



## **Lost and Found Again**

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*To Billiam who was certainly lost just in time.*

## Chapter One

It was difficult for Tanya to think about how she'd lost Braden. She had kept every one of his letters, every little trinket he'd ever given her. There were pictures of him, of them together, stuffed in an old wooden jewelry box her grandmother had left for her. She would take them out and look at them from time to time and remember how much she loved him, and how stupid she'd been to push him away. Today she needed that comfort, that sweet memory that someone had truly loved her, so she sat in the bedroom and pulled open that box. She picked up one of the photographs, its edges worn and colors a little faded. She stared at him. He was so young then. They both were. It was taken by her mother at the backyard party where Tanya and Braden first met.

*Seven years earlier...*

Tanya sat at the party feeling completely out of place among her parents' friends, well, her dad's friends. It was a mish mash of Air Force families, some young, some older, all drinking beer and enjoying a barbeque while laughing it up at her father's dirty jokes. She stayed quiet, upset over the bad break-up with her last boyfriend. She was only seventeen, so her parents didn't take it seriously, but she hated being alone. Tanya had never quite fit in at school, and she only had two close girlfriends but both of them were too busy with their own drama to notice Tanya's worries. She didn't want to bother them anyways. That was her way. She kept herself to herself.

Tanya watched a young man smile at her from across the yard. He had just gotten a beer from the cooler and seemed to have taken notice of her. He wore shorts that showed off his muscular legs, and a tank top that did everything for his broad chest and strong looking arms. He strode her way and sat down at the worn picnic table opposite her. He was tall and handsome with a boyish grin and short, dark hair. His hazel eyes sparkled with mischief in the waning evening light.

"Hi," he said and tipped his beer bottle at her.

She only smiled and looked down at her plate of food. The family whose house they were at didn't have much. They raised purebred American Akitas to make extra money. The wife was going to night school to be a nurse's assistant. The husband was a mechanic in the Air Force. Tanya's dad was his boss. Their little boy, who was only three years old, scooted up beside her on the bench and

poked her in the side, wanting attention. She always drew pictures for him to color in; cars, trucks, dinosaurs, whatever he asked.

It was the perfect excuse to ignore the guy across from her, and he was good to look at, so it was best she didn't look at all. Safer. Still, between drawing little cartoons for Baby Michael, as they called the boy, Tanya kept stealing glances at the hazel-eyed hunk. He had to be too old for her, and she took comfort in that. Besides, more than likely her dad was his boss, too. That would only complicate things.

He smiled at her again. "I'm Braden. You must be Ramon's daughter."

"Yes. I'm Tanya." She smiled back and heat spread through her.

"I work for your dad," he said.

"I guessed you did." The little blond-haired boy next to her shimmied off the bench and went to chase one of the puppies in the front yard. Tanya set the few crayons he had brought back in the small plastic cup his mom had set out for him earlier. "You fix airplanes."

"Yeah." He swigged his beer, and she figured maybe he was younger than he seemed, barely twenty-one. She didn't care for beer or drugs, or anything like that. Her father often drank too much, and she hated listening to him get sick for hours after parties. Braden looked innocent in a way.

She was anything but that, despite her parents' best efforts. Her daddy worked too much, and she had needed more attention for him. That was why she picked the kind of boyfriends she'd had—ones that would give her attention, but they always turned out to be the wrong kind of boyfriends and gave her the wrong kind of attention.

"Where are you from?" she asked him.

"Kansas." He smiled and looked down as if his answer embarrassed him, then lifted his face again.

"But you've probably never heard of the town. It's just farmland there, not much to see or do."

"Oh. I have relatives in Oklahoma, a few in Missouri, and a cousin in Kansas. You might be surprised." She sipped at her soda and eased up a little. "I like it there in farmland country, the quiet, the cows. We used to visit my grandparents' house by a dairy farm every summer. Best vacations ever."

His eyebrows cinched up like he was confused. "Really? You *like* it in the middle of nowhere?"

She nodded. Better than here. There's nothing to do in Tucson, and it's way too hot in the summer to be outside unless you have a swimming pool."

"True." He set his beer down.

She crinkled her nose at it.

He noticed her reaction and frowned. "What? You don't drink?"

Tanya shook her head. "I'm not old enough, and that stuff tastes nasty."

He pushed the bottle away, looking confused. "Oh, sorry." Then he shot a glance over her shoulder at Tanya's father where he sat with his own bottle of beer, deep in a drawn out joke that had everyone around him leaning in so as not to miss the details. "How old are you?"

She shuffled her feet nervously. Everyone thought she was older than she really was. It made for awkward situations. Her friends told her to go with it; it would get her into bars so she could go dancing with guys that had cars and money. She self-consciously crossed her arms over her chest, which had blossomed when she was only fourteen, another reason men took her as being in her twenties. "I'm seventeen."

She figured he'd back off then. Scared away by her youth. But Braden only nodded. "When do you get out of high school?"

"I have one more year. I took extra classes in the summer to get ahead, and um," she frowned. It wasn't cool to be super smart, but she told him anyways. Technically she had enough credits to graduate already, but free school was free school, and she planned to get six more credits her senior year. "I'm in advanced classes and a few college courses at night. I'll start at the U of A after I finish."

"Wow, that's great."

She shrugged.

He leaned forward to rest his chin on his fist, his elbow on the picnic table. "What do you want to do when you get out of school?" He looked genuinely interested in her, and she liked that about him. Most men were put off by her quiet, shy personality, but she found he was easy to talk to. She certainly wasn't being her usual withdrawn self at the moment.

She motioned to the drawings that she'd done for Baby Michael. "I'd like to get into graphic design, marketing, advertising."

His eyes widened for a moment. "Sounds like you have a plan."

"What about you?" she asked. Tanya had never liked being a military brat. Her family had moved five times since she was born, and her mom loved that part. Tanya wanted to be in the same place and settle in, put down roots and make friends that she knew she'd have for the rest of her life. That had been the hardest on her, the moving around, the changing schools and being the new kid on the block over and over.

"I joined the Air Force because I didn't want to be stuck in Circleville, pig farming for the rest of my life." He looked proud of his choice.

But that meant he wanted the Air Force as a career. He wasn't one of the guys that had joined to get through college and then get out into a civilian job after they'd served. He was a lifer. She leaned

back, losing interest. "Well, it's a stable job, the Air Force. But scary as hell to be in the military if you have to go to war. And the moving around sucks."

He frowned. "I don't know. I like going to new places, seeing the world. It's an opportunity."

Tanya was done with him. She could never be with a guy in the military. It couldn't work, not that Braden *was* even interested in her. They were just making small talk. It didn't mean anything. Besides, her father would have a fit if she dated a guy that worked for him. "Excuse me," she said. "Restroom."

He nodded and flashed his charming smile.

She headed inside, past the throng of people crammed into the little kitchen, and down the hall to the single bathroom. The couple had tried to fix it up nice, but the truth was, the house was real old and it showed. Tanya washed her hands and stared at herself in the mirror. Her dark hair was pinned back in a French twist. Her eyes were sad, lost. She chewed at her bottom lip, realizing what a sorry sight she was. *No wonder Charlie cheated on me.*

She jumped when someone knocked at the door. "Be right out. Almost done."

When she opened the door she found her mom standing there, eyeing her as if she knew her daughter was feeling sorry for herself. Her mom was dressed in jeans and a pink V-neck shirt that accentuated her chest. She had straightened her hair last week and it was set in soft curls all around her round face. "Having a good time, Tanya?"

"No, not really. When can we go home?"

She sighed. "You just want to play video games and goof off like your brother," her mom said. "Try to have a little fun, Tanya. Don't be such a stick in the mud."

"I have to study, Mom. I have a report due for English."

Her mom shook her head and pushed past her into the tiny bathroom. Tanya shut the door and started down the hall, but bumped right into Braden. More people had gathered in the kitchen to watch the birthday cake get lighted and to join in the raucous singing.

"Ack, sorry," she said, looking up into Braden's eyes. More people swarmed inside and Tanya found herself crushed into Braden's side. He smelled really good, a hint of cologne and the scent of his skin, clean like Ivory soap.

"No problem." He slipped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her to stand in front of him so she could see what was going on. Her backside was tight against his firm body and his hand cupped her upper arm. She looked to the side at his cream colored fingers on her mocha skin and shivered.

