

BEAUTIFUL
CONFUSION

A PRIDE AND HONOR NOVELLA

**EMBER-RAINE
WINTERS**



Beautiful Confusion

Ember-Raine Winters

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A note to my Amazing Readers.

This is a book of flash fiction along with a few bonus scenes I did not post on my website. Thank you to all of you amazing people for subscribing to my newsletter! Read to the end for a sneak peek into book 2 of the Pride and Honor Series! Told from Marcy's POV!

Happy reading! Enjoy!

PART ONE

The oppressive heat was exhausting. The way the sun shone down on the desert sand blinded Mac as he walked out of the command post. They were getting ready to do a run. Mac wasn't excited about it. Especially the way Twitch kept jumping at every noise.

"You gonna be ok, brother?" Mac asked as he eyed his cousin warily.

"Keep your eyes open. I have a bad feeling about this one," he replied looking back and forth.

"You worry too much," Andy said as he walked out the door.

"I keep your ass safe with my worrying mind," Twitch reminded him.

"Yeah, yeah," he laughed.

"How about you all stop acting like a bunch of girls and load up," Marcy laughed maniacally as she bounced out of the room and sidled up to Mac.

"Damn, that's cold, Pix!" Andy laughed.

Marcy lunged at him. She hated being called that. Mac chuckled to himself. She was lucky that Andy was a close friend. Any other man on that base would have taken that as a challenge. Female or not, she might be in some trouble.

Mac grabbed her around the waist and hauled her over his shoulder. Marcy shrieked and thrashed in an attempt to get away.

“Babe! Babe! You gotta calm down,” Mac laughed.

“Tim! Put me down right now!” She yelled.

Mac smacked her on the ass and looked to Griffin.

“Which Humvee is she in?”

“She’s with Andy’s team,” he replied with a look of confusion.

“Crap!” Mac swore and carried her over to the vehicle. “Andy is driving. He has to keep his eyes on the road. Don’t mess with him.”

“Yes, Dad,” she smirked.

Mac groaned. He knew that smirk. She wasn't one to let things go that easily. He shook his head in defeat and yelled for Twitch.

“Tell her what you just told me,” he ordered, angry.

“Don't do anything stupid, Pix. I have a bad feeling,” Twitch said softly.

Her eyes widened in shock and she nodded. Everyone knew not to mess with Twitch and his gut. She kissed Mac on the cheek and got into the back of the vehicle.

Love you, Big Mac,” She smirked.

Love you, Pix,” He replied. “See you in a while.”

If Mac had only known how fast that would be, he never would have let her get in that Humvee.

About twenty miles from base the truck rocked and the loud roar that filled his head nearly took him to his knees. He watched in horror as the other vehicle flipped in the air and landed on its top.

Mac and Twitch were the first to race from the truck. Twitch ran to the front of the vehicle as Mac ran to the far side and pried open the door. The smell of

sulfur and gun powder nearly made him gag. It was mixed with metallic scent of blood and Mac searched the wreckage for any survivors.

He found her curled in a ball with a piece of shrapnel sticking out of her arm. She was crying like he had never heard before. He scooped her up as gently as possible. He didn't want to hurt her but the smell of gasoline was tickling his nostrils. He had no idea how long it would be before the truck blew but he knew that it wasn't a matter of if it blew, it was a matter of when.

Marcy moaned as he waded through the truck and as soon as he cleared the door he heard Griffin scream. A moment later they were airborne. The last thing that registered in his brain was to hold onto Marcy. Then, everything went black.

“Hey, Pix,” Andy snickered and Marcy growled shifting in her seat.

“What? You're supposed to be watching where you are going, not harassing me, you overgrown child.”

The only response was a chorus of laughs. She glared at the men in her unit. She may be small but she

had taken each and every one of them on at one point or another.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry. But the nickname fits so perfectly! I mean, I could fit your ass in my pocket!” he laughed again turning in his seat to wink at her.

“You heard Twitch, Andy! Keep your eyes open,’ she yelled, frustrated.

“Twitch and his gut don’t scare me,” he made an attempt to sound tough and turned back around.

Marcy blew out a breath, relieved that he finally listened. “Remember that time he saved your hide from sniper fire? He was going on all day about a bad feeling he was having.” She shot the men a smug look.

Twitch and his gut had saved them all a time or two. She knew Andy just liked to look tough. He had a baby on the way though, so he definitely shouldn’t be taking any chances.

Damn it!” Andy yelled as a herd of sheep decided to cross right in front of the vehicle. He slammed on the breaks and waited for the sheep to cross.

The IED must not have hit the Humvee directly but shrapnel went everywhere and the truck went

airborne with the force of the explosion. The smell of Sulphur made Marcy gag and she covered her head with her arms instinctively.

A white hot pain shot through her arm a second before everything stilled.

Opening her eyes, two things became immediately clear. The truck was upside-down and she didn't want to think about what the eerie silence must mean.

Her safety belt was holding her in her seat, but from that vantage point she could see everything with a crystal-like clarity. Rocky was missing two fingers on his left hand and a long gash across his throat.

His eyes were bugging out and she realized then why everything was silent. The explosion had damaged her ear drums.

She released her belt and slammed into the ground. A second later she was being lifted into the strong arms of the love of her life. She sighed in relief just before everything went black.

“I hate funerals,” Mac grumbled as he yanked on the collar of his dress uniform.

