“The Return”

By Brandi Bronleben

Fourteen years.

Two months.

Six days.

That’s how long it had been since he’d last walked through those doors. When Lucy looked up from the table she was cleaning, as the bells on the door jingled, it was like she was looking at a ghost. The tray of half full beer mugs, sweating red soda cups, and used napkins nearly fell from her hands and onto the sticky wooden floor of The Pourpose Pub. She caught the tray and herself before anyone noticed. Behind the bar, Bethy looked up at the door while pouring a beer for a customer sitting in front of her. With one swift motion, she put the beer down in front of a hunched, balding man and picked up the phone behind the bar. She dialed a number without taking her eyes off the man at the door. “You need to get over here. The fryer’s on the fritz.” Then hung up.

As quickly as she’d made the call, Bethy walked to where Lucy was frozen. She grasped the tray, leaned close to her ear, and whispered, “Let go of the tray and go to the back room. Don’t make a big fuss… just go. I’ll let you know when the bastard is gone.” Lucy looked Bethy in the eyes, let go of the tray, and gently headed towards the back room.

Bethy walked back to her position behind the bar as the man took a seat on a bar stool at the far end. With jovial fierceness she looked him in the eye and said, “Well, I did not expect to see you here ever again. If you have something to say to Lucy, you can tell me. She isn’t here, but I’ll give her a message for you.”

“Don’t be so hostile Elizabeth. I know I just saw her,” Mac said. Surveying the crowd for familiar faces or at least cordial ones.

“Mac, I’m only going to remind you once before I throw you out of here... Mama was the only one allowed to call me Elizabeth,” she paused. “Again, Lucy’s not here and even if she was, you don’t have any right to speak to her…”

“I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t important. I really need to explain…” Mac started.

“Explain what? Why you left? Why you didn’t say anything to anyone? Why you’re back? Why you decided to come back now? I guarantee you she doesn’t want to hear it and neither do I. So, you should just take whatever B.S. story you’ve concocted and go…” she waved him off while made herself look busy cleaning up behind the bar.

Mac inhaled. “Look, Bethy,” he looked up at her, “I’m really not trying to make trouble. There is a reasonable explanation for everything…”

“A reasonable explanation?! Really?” Bethy checked her volume as she feigned a smile and wiped the bar in front of her. “Is it that you’re an asshole, because, trust me, everyone already knows. Now, you need to go ahead and get out of here before I call Sheriff Greene…”

“Don’t be stupid Bethy…”he warned.

“You don’t get to call me stupid, you selfish…” she was interrupted by a man coming through the door and making his way to where Mac was sitting.

“Well, it’s been a long time Mac. You probably don’t remember me. I’m Chuck” a tall, slender brown haired man said. Chuck and Bethy were on again off again on again since junior high. They were never married, but they’d spent the better part of their lives together and they shared two kids. Everyone knew they were in love, but they were both too stubborn to say it out loud. “But I can’t say I’m happy to see you. You need to go.”

“I just want to have a word with Lucy,” Mac replied while scanning for ways to get past Bethy, the bar, her newly arrived “henchman,” and get to the back room where he was sure Lucy was hiding out.

“Yeah, that isn’t going to happen… but I’ll have a word with you. NO.” Chuck said. “You’re going to leave now. I mean, I do owe you for your little stunt…”

Mac blinked at the two of them. “Look, I’m really not trying to cause trouble. I just wanted to talk to Lucy. I need to warn her…”

The word *warn* startled Bethy. She could tell it had an affect on Chuck too as the air around them seemed to still.

Bethy looked at Chuck. A silent conversation took place in those three seconds. Mac’s past was clearly catching up to him. But Bethy didn’t care much about her brother’s well being since he disappeared fourteen years ago leaving behind a wake of sorrow, anger, and broken hearts. She’d had to pick up the pieces he’d left behind and take care of her Mam, her own family, and Lucy. She was convinced that no matter what Mac could or would offer, it would only end in heartbreak again. And she wasn’t about to willingly risk any part of her rebuilt, stable life now.

“I literally don’t care if you are here to hand her an envelope of money or warn her that there is an Egyptian prince trying to find her. You’re not meeting with her. You broke her. You broke mama. You broke me. This whole town was left in the wake of your terrible choices and I refuse to clean up after you again,” Bethy’s voice was getting louder and the people in the Pourpose were starting to look up from their Jack and Cokes and half drunk beers.

“Lower your voice,” Mac started but a quick look from Chuck reminded him that he was in no position make requests.

“We spent time mourning you. We thought you’d died!” Bethy screamed at him slamming a newly cleaned glass on the table and shattering it.

Chuck put his hand gently on Neil’s shoulder in an attempt to turn him around and nudge him out the door, “It’s time for you to go.”

Mac threw his hands up in mock surrender and pleaded: “Look just tell Lucy I need to talk to her,” he pulled a folded paper from his pocket. “Could you give her this? It is where I’m staying. I’ll be here for a few days right, but please, let her know I was here and that we need to talk.”

Beth’s face reddened as she started to open her mouth to tell him exactly where he could go, but Chuck responded first, “We’ll see what happens.” He took the paper from Neil and gestured to the door. As Neil left, Chuck followed him and watched as Neil got into his car and left kicking up dust and years of resentment.

“He’s gone,” Chuck said letting the door close behind him and walked back over to the the bar. “What in the hell are we going to do with this?” Chuck asked passing the folded paper to Bethy.

Bethy grabbed the paper out of Chuck’s hand. “I guess we’re going to give it to Lucy. As much as I do not want her to talk to him ever again, it’s not my choice.”

He looked at Bethy across the bar and into her eyes. “I don’t know why he’s here, but I’ll stick around and play some pool until closing time. Then we’ll make sure that Lucy gets home okay.”

“Thanks,” Bethy nodded then headed to the back room to find Lucy. She walked past the clamor of the kitchen. Past Marty, the Pourpose’s favorite bus boy who was also the pub’s part-time dishwasher. She took a deep breath as she opened the door to the back office.

Lucy was standing by the window looking out into the tree covered gravel parking lot that housed the dumpster and the employee parking. She didn’t look up when Bethy came in.

“Tell me that wasn’t who I thought it was.” Lucy didn’t turn around. “Tell me that it was a hallucination and that I am just going crazy.”

“I can’t do that Lucy. I want to, but I can’t” Bethy sighed. “He said he needs to talk to you. And that is all he wants. A chance to talk.” Bethy walked over and joined Lucy in staring into the parking lot. “He asked me to give you this,” she nearly whispered as she passed her the folded paper. “You do with it what you want. I’ll support you either way, but I won’t be hurt by him again and I don’t want to see you or Maggie hurt by him either…”

“Maggie doesn’t need to know anything about this,” Lucy asserted. “She doesn’t know everything that happened and she doesn’t need any of his choices burdening her.”

“I agree. But does he even know about Maggie?”

For the first time since going into the back room, Lucy looked away from the parking lot. “You know the answer to that.”