"You cold?" he asked and ran his other hand up and down her other arm in an attempt to warm her up.

She turned her face up to his. "No. It's just—"

"Happy birthday to you...!" The crowd's loud singing interrupted anything she might have wanted to say, like: Get your hands off me, or damn, you're so handsome I'm going to melt right here in the hallway. At the moment, she couldn't decide which way she felt. She relaxed as they broke into a second, more profane version of the birthday song, her dad's voice booming. Tanya *did* feel like she was melting back into Braden. She closed her eyes and tuned out all the sounds until she felt the thrum of his heart beating fast in his chest at her back.

His lips brushed against her ear when the song ended, "Want some cake?" She had half expected him to say I want to be alone with you, or let's get out of here, or a whole bunch of other things that, at the moment, she would have agreed to do. Her body was already responding to his closeness, her nipples hardening, her skin prickling with heat.

"S-sure." He was moving away, and his warmth left her. Tanya leaned back against the wall and watched him weave his way through the crowd. She backed down the hall and headed for the front



yard and the picnic table, hoping to God her parents hadn't seen him so close to her like that. *What was I thinking? What was he thinking?*

Not long after, he came and sat with two plates of toppled pieces of chocolate cake in his hands. He set one in front of her, and she giggled, feeling happy for the first time in a long time.

Braden had always found a way to make her smile.

She set the old picture of her and him at the table with the cake in front of them back into the jewelry box. Stacie, the woman who lived in that house, had taken the photo and given it to her secretly months later. Even then that woman had known things wouldn't quite work out.

Her cell phone rang. She picked it up and look at his name on the screen: B. Williams. The familiar shiver ran through her before she answered. "Hello."

"Hi Tanya. Just got in. I was thinking, let's meet at the IHOP where we used to eat on Saturdays. It'll be like old times."

"Okay. That's sound casual. Good idea."

Pressure was building up in her mind. She didn't know how this was going to end up. He'd found her after all these years. And she'd been hiding herself so well that no one, not even her family, had any idea where she was. As she hung up the phone, she wondered just what the hell was going to happen when Braden found out about her secret. She didn't think she'd be strong enough to push him away this time. She was terrified he'd never forgive her for what had happened between them.

"Who am I kidding?" she asked herself as she pulled out the photograph again. "He's the only man I've ever really loved. I might never have another chance to see him after this."

## Chapter Two

Braden Williams zipped his suitcase shut. He hadn't been back to Tucson since Tanya broke up with him before he had to leave for Iraq. It was a memory he relived every time he thought of her, and he tried to come up with what he should have done to make things go differently than they had. She was nineteen then, but only by a few months. He'd shown up unexpectedly, flying all night from Atlanta on stand-by just to see her before his deployment. He'd rented a car and driven to her parents' house, ran up to the door still dressed in his fatigues, completely exhausted.

Her parents weren't home and she opened the door. Seeing her standing there, her dark eyes on him and wide with shock, longing had torn at his heart. She'd broken up with Braden when he found out he was being stationed in Atlanta, stating a long distance relationship couldn't possibly work.

He had come back anyways. He wanted her in his life, had asked her to marry him three times, and he was determined to have her no matter what. But he had forgotten that she was so much younger, just starting out and getting to be where she needed to be. He had been selfish. He had been stupid. Her dad had walked in on them in her room, tangled up together on the bed in the throes of their hopeless passion. It ended badly. Her father had thrown him out, and he never saw her again. Calls to her parents' house afterward only got him a swift hang-up.

He shook his head and lifted up the suitcase. He was stationed in Indiana now, had served a tour in Iraq, and made it through in one piece. Now it was time to put things right, to find the woman who was supposed to his wife, and damn it, marry her and start his *real* life.

As he stepped out into the hot Arizona sunshine in the middle of July, he breathed in the air with its dry heat and smelled the sweet scent of Palo Verde tree flowers that were blooming by the hotel. The yellow petals fluttered to the ground and all over the top of his silver rental car. But he didn't care. They were pretty and he was on his way to see the most beautiful woman in the world. He was happy. Tanya Harrison had agreed to meet with him for lunch at the IHOP on Broadway and Pantano. It wasn't anyplace fancy. In fact, it was kind of hokey for a date. But they used to eat there back when they were dating.

When his parents came to visit, they had all met up there, Braden hopeful that they would love her and want her to be a part of their family. His parents hadn't approved of her at all. She was black. He was white. And she came from a big city. After that lunch meeting, they had told him she was one of those fast girls they'd always warned him to watch out for. She didn't go to church and they doubted she even believed in God. But his parents were small town. They cared about him and they wanted him to settle down back home and marry there, raise some kids, and take over the family farm. He had laughed off all their accusations and warnings.

As he set the key into the ignition and remembered the secret late night meetings with Tanya, he realized his parents had been a little bit right about her. He could never get enough of the taste of her mouth, her plump lips pressed to his, her tongue tasting and teasing. Her fingers were always circling his skin, exploring, turning him on until he thought he'd explode if he didn't make love to her. And they'd done that too. So many times he'd lost count. It had been hell to wait until she was eighteen. Making out was hot. There were other ways to pleasure each other besides sex, but the night of her birthday had been it for him. There was no turning back. Neither one of them had wanted to turn back. Their relationship was like a fire burning out of control, a fire that no one around them thought would burn long enough to last.

He started the car and drove down Tucson Boulevard, remembering and hoping he'd be able to reconcile who she was then with who she was now. Everyone changed. He had. Braden had grown up. He'd seen two of his best friends die in Iraq, one on the side of the road, and the other after two months of suffering in a hospital bed. He knew life was shorter than it seemed and to waste what life he'd been given was stupid.

He'd wasted enough time already.

He turned onto Valencia and marveled at how much the city had grown. There were a lot more suburban housing areas. He turned left onto Kolb Road. They'd landscaped the road which bordered the bone yard at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base so that it was difficult to see the shells of the old planes until he got closer to Golf Links. He remembered Tucson like the back of his hand.

He knew it because he'd left his heart here when he'd been called to go to Iraq. He'd left Tanya and his future behind to serve his country. It was the one thing he regretted.

She'd begged him to get out. How could he? It was his duty to serve. He believed that. That night she'd cried and held him as if she would never see him again. And for seven years, he'd been so sorry that he hadn't done more than pull her into his arms and make love to her.

He took a right on Broadway and laughed at the Eegee's. They'd shared slushes there a bunch of times. It felt like he was emerging from a horrible nightmare and heading back to the safety of awareness. "No," he said aloud. "It feels like I'm coming home."

He pulled into the parking lot of the IHOP and sat there for a second to catch his breath. For years he'd passed people in crowds and looked back, his mind playing tricks on him, telling him it was *her*. But it never was. Tanya Harrison had never left Arizona. She'd never be found in a grocery store in Atlanta, in a mall in New York, or by the ferry dock in New Orleans. He had wanted it to be easy that way. He had wanted to turn around and find her again right where he was, happy to see him, ready to slip into his arms into his life

He stepped out and hurried to the door, the sun beating on him like it always used to do. It was so damn hot here in the summer. Once inside, he smiled at the hostess who stood behind a podium. He scanned the Saturday crowd, and his smile melted away when he caught sight of Tanya. At last he'd turned around and there she was. She was standing in the corner of the room, her eyes on him, her body clad in a snug fitting red summer dress. She had on the earrings he'd sent her from Atlanta so long ago. She looked almost exactly the same. A little more reserved maybe. Her lips were in that sad frown that made him want to rush up to her and kiss it away, hold her in his arms until she gave up and gave in.

"There you are," she said. Tanya crossed the lobby and stopped a step away from him. "How was your flight?"

"Long and boring," he said. "It's good to see you, Tanya." His voice cracked when he opened his arms out to her. She hesitated, looking sideways for a moment before she met his embrace. Then

she settled against him like she had at that birthday party years ago where they'd first met. She fit to him like she was meant to be his. Her hands locked at his lower back, hugging him close.

"It's good to see you, too." Her voice came out muffled. He heard the snuffle she had tried to hide. "I see you've been working out way too much."

He chuckled. "Yeah. Keeps me out of trouble."