Marcy looked at him disapprovingly as they walked through the cemetery on their way to Andy’s grave side service. He knew she was cutting him some slack by not elbowing him and telling him to behave. They were participating in the Military funeral service for his good friend. It hit them all hard when that IED took out his humvee in Iraq.

He looked over at his cousin. No one was hit harder by Andy’s death than Twitch. He had a rough life and those few that Twitch decided were family were the lucky ones. He made it his number one goal to protect them. To him, Andy’s death was his failure. The somber look on his face said it all. Mac could see the guilt and pain in his features. He reached over and squeezed his shoulder in an attempt to comfort him.

It was a weak gesture. He knew that more than anyone. How many times at his parents’ funeral did men come and clap him on the shoulder in an attempt to show condolences? Did any of it really make him feel any better? No. It didn’t. It was a gesture meant only to make

them feel better. To console the young boy who became an orphan in a second. None of it was real. The weak gesture just made it worse for him now.

He felt useless for the first time in a long time. He couldn't help Twitch. He couldn't ease the pain of the man who went out of his way to protect them all. He looked down at his biceps remembering the tattoo Twitch had gotten the night before. "I am my brother's keeper" is what it said and Mac had wondered briefly who would be his keeper. Who would keep his brother safe if he was always busy watching everyone else's backs? He vowed then to no one else but himself and God that he would do whatever it took to keep Twitch safe.

They walked across the grass. Headstones were lined in neat rows some had flowers on them some didn't. It was a beautiful spring day and the sun was shining bright. It almost seemed wrong for the birds to be chirping and happy on such a sad day. The large canopy held the bright sun off the few mourners that were already sitting in front of the casket that was draped in the red, white and blue American Flag.

Twitch stumbled but caught himself. Mac knew what was going on. It didn't seem real until he saw the casket sitting there with a picture of his friend in his fatigues. His blue eyes were laughing as he sat stone faced.

He looked to the front row and saw Casey sitting alone. Her long blonde hair was pulled up in a bun on the top of her head and she was wearing dark sunglasses over her red puffy eyes. His heart cracked open when he saw her. She was sniffing to herself and Mac could just imagine the tiny baby in her stomach growing. She wasn't showing yet but he remembered how excited Andy had been when he got her letter and the copy of the ultrasound picture. Now that tiny little life would never know his or her dad.

He would never be able to take them to the park or teach them to ride a bike. Mac knew all about parents missing out on their kids' lives. He promised that no matter how things turned out between him and Marcy if they had a kid he would be there for them. His kids would always know their daddy loved them.

“This sucks,” Twitch said, his voice raw with emotion.

Mac cleared his throat, nodding his agreement. He felt Marcy’s small hand on his back and relaxed marginally.

“I’m so sorry, Casey,” he said choked up.

She looked up as if in a daze and smiled sadly at them.

“Mac, really? It’s not your fault. He loved you guys like brothers,” she replied, sad.

“We love him too. If you ever need anything don’t hesitate to ask,” Griffin said sadly.

Mac looked over at him. He hadn’t even heard him walk up. He had dark circles under his eyes. It looked as if he hadn’t been sleeping much. Mac knew nobody got much sleep these days. The things they had seen fighting a fruitless war had haunted each and every one of them.

Twitch choked on a sob and walked away. Poor Casey looked like she wanted to follow him. To try to comfort him in her darkest hour. He could see the tear tracks down her cheeks.

“Don't Casey, I'll go talk to him,” Griffin said and gave her arm a squeeze.

He walked over to Twitch and put a hand on his shoulder. Mac looked down at Marcy standing next to him looking thoughtful.

“Casey, this is Marcy, my girlfriend,” he introduced.

“Hi Marcy,” Casey said with little enthusiasm. “Andy used to talk about you all the time.”

“Hi, it's nice to finally meet you,” she replied, distracted.

He didn't know what was up with Marcy. She had been different since they got back. She had been the only survivor to get out of the humvee that day. Mac had pulled her out just seconds before the thing exploded and knocked Twitch unconscious. If she had moved just an inch to the left, she'd be dead right now. If the shrapnel that pierced her arm had been an inch to the right, she would be an amputee.

She was given medical leave and decided not to re-enlist so she was home much sooner than the rest of them. He was trying to be supportive but he could feel

her pulling away. He didn't want that. He had attempted to get her to talk to a counselor to no avail. She was strong willed and wouldn't do anything until she was ready.

The minister walked up and the guys all stood at attention. Mac patted Casey's arm and moved to the group of soldiers. All his brothers, who had been there the day Andy died.

The service was beautiful. The minister told stories about Andy that made them laugh through their collective tears. He even shed a tear for his friend. The moment he and Twitch moved forward to fold the flag was one of the hardest in his adult life. He was unable to contain the waves of emotion as he folded the flag and tucked the end.

He handed the flag to Twitch who took it to the front row and handed it over to a sobbing Casey. He whispered something to her and kissed her cheek before straightening and joining them for the twenty-one gun salute.

The sounds of the shots being fired were like a balm on his skin. They were comforting. He knew they

were sending their brother off properly and he couldn't be any more pleased that he was able to be a part of it.

PART TWO

She barreled into the room. Her face was a mask of fury. Slamming the door, she couldn't even look at his too perfect face. She wanted to scream. She wanted to run. She wanted to punch him in the face.

The worst part was he looked completely bewildered as to why she was fuming. That just made her even madder.

He lied!

He said he had lunch with his aunt that day. He said he was busy at the nursing home.

