

“I’m a traveling nurse. I’m on leave right now, for my wedding, funnily enough.”

“Oh, uh, wow.”

“Yeah...but, um, what about you?”

“Huh?”

“Where’d you come from?”

“Just a small midwestern town. Nothin’ too special ‘bout it. Just a lotta cows and corn.”

“Did you live alone?”

“Nope, I’ve got a big family, so it’s pretty hard to be alone back there,” he laughed.

“How big are we talking?”

“I’ve got six or seven aunts and uncles on both sides of my family, a helluva lot more cousins. My mom just had me and my twin sister, but she died when we were real young; so we never got to grow up together.”

Lilly gasped, “Oh my god, I’m so sorry.”

Mac waved it off, “It’s all good. Like I said, a lotta cousins. I never really missed out on bein’ a brother. Don’t get me wrong, I miss her all the time, but I can’t do anythin’ to bring her back.” Mac could feel tears welling up in his eyes, but was determined to keep himself collected, “So, I just keep on keepin’ on, and tryin’ to make her proud, until I see her again.”

Lilly smiled at him, putting her hand over his on the gear shift, “Well, I bet Maddie’s smiling down on you right now.”

Mac froze. His somberness instantly turned to panicked confusion.

“What was that?”

“I just meant your sister’s probably incredibly proud of you. You seem like an amazing guy.” Her grip tightened as she turned towards her window, gazing into the darkness.

“Oh, right...,” he muttered.

Mac took a shaky breath as he continued driving, wondering how this stranger knew Maddie’s name.

“Hey, Lilly. I think I’m gonna pull off at the next truck stop, I gotta fuel up.”

“Yeah, of course.”

The rest of the ride was silent, aside from the pounding heartbeat in Mac’s ears and the alarm bells ringing in his head. After about twenty minutes of tension, they pulled up to a small truck stop.

“I’m gonna go pee real quick,” she said, finally releasing his hand from her grasp.

“Sounds good,” Mac agreed, timidly.

They both jumped down from the cab; Mac watched as she made her way over to the glass doors, swinging them open and vanishing into the building. He hurried back into his truck and pulled away from the gas station as quickly as he could. After driving for about forty-five minutes, Mac finally let out a breath he wasn’t aware he was holding. He constantly looked in his rearview until he was back on the interstate. Hours passed before he felt a real sense of relief.

Suddenly, everything went black. Mac screamed, echoes reverberating around him. He felt weightless, unable to tell if he was floating upwards or downwards. Out of the darkness came a voice as familiar as it was blood-curdling.

“It’s time, Malcolm...”

As quickly as he was taken away, Mac snapped back to reality. His knuckles were gripping the steering wheel, turning white from the force. His heart was racing and his breath was almost non-existent.

“What the fuck...” he whispered to himself.

Then, he felt the wind hit his neck. He loosened his grip and reached to roll up his window. That’s when he realized the air he felt wasn’t from outside. Confused, Mac attempted to check the passenger side. Before he could turn his head, he felt something slam into the side of his face, banging his head into his window and losing consciousness.

The next thing Mac saw was the bright fluorescent lights of an emergency room hallway rushing by overhead. He was surrounded by muffled yells, black spots clouding his vision. As the hospital staff wheeled him into an operating room, they began prepping him for surgery. Still fading in and out, Mac could tell there was someone looking at him upside down.

“Okay, Malcom, here we go,” the figure announced as they put a mask over Mac’s nose and mouth. Just then, Mac began to hear screaming, accompanied by ripping and banging and slashing. He struggled to speak, but couldn't let the words out. Then, he felt something wet hit him. Slowly, Mac saw a face rise up to look down on him. He couldn’t see much, beside the twisted smile that had been sitting in his passenger seat earlier that night. This time, however, those pearly white teeth were crimson-stained. Everything went black again, and Mac heard the familiar voice one last time.

“It’s time, Malcolm. It’s time to see Maddie...”