She stepped back too soon for his liking and smiled up at him. "You were never any trouble." She nodded at the hostess. "Let's get a table."

They were ushered to the side room and seated. He glanced around at the pale yellow walls and odd decorations honoring pancakes. He thought back to the day he'd met her here with his parents. It had been a mistake. She had been so excited at first. They both were. Meeting his parents was confirming that they were serious. But it had gone wrong like so many other good intentions. This time he wanted things to go right.

They both ordered, and Braden kept staring at Tanya.

"How long will you be in town?" she asked.

"Two weeks this time."

"You going to visit the Parkinson family?" They were the couple that owned the house where he and Tanya first met.

"Yeah. It'll be good to see them again."

She nodded, her eyes sparkling and welling up. She dabbed at them with her napkin. "I haven't seen them in years. Baby Michael should be about...ten?"

He nodded; seeing her sad upsetting him. But he had to know, had to understand why she'd hidden herself away for so long. "How are your parents?" He leaned forward, curious. He knew she'd had a falling out with them not long after he had left Tucson. He'd gotten that much out of her brother. He could only assume that it was because of him.

"Oh, fine I guess. My brother tells me they're fine." She waved her hand, dismissing the conversation. "How about yours?"

"Good, good. My younger brother is about to take over the farm so Mom and Dad can retire. I was back there a couple months ago. Daryl has two kids now, you know. Twin girls."

"Aw, that's great." She smiled. "I always liked your little brother. He was nice to me."

"He's a nice guy. Look, I'm sorry about *my* parents...about what happened last time we were here."

She waved her hand again. "It's all in the past. My dad wasn't the nicest to you when he found out about us." She laughed nervously. "Times change. We all get older and hopefully grow out of the prejudice and the stupidity."

He looked down at the table, frowning. "Tanya, I came back here to find you because I..". He raised his head and faced her. "Because I want us to give it another try." He chose those words carefully, not too much stress on her, not the promise of marriage or moving somewhere else or anything that might upset her.

Her smile was sad. A tear did fall and dribble down her cheek. She sniffled and wiped it away. "Well, that was unexpected. I thought you'd come back around eventually. That's what people do. Look up their past to check and see what happened, where everyone ended up. But I never thought you'd want to be with me again." Her voice lowered. "I was such a bitch to you, Braden. And you didn't deserve that. Not from me."

"You were young. I scared you away. I understand that now." He knew it was true, but there was something wrong. She was sadder than he had remembered. "I should have stayed here with you. I'm sorry."

She shook her head, her silver earrings tinkling. "No, Braden. You did what you had to do. You went to war. And I thank God every night that you're alive. All this time I didn't know."

"I should have come back here. To you."

"I should have married you." She shrugged. "Should have. Could have. Would have. You're here now. And I'm happy you are, but I don't think a relationship between us could really work. A lot has happened since we last saw each other. I'm a different person. I like my privacy and my solitude."

His heart lurched. He nodded. He smiled at the waitress who set their plates in front of them and thanked her. This sounded almost like the same conversation they'd had before he left for Atlanta. He'd asked her to marry him and she'd shook her head no. *"It can't work,"* she'd told him. *"I don't want to be here worrying that you're dead or waiting to find out that you've been hurt. I don't want to move around like my parents did. I want to stay here. I want my life."*

He ate and tried to think up something to change her mind. "I think it could work," he finally blurted. "If you'd be willing to try."

She set her fork down and stared at him. He couldn't tell if she was angry or shocked. Maybe it was a little bit of both.

Braden went on. "I think you're scared. That's what the problem is. I mean, come on Tanya, we were good together. We were *happy*. Don't you remember?"

"I remember your parents hated me. I remember my dad wanted to kill you when he found out about us. I remember you left and I was all alone..." Her voice broke up and she began to cry. "And I remember...that...you kept writing to me...even though...I told you to just *leave* me the hell alone."

He scooted out of the booth, not caring that the couple across the aisle was staring at them. Braden sat beside Tanya and pushed her into him, holding her until her tears stopped. "I'm sorry," he whispered and kissed her forehead. "I didn't mean for it to happen like this. I don't think you know how much I loved you, how every night when I was in Iraq and I could hear the mortars going off or I watched my pilots fly out for the day's rounds wondering if they'd make it back in one piece, the only thing I could think of was you."



### Chapter Three

She melted then. Melted right against his big chest and set her ear against Braden's strong heartbeat. He loved her. She'd known all along that he did, but she'd been afraid. She'd been stupid, pushing away anyone and everyone that cared about her so that she could get what she wanted, a life of her own. Well, she never did really get that. Maybe it was time to stop rushing along the road she'd chosen. Maybe she needed to rethink her life.

"I'm sorry, too," she said, clinging to him. "I'm so sorry I hurt you. I wasn't strong enough to wait for you to come back. I wrote to you a thousand times, every night after you left, but I couldn't bring myself to send the letters. I couldn't face it."

He kissed her forehead a second time, his lips warm and comforting. Then his mouth slid down to her cheek where he placed another kiss. Tanya couldn't help it. She lifted her chin and waited while he slowly moved in and kissed her lips. Time stood still. It didn't matter that they were in a public place. It didn't matter that she had ditched him when things got too serious. Nothing else was important except him kissing her. *Braden loves Tanya*, she thought. *And Tanya loves Braden*. It felt like it had the very first time he'd pulled her behind his Chevy truck and stolen a kiss under the shade of the mesquite tree at the side of her parents' house. It felt right.

She heard a child snickering. Embarrassed, she lowered her mouth from Braden's and let him hold her. "What happened after I left?" he asked gently. "I want to know. Your brother wouldn't tell me much."

She sucked in a choked sob and nodded. "All right. Fine. I'll try to explain. But you'll never be able to forgive me. I guess it's time I told you the truth."

He set his fingers under her chin and lifted so that she could see the pain in his eyes. "I'll forgive you, Tanya. I will."

She shook her head and laughed nervously. "Yeah, okay. Let's eat and go somewhere more private."

"Your place?" He looked expectant.

"God no." She didn't want him there. Not yet. It was too soon.

"I have a hotel room." He released her and pulled his plate across the table. "We can go there."

She glanced at her little, gold watch to see how much time she had and nodded. "Yeah. That's fine. I'll follow you there."

Tanya downed her plate of pancakes and eggs, then sipped her juice while she savored the feel of him next to her. She'd only dated two men since Braden had left. Both were the type she had always gone for. The wild type that liked to party and have fun but didn't stick around long once things got serious. She'd thrown herself into her work. She was a self employed marketing consultant contracted with several large companies in Tucson and two in southern California. The pay was great and kept her self sufficient. She hadn't spoken to her parents since after Braden left. She'd left home before they moved to San Antonio. She knew from her brother that her father was stationed at Lackland Air Force Base. Her mother was working there as a teacher last she'd heard. Tanya knew they would never forgive her for the choice she had made back then. Not that she ever gave them a chance to know.

She didn't think Braden could forgive her either.

After their meal, she followed him out of the restaurant and smiled when he took her hand to hold as they walked through the parking lot. "I'm sure you have a lot to tell me," she suggested. "Do you have an ex-wife and kids somewhere back home?"

"Nope." He stared at the sky for a moment, which was clear and bright blue. "No ex-wife. No kids. Never been married, Tanya. You were the one."

Her heart pounded in her chest. It was hard to breathe. "Um well, what's the name of your hotel?" She nodded to the white Camry they had stopped beside. "This is me."

"Hampton Inn by the airport on Tucson Boulevard." He let go of her hand. I'll meet you there."

Tanya edged backward, memorizing the way he looked and thinking it would be so much easier if she went back home for the day instead of what she was about to do. Meeting Braden Williams in the privacy of a hotel room was not going to go well. She likened it to meeting him behind her parents house, or in the darkness of the drive-in theater, or so many other secret, private places they had lost control and gone all the way.

*Then again, she thought, a roll in a hotel bed with him would be worth it. Just once, for old time's sake.*

## Chapter Four

Braden held her hand until they reached his hotel room door. He slid the plastic card in the reader twice before it would let him in. Once inside, he couldn't help himself. Years of fantasizing about what it would be like to have her alone with him had built up into an uncontrollable lust. He had to have her, had to make her his again. Even though he was afraid he'd scare her off, he pulled Tanya against him behind the closed door in the dark of the room and devoured her mouth. He kissed her with all the passion he'd been saving just for her. He kissed her hard and soundly until she started to moan, until her fingers curled into his hair, gently scratching at his scalp. He kissed her until she pressed her pelvis against him. But that only made things worse. It made him want her more. And it made his dick hard.