Little did she know, he was out to lunch with another woman. A tall blond with a perfect body. *I shouldn't be surprised*, she thought to herself. All men have a fascination for tall leggy blonds. She thought he loved her. She thought they would be together forever. She was wrong.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?” she shrieked.

“What?” he asked completely dumbfounded.

“Where were you today?” she screamed in his face.

It was more like his chest. She was short, maybe five foot two. Tim was freakishly tall. He was broad with big bulging muscles and sinfully dark brown eyes. She mentally slapped herself and glared at him.

He paled at the question and she glared at him again. That hesitation was all she needed to know. She could never be with him again. She was hiding her heart break behind her anger. She couldn't let him see the complete and utter devastation that he caused. Her heart was shattered and she didn't know if it would or could ever be repaired.

“Marcy? Babe? What are you talking about?” he asked, confused.

“UGH!” she growled and turned to leave.

“Are you leaving?” he asked getting angry.

“Maybe,” she replied.

“Are you coming back?” he asked quietly, almost pathetically.

“Maybe not,” she answered as she closed the door behind her.

“Wait Marcy!” He bellowed as he tore from the room.

He hadn't expected to see her there. He hadn't expected the fiery little pixie to be curled in a ball on the floor, sobbing. He had no idea what was going on. What she thought she saw that day.

Andy's pregnant wife had walked up to him while his Aunt was in the restroom that day at the Bistro to thank him for everything he and the guys had done for her after Andy's death. She seemed good. Well, as good as can be expected so soon after her husband died needlessly. A car bomb in Iraq. His death like many others still haunted Tim's dreams. He almost lost his cousin and Marcy that day too.

He sat down against the wall next to Marcy and hung his arms over his knees. He sighed and attempted to wrap his arm around her. She stiffened and turned her head slowly. It was so slow he knew then the anger had returned. He dropped his arm and looked at her, sad.

“Marcy,” he sighed and put his head in his hands.

“Don’t! I don’t want to hear any of your lies!”

She screeched.

He looked at her dumbfounded. *She isn’t going to let me explain!* He started to get angry. His blood began to boil and he had to stop and take a deep breath before he blew. He was quickly matching the rage in her eyes.

“Why?” she asked brokenly. “Why did you do it?”

“I didn’t do anything!” He bellowed.

She flinched and he instantly regretted his actions. He never wanted to make her scared. He never wanted to upset her. He would never, ever cheat on her. He should have known something like this was coming.

They had both been different since they got out of the army. She was more neurotic and threw herself into her degree. She was distant and paranoid at the best of times. She was volatile and violent at the worst of times.

“I don’t want to fight with you,” he sighed. “Not like this.”

“You should have thought about that before you cheated on me!” she screeched.

“I didn’t! Would you let me explain?” He bellowed.

She got up quickly and made a dash for the elevator. He blew out a strangled breath and went after her. He couldn’t believe it was going down like this. After everything they had been through together, she was really doing this.

“Leave me alone Mac,” She said and he sighed. “I can’t talk to you right now. I can barely look at you!”

“Don’t leave me Marcy! Not like this! Please, Baby just hear me out!” He bellowed as the elevator doors opened and she walked inside.

The tears were streaming down her face. Her bright blue eyes were shining. Her milky white skin was blotchy from crying and he hated himself for being the cause of her tears.

“Good-bye Tim,’ she said on a strangled breath as the doors closed and took his heart with it.

“Good-bye, Marcy.”

The second the elevator doors opened she ran. She knew Tim would come after her. She didn't have the strength to confront him again. The tortured look in his eyes when he said good-bye was almost enough to send her running back into his arms.

It made her even angrier. How could he look at her and regard her with such desperation? How could he look at her with such love and devotion after what he had done? He looked destroyed when she left. Was she wrong? Was the whole encounter nothing more than a misunderstanding?

She bolted through the glass doors that led out of Tim's apartment building and stopped dead when she bulldozed into someone walking down the street. The woman had long blonde hair and was at least six inches taller than her five foot two inch frame. The woman put her arms out to steady Marcy. Her mouth went dry and her lungs refused to fill with air as recognition dawned on her.

She pulled herself from the woman's grasp and shot her a scathing glare.

"Are you ok?" she asked in her sweetly melodic voice.

"Fine, I'm fine," Marcy replied and turned to leave.

"Wait! Do I know you?" she asked a moment later.

"Nope," Marcy replied and attempted to flee.

Her heart was breaking all over again. What was she doing here? He was really tortured about their break-up if this woman was already coming to his apartment so soon after she left him. Her mind whirled and she attempted to leave once again. The woman grabbed her arm.

"It's Marsha, right?" she asked. "Or Paisley? No, that's not it."

That took Marcy by surprise and it made her even angrier. He told this woman about her. She obviously didn't care to listen.

"No, I don't know you. I'm sorry, I have to go," She replied and turned to leave again.

She looked pointedly at the woman's hand still wrapped around her arm. She looked up and saw the

elevator doors open and Tim walk out. He blanched as he looked between the two women.

Ripping her arm from the woman's grasp, she ran down the street at full speed. The whole time Tim was calling to her desperately to stay. To let him explain. She couldn't. She wouldn't.

As his voice faded into the dark night, she vowed to never speak to him again.

When he stepped off the elevator and saw Casey there he freaked.

What the hell is she doing here?

He saw the anger and hurt in Marcy's eyes as she turned and fled once again. He knew that was it, but he wouldn't accept it. He would fight her stubborn ass as long as he could. He wouldn't let her go. He couldn't. She was everything to him.