Like two animals, they rubbed their bodies together in a mock dance of mating. He slipped his hands down to her ass and cupped both firm cheeks. They were just as he remembered. He thrust at her body, half expecting her to wriggle away and escape, but that didn't happen. She met his aggression with her own.

He kissed his way to her ear where he nipped the soft lobe and whispered, "I love you, Tanya. I want you."

She kept moaning as if she couldn't find any words. He lifted her up and pressed her back against the wall, his clothed hardness fitting against her clothed mound. Tanya's legs wrapped around his waist to keep her steady. He licked and kissed his way along her slender neck, wishing they were naked, that they could do it right that moment. It wouldn't be the first time they'd had sex standing up.

"So much for talking," she murmured.

"We can talk in a minute." He kept kissing and nipping at her skin. She trembled his arms, her body tightening as she breathed out a strained cry of release.

"Damn. I've missed you," she said with a sensual laugh. "See what you just did to me. And I still have all my clothes on."

He chuckled, his ego soaring. "Then let me take you to the bed and show you what I can do when you have your clothes off."

Her smile faded. Would she deny him now? Leave angry and full of spitfire like she'd done before so many years ago when he'd said he was being sent to Atlanta and then Iraq?

"Oh, I dare you," she teased. It was his old Tanya, full of fire, but not the cruel, angry kind that had sent him away broken hearted and lost. She wanted him like she did when they were both a pair of raging hormones. Tanya had grown and changed from a shy temptress to a bold woman who tempted him even worse.

He laughed but it came out more like a lusty growl. "I'll take that dare, honey, and I'll make you beg for more."

"Cocky aren't you?"

He carried her toward the bed and danced his hips from side to side so she could feel how cocky he really was. She smiled and kissed his chin, then his mouth until they were locked together again. Breaking that kiss was torture, but he set her on the bed and grinned down at her. "I've missed you so much."

She looked up at him with those big brown eyes that he couldn't get enough of. "I really have missed you, too." She started to fidget with her fingers. He took that as a bad sign and placed his hands on her shoulders. "You want to talk yet?"

She stopped fidgeting and shook her head no.

"Good." He pushed her back until she lay there looking up at him expectantly. Braden stood between her legs and reached down to lift up her dress. She was wearing black lace panties.

Something he knew she used to put on for him. She had worn them today for him too, just in case something like this happened. This epiphany made him feel more secure. She wanted him too, as much as he wanted her. He slipped his finger between her legs to touch the wetness already there on the satin. She quivered. He'd made her come. She hadn't been lying about that.

He knelt before the bed and kissed her inner thigh. He could smell her arousal, the musky scent that he cherished and used to sink his fingers, lips, and tongue into whenever he found the chance. He wanted to do it like that, like they used to, with no inhibitions and with nothing to stop them. But he knew this might be his only chance with her, that he needed to make it last. He kissed her soft mocha skin and worked his way up, higher until he had reached her panties. Then he kissed her there too, causing a startled gasp to escape her. He smiled and kept teasing at her body until his tongue met the hard nub of flesh that was her clit. He worked that little button until he had to hold her hips still to keep her from writhing off the bed.

He knew the exact moment she came because she heaved a groan between her clenched teeth, and her panties became wetter. How he wanted to sink himself into the tight, wet place, so hot and slick and ready. He forced himself to wait.

Braden pulled away her silken panties and let them drop to the carpeted floor. He stared at her center, so soft and delicate looking. He reached up and slipped a finger deep inside her. She bucked, clearly startled, but as he circled his digit against her sensitive insides, she soothed and panted.

When he pulled out, she said, "I want to feel you inside me."

He stood and unbuttoned his shirt. "Are you sure you want to do this?" His conscience screamed at him to shut up and take her. Of course she wanted him. She was here, wasn't she? But he wanted to be a gentleman. He'd pushed her to do a lot when they were younger. And maybe he'd pushed her too far back then.

His shirt dropped atop her discarded panties. Her eyes searched his chest. He moved his fingers to his pants and started to take them off. "Are you sure, Tanya?"

She nodded. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

He pushed away his pants and then his boxers. She stared at his dick, standing proudly up at attention, ready to be buried inside her. He took his position between her legs and dragged her bottom to the very edge of the bed. The head of his length touched her entry and he waited, his fingers sliding up across her smooth skin and underneath her lacey bra. He searched for the front clasp and unhooked it to release her round breasts. Her nipples were firm, jutting out for him to gently pinch and twist. Her hips bucked, setting his dick into her, sliding him into action.

## Chapter Five

She drew him in, her ankles locking behind him, pressing his ass down and his cock deep. For the first time in seven years, Tanya let go of her fears and let everything unfold before her. She had been given a second chance at something she never thought possible. As Braden slowly pumped his hot length into her, she eased, relaxed, and let herself feel every touch he offered to her body, every lowered kiss he pressed to her. When he came, spilling himself in a rush of heat, she smiled, satisfied.

They rested for a little while before he pulled her dress the rest of the way off and climbed fully onto the bed. Braden took the blanket and folded it over their naked bodies, curling against her even as she curled against him. It felt right although she knew it was wrong to lead him on this way. She had every intention of letting him go. This could really never work out. It would be a repeat of the first time, and she knew it would hurt, but she wanted this small time with him. They cuddled in solemn silence for a long while.

"So, how did you find my brother? Half the time I don't even know where he is, and he isn't good at returning calls."

Braden laughed. "It wasn't easy, I'll admit." He shifted until he had his arms about her waist. Face to face, they stared into each other's eyes. "I was at a bar in Indiana. He was playing drums with the band, and I recognized him right off. I found him totally by accident."

"Ah fate. I guess." Her brother had always been the wild and reckless one, more so than her. She always thought her parents would disown Kendi. He'd done a lot of stupid things growing up, and they'd always forgiven him. But not her. *No, they'll never forgive me for what I've done.*

"He didn't want to give me your home number. I practically got down on my hands and knees and begged for your cell."

"I bet you did."



"Ask him." He sounded serious. "Let me tell you we got a lot of weird looks for that moment. The worst mistake I ever made in my life was taking no for an answer from you. Shit happens, I know. You said that then, but that doesn't mean I should have given up as easily as I did. I should have come right back here when I had leave, every time. I should have hunted you down."

"Like a crazy stalker?"

He chuckled and nodded. "Exactly."

"You did try, Braden. You did when you came back from Atlanta. You tried by writing even after what happened with my dad. It was my fault for not answering your letters. Then I moved out of my parents' house and well, no one could find me for a long time. I wanted it that way."

"Your brother found you."

She shrugged. "He's practically a stalker anyways. I'm surprised he survived high school. He's done every illegal drug known to man, been in three car wrecks where the vehicles he was in were totaled, and I can't even count how many times I've had to bail him out of some stupid nonsense he's gotten himself into. He probably paid some damn mobster to locate me."

"His girlfriend sounds nice. She's straightening him up, or at least that's what he said."

She humphed in disbelief and closed her eyes, breathing in the wonderful scent of Braden's skin. The room smelled like sex and fresh linens. She wished she could wake up to him every morning and go to bed with him every night. Tanya couldn't believe how easily they'd reconnected or that she'd done what she had just done.

"I'm glad he found you. And Tanya," his voice turned stern. "You really should call your parents. I'm sure they want to know where you are."

"My brother likely gives them updates."

"No. He said he swore to you that he wouldn't. He said your mom really misses you."

She sighed. "I'll bet my dad doesn't. There's a lot that happened after you left, Braden. My parents didn't want me, and with good reason."

"I'm sorry I came between you and your family." He kissed her cheek and rubbed her lower back in slow circles. "I was stupid and young. And in love with you. I didn't think your father would freak out like he did."

She took in a deep breath. "No poor white boy from Kansas is gonna marry my daughter," she said, mimicking her dad's deep voice. "He's just using you and you're stupid for letting him."

"I wasn't using you, Tanya."

She thought back and smiled at the memories. "No, I believe it was quite the other way around. I'm certain I was using you and enjoying every second of it. It was a rush to keep us a secret, to sneak around behind my dad's back. Looking back now I know why I did it. I'd always wanted his approval, and you were something I know I'd never get his approval on. I loved you, but I was so young."

"People change," he suggested, referring to her father.

She shook her head. "Maybe. Some people. Not him. He'll never accept that I loved you, that you weren't using me for sex because you could. In his eyes I'm nothing but a whore."

"You're not a whore. Don't ever say that."

"That's what he called me. His daughter the whore giving it away to any white boy that came knocking. It doesn't matter. It's over. I never want to see him again. Maybe I could meet up with Mom if I could do it without Dad knowing. I feel bad for what happened, for running like I did. But it had to be done and then when I found out..." She stopped. Tanya couldn't bring herself to say it.

Not yet. Maybe she could never tell him. Besides, who was she kidding? Braden would go back to work in two weeks and be shuffled around to a different base every three to five years. She still didn't want that kind of life.

"Found out what?" he pressed.

"Nothing. Never mind. Where have *you* been all this time?"

He stopped rubbing her back and a look of sorrow spread over his face. "Iraq for four years. It was hell. I lost two guys there, friends. I had a hard time after that. A lot of nightmares. Then they sent me back to the states. I've moved a few times. Last station was at Grissom Air Force Base in Indiana. I usually got a place on base, kept to myself."

"How many girlfriends have you had since me?"

"I dated a few times, but when things got serious..."

She groaned. "You copped out. I've heard that story before."

"Not exactly. When it got serious I knew they weren't for me. I knew I needed to find you. Yeah, I had issues with commitment, but you can't blame me."

"I messed you up pretty bad."

"Yeah. You did." He ran his fingers over her cheek and then through her hair. "I think you should fix me. I'm tired of missing you, tired of waking up alone. You should be with me. We belong together even if nobody else thinks so."

"My brother thought we did," she said.

"Thank God for that," Braden said with a laugh. "He wasn't too keen about your dad walking in on us."

"I wasn't too keen on that moment either." She grimaced. "After he threw you out, he laid into me pretty bad. Every day following I had to hear the same lecture. Mom didn't say much. But it kept getting worse. And you were gone. Maggie and Sheila had started college at NAU. I didn't have any place to get away from Dad. So, I took the stuff that meant something to me and I left. I didn't know where I was going, only that I had to get out of there. I left a note so they'd know I wasn't kidnapped and that I wasn't with you. I stayed with Harvey Galman. Remember him?"

"Yeah. Good old Harvey. He was a funny guy."

"Total gentleman. He drove me up to NAU and helped me find a place. I studied there for four years, got my degree, and started my own business. After a while, things took off, and I was able to work from home or commute to the companies I represent." She went silent. Tanya was leaving a big part out. A huge part. But she didn't want to tell him.

He'd be pissed.

"Sounds like things have worked out well for you." He traced her cheek, staring fondly into her eyes. "Did you ever miss me?"

"Every night."

"Stay here in the hotel with me for the weekend. Pretend it's a vacation. Stay the two weeks. You don't have to go home."

"Tempting," she breathed out the word. "So tempting. But I can't. I have some things I have to take care of. Work and such. I can't be away from home long."

"Will I see you tomorrow? The day after?"

This was going to be hard. She'd hurt him when he found out, but the truth was, she was tired of being alone too, tired of waking up without him next to her. She knew she needed him more than

she would allow herself to admit. "Where is this going to go between us, Braden? Nothing has changed for me. I don't want to move. I don't want to be waiting, terrified that you're going to get killed if you have to go to war again. I can't live like that. It hurts too much."

He shook his head. "Look Tanya, one thing I learned is that we only get this life. We don't get a lot of second chances. We get one shot to do the things we love. I love you, and I love my job. It's what I was made to do whether you can understand that or not. I'm not asking you to move or change your whole life. I'm just asking to be a part of your life."

She closed her eyes and shook her head no. "You always make everything sound so simple."

"It really is."

She stayed three hours with him, talking about old times, about how much fun they used to have. She told him about her job and how much she loved the freedom it gave her. "You could do that kind of work from anywhere," he said, hoping she'd see that. But she'd glossed over his suggestion and started talking about where Maggie and Sheila had ended up.

"Maggie moved to Colorado for a while, got married, had two kids. Then he cheated on her and they divorced. She stayed with me for a while. Says she owes me for that. She was a mess." Tanya slipped off the bed and pulled on her clothes. She sat on the loveseat by the window, watching Braden get dressed.

"Sheila was different. She never stays with a man more than a few months. I don't think she'll ever settle down."

"What about Harvey?" He crossed the room and plopped onto the couch by Tanya. She thought she heard jealousy in his words.

"Oh, he's still got it bad for Sheila. She'll never see him as more than anything but a friend. I don't know why." She reached for Braden's hand and their fingers intertwined. "He's a nice guy. He'd take care of her."

"I'm a nice guy." He waggled his eyebrows, grinning, but she knew he meant it. "I'll take care of you, Tanya, for the rest of your life."

"I can...take care of myself."

He pouted but was unable to stop smiling. "I know you can. I know."

She looked at her watch. Her time was almost up. "I better get going."

He squeezed her hand. "I wish you'd stay."

"I know. But I have to get back." She left out the reason why. She knew she'd have to tell him eventually, just not yet. Not until she felt like he really would stay. If he was going to give up on her, then it was better off that he didn't know."

"Can I see you tomorrow?"

She got up and her hand left his. "Maybe after church. I have your number. I'll give you a call, okay?"

"Promise?" There was a sad doubt in his eyes.

"I promise, Braden. We'll spend some more time with each other. I'll regret it when you have to go back. But I guess that's my choice."

She snatched up her car keys and her purse where they'd fallen on the floor. When she stood up straight, he was in front of her, pulling her close and tight, hugging away her resistance. Then he let her go, and she practically ran away.

Safe in her car, she let it all out and cried until she'd made it back to her house. In the driveway, parked by Maggie's minivan, Tanya wiped away her tears and composed herself. She didn't want Brady to see her like this.

## Chapter Six

Sunday morning, Braden drove on base, flashing his ID at the checkpoint before they waved him through. Davis-Monthan was familiar, another place he knew well. He drove past the Burger King on the corner thinking his whole idea had been crazy. But he could pull it off. He'd asked, and they'd said yes. There was a position available here if he wanted it, and he wanted to come back to Tucson now, permanently.

He met with the crew chief and walked through the flight line, glancing at the A-10s. He answered the other man's questions without really paying attention. It was standard military small talk and polite courtesy. His mind was fixed on Tanya. His fingers kept reaching for his cell, anticipating that fateful ring. He knew it was too early. Churches let out at noon. And what was she doing going to church anyways? *People change*, he reminded himself. She probably had her reasons. Besides, by choice she had no family now and church likely offered that kind of support.

When the crew chief took his leave, Braden made his way back to his rental car and looked up at the sky. He and Tanya had come to an air show here. They had a good time, ate hot dogs and junk food, and marveled at the planes twisting through the heavens.

Her voice trailed through his thoughts. That one unfinished sentence. "*... and then when I found out...*"

*Found out what?* he wondered. She had been about to tell him something important, but she'd evaded him, changed the subject to him and drawn his attention away. He got in the car and drove out to the housing area, looking over what could be his next place of residence. Every yard was immaculate, clean and tidy just like the military ordered them to be. At the little park he passed, he saw children playing a game of tag. Parents watched from a Ramada, smoke trailing up from the little barbeque. It wasn't a bad life, but he guessed he could understand why Tanya hadn't wanted it.

He thought he ought to call the Parkinsons and see when they might want to get together. Maybe he could persuade Tanya to go with him. He knew that family still lived in the same house. Stacie



Parkinson had been sending him Christmas cards every year with little family newsletters in them. She was one of those people who kept up with everyone. He'd been a jerk for not responding.

He picked up his cell and dialed their number. It was a way to pass the time until Tanya called him, and it was time he reconnected. They'd been good friends back in the old days.

It rang four times before Stacie's unmistakable voice answered. "Hello?"

"Hey Stacie, it's Braden. You remember me?"

She squealed and in the background he heard a child crying. "Braden, oh my goodness, how are you?"