“Are you ok, Mac?” Casey asked innocently.

He hung his head and shook it back and forth.

“She thinks I cheated on her,” he sighed.

“What?” she nearly shrieked.

“With you,” he continued.

Her eyes got as big as saucers and she looked as if she was going to be sick. She stumbled but caught herself on his arm.

“How? What? Why?” she stuttered.

“She saw you at the Bistro today when my aunt was in the bathroom. She thought we were there together. She won’t let me explain!” he roared and kicked a trashcan.

“Hey, Mac. Calm down, it will be ok.” She replied and patted his back.

“How can you say that? How can everything ever be ok again?” He yelled.

Casey took a step back and there was a fire in her eyes he had never seen before.

“She’s alive, isn’t she?” she asked angry. “As long as she’s alive there is always a chance, Mac.”

“God Casey, I’m such an ass! I’m sorry,” he said and gave her a one arm hug.

“It's ok,” she sighed. “I know you didn't mean anything by it. I still go through every day with out him and sometimes I let my grief get the better of me. I'm sorry. I know, believe me I know how hard it is not to

have the most important person in my life with me everyday and know that I will never get him back. I know.”

The tears welled up in her eyes and Mac couldn't do anything but stare. He didn't want to be like that. Marcy was alive and he had no idea what to do now.

“Thanks Casey, I think I need to go call somebody,” he said and hugged her goodbye.

“Don't let her go, Mac. You never know when it's too late,” she said kissing his cheek.

He thought about what she said the whole way up in the elevator and even more when he sat down on his black leather L shaped sofa. He was still thinking about it when his phone rang in his pocket some time later.

“Hello,” he croaked.

“Hey brother, you sound like shit,” Twitch said into the phone.

“What do you want?” He sneered.

“Casey called me,” he replied.

“Figures she called you,” he slurred looking down at the half empty bottle of Jack in his hand.

“She was trying to ask how you were, you dick. She thought you called me.”

“Marcy left me,” he said, sullen.

“I know,” Twitch replied.

“Then why are you calling me instead of being over here and drinking with me?”

“Well, I would if you would answer the damn door!” He yelled.

“You're here?” He asked.

“Yeah I'm here, brother. Where else would I be?” He laughed.

“Tell that idiot to open the damn door! The beer is getting warm,” Griffin laughed in the background.

“Shit, I'm coming!” He groaned.

When Mac opened the front door he nearly punched his brothers. That was the only way to describe the two men standing at the door looking at him like his dog just died. They had bled together. They had fought together and they had cried over the loss of a good friend together.

They were as close to brothers as anyone could be. Now, they were standing in his living room ready to

help him with the biggest loss of his adult life. He couldn't take it. He almost let the tears fall, but he couldn't. So, he took another swig from his bottle of Jack, led them to the living room, and flopped his big frame down on the couch.

“What happened? Griffin asked.

“Casey already told you the basics, right?” Mac eyed him warily.

“Yeah, but I want to hear from you. What happened brother,” Twitch replied.

“Ugh,” he sighed. “I went to lunch with my aunt. Marcy must have seen me, but when she saw me, Casey had stopped by the table to thank me for all that we have been doing for her. Aunt Maggie was in the bathroom.”

“You didn't tell her the truth?” Twitch asked incredulous.

“She wouldn't let me! I couldn't get one word out! It was like she wasn't going to believe a word out of my mouth no matter what I said!” He bellowed in frustration.

“I'm sorry, bro,” Twitch said squeezing his shoulder.

There it is again, he thought angrily. The weak ass gesture that never made anyone feel better. He knew that Twitch didn't mean anything by it. He knew his brother was just trying to comfort him, but he couldn't stop himself from shrugging the hand off his shoulder and taking another swig from the bottle.

Twitch looked at him curiously but shrugged it off.

“I'm going back to California in a month,” Griffin said.

Mac and Twitch looked at him dumbfounded for the abrupt subject change. Mac was grateful for it. He couldn't sit there and talk about Marcy anymore. His mind was hazy and his vision was starting to blur from the alcohol.

“What are you gonna do?” Twitch asked after a moment.

“I think it's time to see what little brother has done with the security company,” he replied, shrugging his broad shoulders. “Why don't you come with me?”

Mac looked at Twitch. He knew how much his cousin hated Baltimore. It would be good for him to go

that's where Kelly was. He knew the only reason Twitch was there was because of Andy. Mac wasn't so sure about going across the country. He couldn't leave until he knew where he stood with Marcy.

“You should go Twitch. I know how much you hate it here. I can see you crawling out of your skin to get out of here,” Mac sighed.

“You should come too, Mac,” Twitch said.

“I don't know, man,” Mac replied.

“Maybe if you come to California with us it will make her see the error of her ways,” Griffin said thoughtfully.

“I can't. If I go, I may never have a shot with her,” he sighed.

“Ok, well if you change your mind there is always a spot for you at the company. This was our dream when we were in the Army,” Griffin said solemnly.

“If I can't get her to listen, if I think it's really over, I will think about it,” Mac replied, sad.

They didn't talk much after that and Mac didn't care. He was practically three sheets to the wind when

they showed up anyway. He sat on the couch and quietly sipped on his bottle of Jack until he couldn't feel anything. The blessed numbness was a balm and he eventually drifted into oblivion.

Over the next week, Mac didn't leave the house except to get more Jack. He hadn't showered or slept in days. So, when Twitch came by five days later, he nearly gagged when Mac opened the door.