"Good, good. I'm in Tucson for a couple weeks. I wondered if you and Mike might want to get together."

"Absolutely. We're free this afternoon. We can cook up some burgers out back. Sound good?"

He hadn't expected that. "Can I bring a friend?"

"Sure! I'll tell Mike. He'll be excited to see you again. Man, it's been a long time. You ever keep up with Tanya's family? Last I heard she ran off and they haven't heard from her for years."

He frowned. "Yeah, I ran into her brother about a month ago. He plays drums in a funky bar band in Indiana. You believe that?"

"At least he's doing something. That boy was always into trouble."

"What time do you want me to come by?"

"How about 1:30? That gives me time to pick up the place. The baby is such a mess. She follows behind me when I clean and wreaks havoc. Wow," she said. "It's great to hear from you."

"You too, Stacie. I'll see you this afternoon."

They said their goodbyes and hung up. He pulled away from the park and headed off base. Ten past twelve, his cell rang and he pulled over, fumbling to answer. "Hello?"

"Hi Braden." It was Tanya. Her voice sounded light, happy. He could hear a bunch of people talking in the background and children laughing.

"You still at church?"

"Just got out. Do you still want to see me today?"

"Yes. I have a date all set up. Are you okay to see Stacie and Mike? She invited me over for lunch at 1:30."

"Oh." Her voice changed with that single syllable. "Um, I don't know."

"Come on. It'll be fun to see them again."

She was quiet for a little while before she answered. "All right. I'll meet you there."

"Won't let me pick you up?"

She laughed, sounding nervous. "Then how can I escape if things get weird?"

"Things won't get weird."

"No thanks, Braden. I'll meet you there. The sooner you know where my house is, the sooner you'll be showing up on my doorstep with those sad puppy dog eyes."

"I see how you are. You know you wouldn't be able to resist."

"Yeah well, we saw how well I resisted you yesterday. At least I'll be safe at the Parkinson's place. You're not going to trap me in a dark corner there, are you?"

"I might."

She laughed. "We'll see. I'm gonna go home and change, get some things taken care of, and I'll see you there."

The phone clicked and he set it down while he watched cars zip past on Craycroft. It felt like he was going back to the beginning of their relationship, like he could start it all over again. Braden turned on the radio and headed north. He wanted to pick up something to bring to the barbeque, and he knew just what to get.

At 1:30 he showed up in front of the old white house on 5th where he had first met Tanya Harrison. He balanced the chocolate cake in one hand and knocked.

"Coming!" he heard Stacie shout followed by a childish echo of, "Mama's comin'!"

He scanned the street for Tanya's car, but didn't see any sign of her. *Maybe she's just running late.* The door opened and he recognized the red-headed woman standing there with a spatula in one hand and an apron tied over her waist.

"Hey! Look at you!" She hugged him sideways and grabbed the cake box. "Oh the kids are going to love this. Thanks." She waved her spatula. "Come on out back. Mike's got the grill going."

He followed her inside and shut the door. The house had seen some upgrades. The fireplace had a wooden mantle now, and the furniture looked new.

"I thought you were bringing someone."

Stacie's daughter ran across the hallway into the kitchen, dressed in tights and a pink tutu. She poked her head around the door jamb and stared at him with big blue eyes. Braden waved at her. "Yeah, she's not here yet."

"She?" Stacie set the cake on the counter and opened the oven to flip over the crinkle cut fries inside. "Who is this she?"

He reached down and ruffled the little girl's blonde hair. "Tanya."

Stacie shut the oven and spun around to face him. "*Tanya* Tanya?"

"Yeah." He felt uncomfortable all of a sudden, as if he'd just told her he was about to bring someone back from the dead.

Stacie looked perplexed. "God Braden, how did you find her?"

"I begged her cell number off her brother when I bumped into him at that bar in Indiana. It wasn't easy. But it turns out he's known it for about a year."

"That little sh—" She quickly covered her mouth and glanced at her daughter. "Oh my God, Braden. Do you know how long her mother has been trying to find her? She's going to be mad when she finds out he kept that secret."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe you should talk to Tanya about it. I already suggested she call her parents. We met up yesterday at IHOP."

Stacie fanned herself as if she were about to pass out. "Wow, what a shock. Is she... I mean, how is she? Is she all right?"

"She's older. Sounds like she has a great job."

Stacie leaned against the counter. "Wow, wow, wow. I can't believe this. Is she married?"

He shook his head.

"Are you trying to get back with her, Braden? I know what happened with you two. Her mom told me all about it. Is that why you're here?"

He pointed at her and half smiled. "You guessed it. Can't keep any secrets from you. Never could."

The doorbell rang. Stacie all but ran for the door, leaving Braden and the little girl alone. He bent down and introduced himself. "Hi. I'm Braden. What's your name?"

She eyed him suspiciously. "Amanda." Then she peered up at the counter. "When do we get to eat the cake?"

"After lunch. But if you can keep a secret, I'll let you sneak some frosting right now."

She nodded. He picked her up and held her over the box so she could open it and stab the cake with her finger.

"Don't tell," he said and set her back down.

She sucked away the evidence and ran off down the hall to the back door.

Stacie squealed even louder than she had when she'd opened the door on Braden. He listened to Tanya's voice, thinking this might work out okay in the end. She really should try to reconnect with her family. So much time had passed and time healed all wounds.

The women stepped into the kitchen and Tanya set down a container of potato salad. She looked over at Braden and smirked. "Chocolate cake?"

"Mmmhm. You have a problem with that?"

She shook her head. He knew she remembered that day so long ago and the mangled cake he'd brought out to her. "Where's Mike?"

"Out back," Stacie blurted. "Come on. He'll be so surprised."

Braden followed after them while Stacie led Tanya outside. The backyard had really changed a lot. There was a thick green lawn, a wood jungle gym, and a patio with a nice wrought iron table set. The old redwood picnic tables they'd had years before were gone. There was still a dog run on one side that spilled over to the front yard, and Akitas lifted their heads to watch the commotion.

## Chapter Seven

Tanya pulled Mike into a friendly hug. "Good to see you," she said. He gawked at her, clearly stunned and finally returned the greeting.

"Burgers are almost done." He motioned to the table. "Have a seat, you two."

"Where's Baby Michael?" Tanya settled in and looked around, half expecting a tow-headed boy to come running up to her.

"He's in his room playing video games," Stacie said. "I'll drag him out here and make him be sociable."

Braden sat down beside Tanya and held out his hand. She hesitated. These were her parents' old friends. Now that they knew she was around, it was only a matter of time before she'd have to face them. She thought maybe she shouldn't have come here. But then again, as she placed her hand in Braden's, maybe it was time to do things her way and not worry about what her parents thought.

Mike's eyes caught the hand-hold. His stern face lit up with a quick smile. Stacie went inside to bring out the food and her son. She too, flashed a smile Tanya's way. Soon they were all eating lunch together like old times. Baby Michael was now just Mikey. He said he remembered Tanya, that he still had a few of the doodles she'd made for him of planes and trucks.

"He sure grew up fast," Braden commented.

"Yeah, they do." Tanya eyed the boy and his much younger sister. The Parkinsons were a happy family. Her chest suddenly felt tight. Maybe she didn't want to move or worry that the man she loved would get killed overseas, but she did want what they had here in this backyard. A family. A family that loved each other and took care of each other. A family that had barbeques in the backyard and didn't care if their house was old or new. This realization struck her hard. So much,

that after they'd eaten their pieces of cake and Mike and Stacie were inside cleaning up, Tanya leaned over and said, "Braden, there's something I haven't told you."

"What is it?" By his face she knew that he thought it was something serious.

"I think it's better if I show you. Can we go to my place after this?"

"Yeah, sure."

After another hour of visiting, Tanya and Braden took their leave promising they'd all get together again real soon. He walked her to her car and planted a warm kiss on her lips before she knew it was even coming. She kissed him a second time, savoring the closeness. This might be the last time she got to do so. When he found out what she'd been hiding, he'd either be mad or he'd forgive her.

"Follow me," she said.

"Anywhere." He backed to his car and she got in hers, second guessing this decision. It would affect more than Braden and her. She had protected her secret from her family. Even her brother didn't know.

She took 5th to Swan and kept below the speed limit so she wouldn't lose Braden. *Lose Braden.* Tanya sighed. She turned into her neighborhood and drove two streets over to where her little house stood. Maggie's minivan was parked in its usual spot. Braden parked at the curb.

Hand in hand, they went to the door and she led him inside. It smelled like Maggie had been cooking again. Baking cookies. "Hey Maggie. I'm back."

"Oh hey girl." Maggie came out of the kitchen into the den. Her usual cheery face fell into a look of dread. "Oh. Hey Braden." She sounded grim.

He didn't seem to notice. "Hi Maggie. Long time no see."



She nodded, her brown curls bobbing. "Well, let's see. I guess I better leave you two and get out of here. There's a last pan of cookies in the oven, Tanya. Should be ready in about five minutes." She bit her lip. "And Brady's napping on the couch in the den."

"Thanks Maggie. I really appreciate you looking after him for me on such short notice."

Maggie smiled and went to get her stuff. She called to her girls who were playing out back and then she and her troop hurried out, leaving Tanya and Braden alone with their son. For the first time.

Braden looked puzzled. Tanya led him into the den and waved her hand at the little boy asleep on the couch, his dark, curly hair a perfect match to his father's. "He has your eyes," she said, her voice cracking with emotion. She went and sat beside her son and ran her fingers over his face. His skin wasn't as light as Braden's or as dark as hers. He let out a soft moan and settled.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking up at Braden's face. "So very sorry."

## Chapter Eight

Braden felt like he'd been hit by a semi. He could hardly breathe or think, much less move. His son. He stared down at the little boy. Son. His son. His son, Brady. God, she'd named the boy after him. And her damn brother hadn't told him. Even Tanya hadn't told him. She should have told him over the phone when he called. Hell, she should have told him when she found out she was pregnant.

He swallowed and took a step back. She looked miserable, her face downcast, her shoulders trembling.

*And she should be miserable*, he thought. Damn her for keeping his son from him, hiding the child like some dark secret. He was a father, damn it, and she hadn't even given him a chance to be that. Another step backwards. Another and another until he was in the kitchen looking at them with wide eyes.

Tanya raised her face and shook her head. "You go on, now, Braden. Just go. You have every right to hate me."

He reached to the side and caught hold of the wall's edge, steadying himself. Hate her? She thought he hated her for this? Did he hate her? He didn't know. He didn't know what to think at all.

His eyes sought out the child, the curve of his round face, his legs all curled up and tucked in. His body was so tiny. He guessed the boy was about five. Five would make him the result of what had happened when Braden had rushed to Tanya's parents' house that night so long ago. He hadn't used any protection then. He had really screwed up her life more than he knew.

"Just go," she said again, her voice soft, defeated. "I shouldn't have brought you here. I should have had fun with you and cried every night after you left. That would have been easier than this."

*Easier?* He turned his back on them and walked away. Past the kitchen with its sweet melting chocolate scent, past the little green couch in the front room and the vase of white roses on the

coffee table. By the front door he stopped and stared at the bookshelf, something there catching his eye. It was a photograph of them together in the Parkinson's backyard. Two plates of cake in front of them and Tanya smiling at him, looking happy. It wasn't in a frame. Just sitting there propped against books as if it had been pulled out hastily and set there as a reminder.

He opened the front door to the heat and looked at his rental car parked by the curb. He took another step and heard the unmistakable sound of 'Tanya' sniffing, crying, hurt because he was about to do the one thing he had promised he wouldn't. He had told her he would forgive her. *But I didn't know what she wanted forgiveness for.*

He looked back into the room. Everything was neat and orderly, perfectly placed and organized. The place smelled like her, sweet and floral. It was a small house, but it was hers. The child was hers too. She'd been selfish to raise him alone without his father. Maybe she wanted it to stay that way. Hiding from her family was one thing, but hiding from him?

He heaved a sigh.

\* \* \* \*

The door shut. She heard it and she breathed out a raked sob. Tanya leaned back into the couch and covered her face with her hands. Regret filled her up so completely that for the first time in her life, she didn't know what to do.

Her first mistake was telling Braden no, that she wouldn't marry him when he was going to have to move to Atlanta. Her second mistake was not trying to find him after she found out she was pregnant.

Instead of doing the right thing, she'd ran away from everyone. She'd started school up at NAU and attended classes and worked nights all through her pregnancy. She'd had the baby alone, with Maggie and Sheila helping as much as they could. But more Maggie. Sheila had blamed Braden for the baby and been upset about it all. Tanya thought maybe her own mistakes had changed Sheila, made her hate men and use them.

Tanya closed her eyes, tears spilling down her cheeks. She held her little boy close, thankful that he was still asleep, and tried to stay determined to go on as she had all this time. *I don't need him*, she thought, trying to convince herself. *I can take care of myself. I can take care of Brady. I can do anything I set my mind to.*

The oven beeped. The cookies were done. She didn't feel like getting up. *Let them burn.* Served her right for bringing Braden here, for hiding his son from him.

Several minutes later, the beep sounded again.

She sucked in a sad breath and got up, careful not to disturb Brady. As she stepped into the kitchen, she heard the sound of the oven door opening. She stopped and gawked. Braden hadn't left. He was getting the pan of cookies out with a funny cow head potholder on his hand.

She stood there and watched as he turned off the oven and then set the pan on the stove. He looked at her sideways, no smile, no frown, and then started to take the cookies off with a scraper and set them gently on the cooling rack. "I expect to get a few of these."

"Wh-what?"

"I'm helping get them out, so I expect to get my share of them." He set the last one on the rack and pulled off the potholder, dropping it on the counter. "I hope you have milk."

"I do."

"Good." He started for her and she felt the undeniable urge to run. But he caught her up in his arms too fast to let her escape this time. "I hope you don't mind me coming around either. I'm going to be stationed here next month, and if everything works out, I'll be here for a long time, maybe forever."

She buried her face against his chest and half laughed, half cried.

"You thought I'd leave you, didn't you, Tanya?"

She nodded.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'll never leave you again."

She sobbed while he held her. He kissed her face until her tears finally dried up. There was nothing to cry about now. He had found out and he had stayed.

"I forgive you," he whispered against her ear. "I told you I would. I love you, Tanya. I want you. I need you. You're everything to me. I'm going to ask again, right now, and if you say no, I'll keep on asking until you change your mind." He let go of her and knelt on the tiled floor. "Will you marry me?"

She shook her head no, but blurted out a, "Yes."

He stood and took her hand, then the two of them went to sit on the couch by their child and waited for the cookies to cool. They sat in silence, hands clasped, faces turned to each other, and Tanya was happy. For the first time in years, she was truly happy. "I love you," she told him. "I've always loved you and only you."

## Chapter Nine

Brady woke up and frowned at Braden. He stretched his arms up high and yawned. The little boy smiled wide. "Cookies are ready, Mamma. Auntie Maggie made them for me." He looked around and then back at his father.

*I'm a father*, Braden kept thinking. It would take time to get used to that fact. He hoped his son would accept him. He didn't know what Tanya had told him about his father, how much he knew or didn't know.

Brady jabbed a finger into Braden's chest. "I saw you in Mama's pictures."

"You want some cookies?" Tanya asked.

The child nodded and the three of them went into the kitchen for their snack. Braden got milk out of the fridge while Tanya placed cookies on three small plates. They sat at the little table and nibbled at their cookies in silence, the child smiling and staring at his father.

"I'm Braden," he said to his son. "But if you want, you can call me Dad."

The boy nodded, taking this in as he downed a second cookie. "Mama has a lot of pictures of you." He reached for his milk and drank, then wiped his milk moustache off on his arm. Tanya gave him a napkin. "She told me about you. Told me you had to go away and fight in a war."

"I did. But I'm back now." Braden bent down and became serious. "Do you think it's okay if I stay here with you and your mom?"

Brady narrowed his eyes. He looked up at Tanya. "I don't know. What do you think?"

"I think he should stay with us now, baby." She placed another cookie onto their son's plate.

The child shrugged. "Mom says that's fine. You can stay."

Braden knew it would be a while before his son would understand everything. But he had time now, and he looked forward to getting know his boy and his wife-to-be all over again. He returned to the hotel to pick up his suitcase and check out. The next two weeks he'd be by Tanya and Brady where he belonged. He'd take in every moment and enjoy it. He knew he'd have to go back to Indiana to take care of things before he could move back to Tucson permanently. That month would be the longest of his life now that he had found what he'd lost so long ago.