“Holy shit, dude. What died in here,” he said with tears in his eyes, coughing.

“Fuck you,” he replied walking away from the open door.

Twitch closed it behind him and immediately started opening windows. He looked around at the discarded pizza boxes and takeout containers and shivered. There was a mountain of glass Jack Daniels bottles sitting next to the couch and he shook his head in disgust.

“Have you tried calling her, going to see her, anything?” He asked incredulous.

“I call her and text her every damn day! She isn't answering!” He bellowed in frustration.

“That's it! You need to get your head out of your ass and go see her. Try to talk some sense into her and if that doesn't work, you're coming with me to California. Even if I have to drag your sorry ass there kicking and screaming!” Twitch roared.

Mac looked up in shock. He hadn't realized until then how big of a bitch he was being. He looked around his apartment and exhaled a shaking breath. His apartment looked like a bomb had hit it, or like someone threw one hell of a party.

“Ok,” he sighed, defeated.

“Ok?” Twitch asked, shocked.

“Yeah, ok. If she doesn't let me explain by next week, I will go to California with you.”

“Good. Now, let's get this trash heap cleaned up. I feel like I will contract some awful disease just by breathing,” Twitch laughed and clapped him on the back.

They spent hours cleaning and disinfecting his apartment. He showered and finally felt a bit more human.

“What do I do?” Mac asked once they were sitting on the couch watching the ball game.

“Why don't you try sending her flowers? Chicks dig stuff like that.”

“You're talking about the evil little pixie,” he laughed. “I would be better off sending her ammunition.”

Twitch laughed. They both knew Marcy wasn't like other girls. She didn't like flowers and girly shit. *Maybe, though. Maybe I should send her flowers. She never expressed any interest, but all girls like to feel special sometimes, right?*

“Maybe I should send her flowers,” he said grabbing the phone book and looking up a florist.

“Maybe,” Twitch agreed. “She might like them, you never know.”

PART THREE

It was a week after the worst day of her life when the flowers started arriving. She had been sick for three days. She could barely move from the toilet without puking and she had to get up every day to answer the door for the same delivery man with another more elaborate bouquet than the last.

She grumbled as she heard the doorbell ring and walked to the front door. The flower man was standing there yet again with the largest bouquet of lilies she had ever seen.

“Maybe you should give the poor guy a chance,” he inserted his unsolicited opinion when she answered the door.

“Nobody asked you,” she sneered as she grabbed the clipboard and signed for the flowers.

She shoved the clipboard at him and grabbed the large case from his hands before slamming the door in his face. She walked past the bouquets of daffodils and Orchids and walked to the kitchen table where she had

left the roses from the day before. She thought about leaving the card unread but a niggling at the back of her mind told her she really needed to read that card.

She snatched the little white envelope and made her way back to bed. If whatever she had didn't clear up soon she was gonna have to go to the doctor. She could only miss so much school before they failed her. Curling up on her side under her covers, she clutched the little envelope in her hand like it was a lifeline. She didn't want to read what he had to say, but she felt like she *needed* to read them. Like her whole life's happiness depended on the words he wrote to her. She tore open the envelope and opened the card. She looked at the cramped handwriting and tears sprung to her eyes.

Pix,

I love you, but I can't do this anymore. I need to explain to you what really happened. I can't do that in a card or over the phone. Please, please, please talk to me. Let me explain what happened. I love you more than the air I need to breathe. I would never do something to jeopardize that.

I wanted to let you know that I am moving to California unless you give me a reason not to. I am begging you to give me that reason. Even the slightest hope that we can work things out. Please hear me out. Don't throw us away.

Love Always,

Tim

She cried then. She cried until she couldn't cry anymore. Then, she ran to the bathroom and dry heaved. That's where her mother found her hours later. She was completely numb and her stomach had nothing left in it to throw up.

“What are you doing?” Her mother gave a disapproving scowl as she walked into the bathroom where Marcy was hovered over the toilet.

“What does it look like, Ma?” She asked irritably.

“Are you sick?” she asked, confused.

She shot her a dark look but suddenly her stomach began to roil again and she almost didn't make it in the toilet before the entire contents of her already empty stomach pushed past her lips.

This is bad! She thought momentarily. Every morning that week she had woken up puking. She couldn't keep anything down. She was afraid of what that meant. Terrified to take the test and find out what she already knew in her heart.

The gasp that came from her mother's lips as she suddenly realized what was happening felt like a bullet to her chest. She didn't want it to be true. What could she do? Tim was no longer a part of her life. She didn't want him anywhere near her. How could she have his baby? Surely God wouldn't be that cruel?

"You're pregnant?" Her mother whispered.

"I don't know, Ma. I bought a test yesterday but I'm too scared to take it," she replied sadly.

She flew into action then. Grabbing the test and helping Marcy up off the floor. The quick movement almost had her doubling over and dry heaving back into the toilet.

The test took entirely too long and when it finally showed up with the little plus sign in the window her heart cracked open. She stumbled to the nearest wall and slid to the floor in a heap.

She was at a complete loss. She didn't know what she would do now that everything in her life was being turned upside-down.

“You have to talk to him, Marcy. What if you're wrong and the whole thing is a big misunderstanding, like he said?”

“No, Ma, it's not. How could it be? I saw him with her at the restaurant and I saw her outside his apartment. There is no misunderstanding. His Aunt was nowhere to be found at the restaurant,” she sighed in exasperation.

“Maybe...” Marcy cut her off. She couldn't sit there and listen to her mom stick up for him anymore.