That night, he read Braden a bedtime story and tucked the boy in, Tanya watching over them from the doorway. He'd missed out on so many things already. Diapers, first words, potty-training, and so many other things a father should have been there for. Tanya took his hand and led him to her bedroom. She turned down the covers. They both climbed beneath the quilt. "I told him his daddy was in Iraq."

"Well, that part was true." He reached for her and tugged Tanya in close. "But didn't he ever ask when I was coming back or why I never called?"

She nodded. "I was pretty good at diversions. He starts school in August. I knew things would be harder to explain then. This is the only life he's ever known. A mommy and two aunties that help take care of him when Mommy has to work." She slipped her hand around Braden's waist. "And a daddy who couldn't be here."

"I'll be here now."

"I know. Thanks, Braden. Thank you for finding me, for not giving up on me. Thanks for coercing my brother into giving you my number. I've felt so lost for such a long time, hurrying along to get that life I always thought I wanted."

"Life is what happens when you're making other plans, huh?"

"That's what they say."

"They're usually right. Tomorrow we can make wedding plans." He kissed her cheek and moved to her mouth. "Now be quiet, honey. I want to make love to my fiancée."

She giggled. "Don't go too crazy. You'll wake up your son."

"Mmm. I can be quiet. I've had practice at that with you. Besides, you're the one that always needed to be shushed." He slid his lips along hers, kissing tenderly until she kissed him back. Her fingers circled his skin, teasing, awakening his arousal like she had always been able to do. Tanya snuck her fingers down the back of his pants and past his boxers. She squeezed.

He obeyed and pushed himself against her. His dick was thickening for what was to come. She groaned, and he said, "Sh. Be quiet."

Her little laugh only made him want her more. Braden ran his hand over her breast, pausing at the center to tweak her nipple until it reached for him. Her nightdress buttoned down the front. He made quick work of that. Dipping his head beneath the quilt, he found the peaked flesh and sucked it into his mouth. Tanya's nails ran up along his back until she was cradling his face in her hands while he nipped and tasted her breast. He moved to the other one, lavishing his tongue over her until she groaned a second time.

Down into her panties he pressed his fingers until he found her wet slit. Up and down he stroked her. Her breathing became frantic. He could tell she was about to explode. So he eased off and moved away from her. She let out a small cry of disappointment.

"Bad girl," he said in a whisper. "You're supposed to be quiet."

"You make that difficult."

She reached for him. He shook his head and took hold of her body. "On your tummy. I want to take you from behind."



She complied, rolling over and offering him her ass. He smoothed his hands over her cheeks, pulling down her lacy panties to expose her. Braden propped her hips up higher and bent his knees between her legs, readying. He took hold of his dick and ran the head up and down her slit, mimicking what he'd done with his fingers only moments before.

She responded by pushing back, inviting him to enter. He did, pushing in slowly until he was buried as far as he could go. Braden leaned against her and held her hips, starting a rhythm that kept him buried deep. He could see her fisting the sheets already, her face turned to one side and pressed to the pillow. Her eyes were pinched shut. Her mouth turned into a pleased frown of tension. He picked up the pace.

## Chapter Ten

The bed started to creak the harder he pounded his length into her depths. Tanya was doing her best to keep quiet, but it was a challenge. His strong hands held her steady to meet each slam of his body colliding with hers. She clenched her teeth, feeling the tingling tickle sweep over her. It built with each desperate intake of breath she took until it became unbearable. She stopped the cry that caught in her throat. Her orgasm gripped her body, curling her toes and making her drag the sheets in her fists until she felt Braden lean back, spearing her as he suffered his own release.

"Mmm," he said, grinding from side to side, increasing their ecstasy. His hold on her waist lessened until his hands swept down to her ass again, fondling the roundness, caressing. "That was so good." He guided her back down until he was holding her from behind, tight, wrapped in his muscular arms, safe and protected. Loved.

She fell asleep, totally exhausted and didn't wake in the middle of the night as usual. Morning came and brightened the window, waking her. Tanya lay still in his arms. This was the first time she'd awakened beside him, the first time she didn't have to hide the man she loved. She ran her fingers up and down his forearm cherishing this brief, silent moment of peace.

*Things need to change.* She lay there until he stirred and kissed her shoulder.

"Hungry, honey?"

"Yeah." She remembered he liked to cook. "What are you making for breakfast?"

He kissed her shoulder a second time. "Eggs if you have them. Bacon?"

"You're in luck."

"Good." He backed out of the bed, and she watched him pull on his pants. His hair was sticking up at the back of his head a little. He needed a shave, and his hazel eyes were half closed.

"Make some coffee too," she suggested with a laugh. "Looks like you need it."

He chuckled. "Okay."

She watched his ass as he sauntered out of the bedroom. Pots and pans rattled and clunked. The fridge opened and shut a few times. Soon the scent of sizzling bacon filled the house followed by the strong smell of coffee. Her mouth watered. She couldn't wait to get out there and start the first day of the rest of her life with the man she loved. But as she swept her legs over the side of the bed, she noticed her grandmother's jewelry box. She opened it and stared at the picture on the top of the pile. It was Braden and her dad at another party. She had taken that one. The two men were talking, her father wearing his usual joking grin, and Braden so serious. Behind her father, her mother was bent over a table of cards, but she'd turned her head up slightly so that she was looking right at the camera.

God, she missed her mother. And she had to admit she missed her father too, just a little. They weren't perfect, probably wouldn't want her back in their lives after she'd hurt them so badly. But she leaned over and picked up the cell. She had to try.

She dialed her brother's number. He answered after seven rings, his voice groggy.

"Hi Kendi. It's big sis."

"Oh hey! How you doin'?"

"What the hell were you thinking giving Braden my cell number?" She had to force herself not to smile. The other end of the line was quiet for a long time.

"Um, shit. I'm sorry," he finally said. "I guess I really screwed that one up."

She burst out laughing. He kept saying, "What?" over and over until she caught her breath. "You're the best brother in the world," she said. "You saw what I couldn't see."

"So, it's okay?"

"Yes, Kendi. You brought him back to me. If not for you..." She shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. "Look, I know it's been way too long but I want us to get together. There's something I haven't told you."

"What?" he asked.

"You're an uncle. You have been for about five years. I think it's time you met your nephew and time Mom and Dad met their grandchild."

Silence again. "Wait a minute. Hold up." She heard the phone clunking and Kendi shouting to someone else, probably his girlfriend because he was shushed and shouted at soon after. "Okay Sis, that's great and all but the hell if I'm calling Mom and tellin' her that. She's still pissed at me for getting Letty knocked up."

"Letty's the best thing that ever happened to you."

"I know. I know that." He sighed. "But you did this shit to yourself, Sis. You gotta be the one to make the call. I've done a lot of messed up stuff in my short time here on this planet, but you know I always took responsibility for it. It's time for you to do that too."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right." She reached for her journal and the pencil she kept at the bedside. "Give me Mom's number. I'll call her right now."

He gave her the phone number and she wrote it out, repeating it to be sure. She didn't want to get this wrong and mess it up.

"It's good to have you back," Kendi said. "I hope it all works out."

"It will," she said, smiling but worried. "I'll find a way to make it work."

She got off the phone with her brother. Hesitating, she listened to Brady playing mini-interrogator with his father. The little boy loved to ask questions that never ended. Braden would have to get used to the "Why, why, why?"

Tanya picked up her cell and dialed. At five rings she was about to hang up when she heard a faint, "Hello?"

"Hi Mom. It's me, Tanya."

**The End**

## About the Author

Anastasia Rabiya writes erotic romance, paranormal erotic romance, and dark fantasy. She often crosses genres in order to follow her muses into the darkness where they seek out destiny in all its forms. She believes in fairies, demons, angels, magic, passion, chocolate, supportive friends, e-books, and writing critique groups. Her deepest desire is to pursue her creative dreams and realize them. Every spare moment she devotes to writing for her haunting muses. She lives in Tucson, Arizona with her husband and three sons.

Visit her on the web at: [www.RabiyaBooks.com](http://www.RabiyaBooks.com)

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