“No, Ma. I can't. I just can't,” she sighed.

Her mother took the hint and kept her mouth shut for the time being. Marcy new it wouldn't be long before the old woman said what she had to say. She was stubborn and opinionated. Once she got an idea in her head there was no use arguing with her. Marcy didn't care though.

This was her life and her decision to make. She would not let her mother talk her out of it. She couldn't let him be a part of her life anymore. It was best for everyone if he just moved to California and forgot that she ever existed.

She knew in her heart there was no way he would ever forget her. Their lives intertwined since childhood. There wasn't a happy or a sad memory of her life that Tim wasn't a part of and forgetting wasn't something that came easy to any of them anymore.

She had no idea what she was going to do. She had no idea how to be a mom, let alone a single one. She picked herself up off the bathroom floor and dragged her butt back to her bed. She was numb. She knew eventually that she had a decision to make. She had no idea what it would be but she knew that either way it would change her life forever.

He had been banging on the door to her mother's apartment for what seemed like forever. It had been two weeks since she left him. He couldn't take it anymore. Every day without her, his heart cracked open a little

more. He couldn't sleep, he refused to eat. He had spent the first week chasing relief at the bottom of a bottle. Twitch was getting worried about him. He didn't care. All he wanted was to see her face again, to hold her in his arms and never let her go.

"Don't hold your breath," he turned towards the raspy voice of Marcy's mother.

"What?" He asked, confused.

"You can bang on that door til the cows come home and that stubborn woman won't answer it," she replied.

"Why?" he asked defeated.

"Don't pretend you don't know why she's so upset," she scolded.

"It's all a misunderstanding!" He bellowed.

"Don't you yell at me, boy! This ain't my doing! Give up now! No matter what you do she won't talk to you. She's stubborn. Move on with your life Tim. She doesn't want to be a part of it anymore," she scolded him and walked inside.

She shot Marcy a wry smile as she shut the door behind her. Marcy knew she had been caught the minute

her mom started speaking outside the door. She just wanted to hear his voice just one more time.

“I still say you need to tell the boy,” her mom said knowingly.

The walls shook with the power of his fist on the other side of the door.

“I’m never giving up,” his voice thundered through the house and she nearly broke down into a sobbing mess on the floor.

She knew that. Tim would never give up on her if he found out. He would always want to be a part of her life. She couldn’t have that. She didn’t trust him. A clean break was what she needed. If she saw him again she might give in.

“I’m not telling him, Ma. He’s leaving for California soon and then I won’t ever have to see him again. He’ll never know,” she replied stubbornly.

“Selfish,” her mother muttered. “After the life he lost when he was just boy. tsk, tsk, tsk, If you take his family away from him he’ll never forgive you. You prepared to lose that man forever?”

She nodded. There was no other way. She couldn't look at him without thinking of the blonde woman she had seen him with. She hardened her heart and looked to her meddling, crass, opinionated mother. Tim could never, ever find out about their baby. She would take the secret to the grave.

She was reminded of the old song by Everlast as she walked into the door of the clinic. What it's like. That was the song and they definitely did give her grief as she walked into the door. She didn't need that. She hadn't even decided what her decision would be yet. She had no idea what she would do. Could she even go through with the unthinkable? That's something she was completely unsure of. She didn't know if she could be a mom either. She sat in the sterile looking waiting room filling out the forms. Her mind was racing a mile a minute as she waited to be called back.

“Marcy Holcomb?” The pretty red headed nurse smiled.

“Y-yes,” she stuttered.

“Right this way, please,” she said pointing to the door.

Marcy followed and took the offered cup. She knew what was coming. She had done some research on what to expect at her appointment. She always wanted to be as prepared as possible.

“There is the restroom, we need a sample and then put on the gown. The doctor will be with you shortly.”

Marcy did what was asked and then sat on the exam table. She waited for what seemed like an eternity before a plump older woman knocked on the door. She had grating hair and kind chocolate brown eyes. She looked as if she could be someone's grandmother.

She reminded Marcy of her own mother. She would be an awesome grandma. The guilt at what she had thought about doing was clawing at her as the doctor started speaking. She didn't hear half of what the woman said. She was her moms only child. The only chance for her to be the amazing grandma Marcy knew she could be. Marcy couldn't even fathom ever trusting someone enough to have another baby with. This may be her only chance.

“Miss Holcomb?” The doctor asked with concern.

“Y-yes s-sorry,” she stuttered.

“I need to do an ultrasound. Is that ok?” She asked sympathetically.

“Yes, of course. Sorry.” She mumbled sitting back on the table.

A few minutes of uncomfortable sensations down below and the room filled with a loud whooshing sound. Marcy’s head had been turned away from the monitor but when the sound filled the room she looked up and instantly fell in love with the tiny little peanut inside her. She knew then that she could never do anything to harm that little life inside her. She would do anything to protect him.

Him? Where did that come from? It's far too early to know the sex at this point.

She didn't know why she said he but she just had a feeling deep in her heart that it was a boy.

“The heart beat is nice and strong. It sounds like a healthy baby. I would probably put you at about seven weeks,” The doctor said with a smile. “That's it dear, you

can get dressed now and go to the front desk they will give you a new parent packet with vitamins and pamphlets on healthy practices for babies.”

“Thank you,” she replied smiling.

She walked to the front desk, happy for the first time in weeks. She had no idea how she was going to make it work but for the small child growing inside of her she would figure it out. She owed him that much.

The apartment looked empty. The movers Griffin had hired had just left and Mac was looking at his empty living room. It was sad to go and leave this place behind him. All of his happy memories from adulthood were made in that apartment. Him, Marcy, and Twitch ordering pizza and playing the latest video game all night long. Laughing and drinking all the while. He had to stop doing this to himself. No matter what he did, Marcy wouldn't talk to him. So, he did what he promised Twitch and made arrangements to move to California. He hoped that they were right and eventually after he gave her time that she would hear him out. He didn't know how long it would take. He hoped that one day she

would change her mind because he honestly didn't know how he was going to live without her.

PART FOUR

Three years later. . .

Pushing the stroller down the street on the warm summers day, Marcy was excited for the first time in what seemed like forever. She was working with her own PTSD patients and spending time with little Johnny. It was the first time she had been able to take him to the park and they were both excited. Johnny was waving his chubby little hands excitedly at all the people they passed on the sidewalk.

When they got to the park she parked his stroller by the swings and got him out.

“You ready to swing, little man?” She asked tickling his sides.

He squealed with happiness. She put him in the baby swing and started to push him gently.

“Excuse me?” Said a soft female voice to her right.

Marcy looked up and all the blood rushed from her face. Her blood turned to ice in her veins and she thought she would be sick.

“I don't know if you remember me. My name is Casey I was Andy's wife,” she said timidly.

“Wait? What? Andy's wife? No! You were the woman Mac cheated with! Holy crap! I remember now! Jesus Christ!” She whisper-shouted.

It all came flooding back to her when Casey mentioned Andy. She couldn't believe she had been so dumb. She looked down at the pink stroller she was pushing and blanched. The little girl in it was the spitting image of Andy. Thick Chocolate brown hair and ice blue eyes that always seemed to be laughing at her.

“Who is this?” Casey asked looking down at Johnny.

“Uh... that's Johnny, my son,” Marcy stuttered.

“Is he...?” She asked curiously. At Marcy's nod, Casey's eyes got huge.

“Does he know?” She asked in shock.

“No,” Marcy replied tersely. “And I plan to keep it that way.”

“I won't tell anyone,” she promised.

They took the kids to the sand box and let them sit with shovels and pails while the two of them sat by a nearby bench watching the babies closely.

“This is all because of me,” Casey said, sad.

“No, I see now that it was a big gigantic misunderstanding,” Marcy sighed. “If I had just let him talk, let him explain, our lives would be so different.”

“I'm not going to argue there, but Mac did leave. He should have kept trying. Deep down I think he thought if he left you would eventually call him. You would miss him so much that you would have to let him explain.”

“Yeah, but it's too late now. He will never forgive me for keeping Johnny from him. It's over,” Marcy replied.

Her heart cracked open at the thought of never seeing him again. The look on his face if he ever found out about Johnny. She had done a pretty good job of keeping her feelings locked up tight over the last three years. She didn't have the luxury of falling apart when she left him. So, Marcy did what she always did when

the thought of him threatened to break her. She put them in a box and locked it away. Being a therapist, she knew that was unhealthy. She knew that eventually it would all come out and cripple her, but she didn't care. She had a beautiful boy to raise and nothing would get in the way of that.

“He looks just like him,” Casey said sometime later.

They were picking the kids up and getting ready to leave. She reached over and fingered a curly lock of his unruly brown hair. His big brown eyes shown bright in the afternoon sun.

“I know, he would definitely love him,” Marcy replied, sad.

They went their separate ways then, but exchanged phone numbers and agreed to do play dates for the kids every now and then. Marcy walked away with a new friend and feeling lighter than she had in years.

Nine years later...

Marcy was having some major issues this week. Hell, she had been having issues for the last couple months. If it hadn't been for stupid Griffin and the guys at GTT she wouldn't be thinking about Tim again.

That's a lie. She never stopped thinking about Tim for one minute over the last ten years. How could she? He was the love of her life! She definitely would have noticed the large man coming up behind her as she unlocked the door to her office.

She never would have been knocked out and woke up chained to her desk. She would have seen all this coming. They were supposed to be vigilant! There were dark forces at work and if they found out what she and the guys were up to, they would be in some serious danger.

"Doug?" she asked in horror.

This could be so much worse than I thought.

"Hello, Dr. Holcomb," he replied with a sick smile.

There was lust in his eyes and Marcy balked at the idea of what that could mean. She was no fool when

it came to fighting off an attacker, but even she couldn't fight him off with her hands chained to the desk.

"What are you doing, Doug?" she asked with a shaky voice.

She wished in that moment that she was stronger, but after having two sessions a week with Tasha over the last month she knew that this man could not be reasoned with. He got off on the power he held over his victims.

"I have been watching you,' he replied in what he must have thought was a sultry voice. It just made Marcy gag.

She couldn't fight him. She knew that. The man was well over six feet with big beefy arms and a huge beer belly. He leaned closer to her and she could smell his rotten breath. It reeked of stale beer and cigarettes. She gagged and squirmed when he took her mouth with his own and rammed his tongue in.

"We're gonna have a lot of fun together," he smiled lasciviously.

"You're Sick!" She screeched in his face.

She didn't even see his fist as it barreled quickly towards her face. She felt the white hot pain and attempted to blink back the spots from her vision.

Tim will come for me, was the last thought that ran through her head before everything went black.

Her eyes shot open. The blinding pain in her head only got worse as the memories of what had happened came flooding back. She groaned and looked around wildly attempting to assess the situation. Doug was nowhere to be found. He took the restraints off her wrists and left her locked in the dimly lit room.

That was his first mistake, she thought triumphantly. She moved slowly around the dank musty room. It was some sort of basement. The wooden stairs looked as if they creaked and she climbed them gingerly. One noise could bring him back in an instant. She knew that. She also knew that if she had any hope of getting out of there she needed to hide. She finished climbing the stairs and reached the door that would lead to the rest of the house.

Locked! She knew it would be. She just desperately hoped that she could find a way out before he came back. She knew better than to pin all of her hopes on Tim. She had just recently been around him again after ten long years apart. There was so much she needed to tell him, but she didn't want to. Now in this situation there was a good chance she would never get the opportunity.

She walked carefully back down the stairs and found a small alcove behind the stairs. The longer she stayed there the more familiar her surroundings became. She remembered this room as if it was from a dream. She hadn't been in that basement since she had been a small child playing hide and seek with Tim and Dylan. How did she end up in his childhood home? What connection other than the obvious did Doug have to their childhood? Questions swirled through her mind as she continued to search for a way out. She remembered why they never hid in the basement. There was only one way out and it was blocked.

An idea came to her and she squeezed her tiny arm between the loose boards at the base of the stairs.

Could it still be there? She felt around in the small space until the knobby end of the baseball bat brushed her fingers. Relief, at finally finding a weapon, was swift. The clicking of a lock sounded above her and she pulled at the bat with all her might. She pushed and pulled until it finally released with a thunk.

“Shit.” She heard Doug curse and his footsteps pounded down the creaky steps.

Okay Marcy, it's now or never!

She gripped the bat in a white knuckled grip and waited for him to round the corner in search of her. She knew that he was going to find her. The spot was not the stealthiest place in the world, but she didn't really have any other options.

Cold blue eyes came into focus and she swung as hard as she could. She meant to go for his knee but hit him in the thigh instead. He cursed and dropped. Marcy didn't take any chances. She ran. She ran up the creaky stairs and out the door that led to the kitchen she used to have cookies and milk in as a kid. She made a grab for the front door but it seemed to be padlocked from the outside,

She wracked her brain trying in vain to remember another way out. She paused only briefly in the living room and then sprinted through the house to the back door. The glass in the door had been broken at some point and the windows were boarded up. She tried the handle and blew out a breath of relief when it opened easily. She ran through the overgrown grass of the back yard and hid behind the old tool shed.

“You stealthy little bitch!” Doug roared as he moved through the yard. “You can’t hide forever Miss Marcy.”

He chuckled and the sound grated on her ears. It was nothing compared to the fear she felt by the closeness of his voice. Right behind her. She turned carefully and looked up and up and up into the cold blue eyes of her kidnapper. That was the last thing she saw before he punched her in the temple and everything faded to blackness.

She couldn’t help the thoughts that ran through her head as she laid chained to the wall in the dank basement. She didn’t know how long it would be before

Tim and the guys found her. She hoped that they would. The laugh that bubbled up within her was hollow and self-deprecating. She'd promised herself long ago that she would never allow herself to depend on him again. If it hadn't been for Griffin practically begging her to treat Kaylee she never would have had to see him again.

Johnny. She sighed. *What must he be thinking right now?* She wondered if he was ok. She wondered if her mother was worried when she didn't come home. She had no idea how long she'd been trapped in that basement. She drifted off to sleep thinking about that day. The day that everything changed all those years ago.

A large crash had her bolting upright. A moment later, Tasha came flying down the stairs. The guys had found her and she had a feeling nothing was ever going to be the same.

When Tasha got Marcy's hands free she could do nothing but fly into Mac's arms. She hadn't even thought about it twice. As soon as she saw him she could think of nothing but being safe in the circle of his big strong arms. She blamed Griffin for this. She knew it was all

his fault. She never would have been this close to Mac again if it hadn't been for him. She wasn't thinking about all that when he hugged her fiercely.

She wasn't thinking about all the years she had put between them or the deep dark secret that she had kept from him all these years. She wasn't thinking about anything except how much she missed him. She stiffened in his arms as the thought came unbidden in her mind. He was kissing the top of her head, murmuring nonsense into her ear and squeezing her tight. Either he never noticed her stiffen or he just didn't care.

“Just one more minute, please? I have been waiting twelve years to be able to hold you again, Marcy. Please just give me one more minute,” he sighed into her hair.

She nodded. She was struck completely dumb by his words. There wasn't anything else she could do but stand there and let him hold her. She knew he would be worried when he found out she was gone. Mac, just like all the rest of the guys, was a protector. She hadn't even thought it was possible that he still loved her after all this time.

She knew it wouldn't matter once he found out. He would find out too. Now, that she was caught up in this mess they had dumped in their laps. There was no way she could leave him behind. When they all had to go into hiding, she would have to tell him the truth. The thought made her shudder and Mac looked at her in confusion.

“You ok, Pix?” He asked, concerned.

She hardened her heart and took a step back. She couldn't look into those chocolate brown eyes. She knew if she did she would be a goner.

Straightening her back, she walked away to the rickety old stairs. She didn't walk so much as hobble to the stairs. His eyes were burning holes into the back of her head as she took each step gingerly. She knew she was being unfair.

It had been years since the incident that changed both of their lives forever, but the only way to protect herself and her pride was to be unfair. She couldn't tell him that she knew what really happened that day. That she had been terribly wrong about everything. It was too

late then. He had already missed so much. He would have never forgiven her for what she had done.