



LOVE, LOST & FOUND

Jean Joachim

Ben Tanner

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Chapter One

“PETERSON!” Staff-Sergeant Jacobs yelled.

“Here Jacobs,” Peterson replied.

“Major Davis wants to see you STAT!”

“Roger,” Peterson said as he rose from his cot, threw on his utilities, donned his cover, and headed to the Major’s quarters.

“Sergeant Peterson reporting as ordered sir.”

“Come in Peterson.” The Major shifted in his chair.

Mick walked into the tent, stood at attention, waiting to see what this was all about.

“At ease. This is an informal meeting Peterson.”

“Yes sir.” Mick relaxed his stance a little.

“I saw your reaction to that letter. It was a *Dear John*, wasn’t it?”

“Yes sir.” Mick dropped his gaze to the floor.

“Sergeant, you’ve been an exceptional member of my group since I got you reassigned to Joint Operations Special Task Force—JOSTF”

“Thank you sir, I try.”

“Quit sir’ing me Mick, I said this was informal. We’ve been beating up bullies together since the sixth grade, pulling Jenny MacBain’s hair and harassing Mr. Pratt in Love Lost and Found 9

science class...we've both lost some good friends in the past few weeks, now this...a woman, worse than any bully we faced. After more than twelve years of all kinds of shit, you'd think we'd seen it all...all happen to other guys...now you...damn her." The Major stood up and walked to the window. "Remember that shack in St. Thomas my grandfather left me? I'm granting you an emergency two week leave so I can send you there. Get laid...lie on the beach, get drunk...get her out of your system. Get your head straight. God knows you're no use to me or your team this way." He returned to his desk and sank down into his chair.

* * * *

On the plane in Atlanta, Mick located his seat. Seat 20-A, right next to the emergency exit. A slightly balding, muscular man, was sitting in 20-B. Upon seeing Mick, he reached out his hand in greeting.

"The name's David Wilkins."

Mick shook his hand, "Peterson, Mick Peterson."

"Military huh? Marines?"

"Yes sir, about thirteen years now."

"My dad was in the Marines in Korea and Viet Nam. I joined the reserves after high school to help pay for college."

"Small world," Mick replied. "Nice meeting you...I don't want to appear rude, but I've been in the air almost twenty-five hours...haven't gotten much sleep. I am going to *try* to catch up now."

"No problem, not rude at all."

In no time, the plane was in the air for the four-hour flight to St. Thomas. Mick was asleep within minutes.

* * * *

Atlanta, two hours earlier

The heat of a stare interrupted Tara's thoughts. The man standing next to her in line at airport security trained his gaze on her chest. She crossed her arms but he simply moved his eyes to her rear end.

Tara tried glaring back at him but he grinned at her, stepping closer, making her more uncomfortable.

God, I hope he's not on the same flight.

"Hi, honey, where you flyin' today?" He leaned toward her.

Tara turned her back to him.

"Don't be rude. Just makin' conversation."

"I don't know you." Tara's eyes scanned the terminal looking for a place to escape but finding none.

"I'm Mark." He took a step closer.

"Tara," she muttered.

His gaze returned to her chest.

"Stop staring at me." She folded her arms across her breasts.

"Hey, honey, if you're gonna show it, I'm gonna look at it." His ample belly rolled as he shifted his weight.

As soon as she was through security, Tara hid in the ladies room until it was time to board. Ducking her distinctive auburn hair down, she blended into the line moving onto the plane. Once on board, she snuggled into her window seat and lost herself in a romantic suspense book until she heard him.

"Lucky me! It's beautiful Tara with the big..." He started as he filled the seat next to her.

"You!" Love Lost and Found 11

Fortunately for Tara, Mark flirted with the stewardesses before the plane took off then fell asleep as soon as they were in the air. Tara read her book and prayed he'd sleep the whole trip. He snored a little and shifted in his seat, his head lolling dangerously close to her shoulder. She squeezed herself even closer to the wall to avoid contact with him.

When they landed in Atlanta, he awoke disoriented but still continued to flirt with the stewardesses as they helped Atlanta-bound passengers leave the plane and passengers bound for St. Thomas board. When Mark stumbled down the aisle, Tara let out a breath. She settled back into her seat, closing her eyes, resting her book in her lap—hoping some hunky guy would claim the seat next to hers.

* * * *

“Hiya, babycakes. Miss me?”

Tara looked up horrified to see Mark squeezing back into the seat next to her. She shrank back against the wall of the plane, trying to put as much distance between them as possible. He smiled at her, his flat nose seemed to grow bigger, now that she sat so close to him. Stubby fingers moved toward her on the armrest.

“Don't touch me!”

“Come on, you introduced yourself to me, baby, remember?”

“So what? I might shake a dog's paw, doesn't mean I want him drooling all over me.”

“Who's drooling?” He raised his eyebrows.

“It's a metaphor, stupid.”

“Hey! Don't call me stupid, big...big...” His hand clenched into a fist.

“Do you want me to call the stewardess?”

“Whatcha gonna tell her, eh? That I gave you a compliment?”

“Compliment?” She shot him a dirty look.

“Yeah, you got a nice rack. What's wrong with that?” He relaxed back into his seat. 12 Jean C. Joachim/Ben Tanner

“Keep your eyes...your...everything...to yourself.”

“Did I touch you?”

She shook head slowly.

“So what’s your beef? Not that I wouldn’t like to touch you...those, uh...maybe when we get to the *island paradise*...you and me could...uh...hook up.” He grinned.

Tara crossed her arms over her chest and avoided his stare.

“Come on, baby. Don’t be such a killjoy.” He placed his hand on her knee.

Tara moved her arm from her chest long enough to reach for the call button for the stewardess when Mark cut her off by grabbing her wrist.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he threatened.

Tara’s face went white.

Across the aisle, Mick awoke to a woman’s voice.

“Stop touching me!”

David got out of his seat and walked over. “Everything ok, ma’am?”

“Yes, everything’s ok,” Mark replied, “now go back to your seat before I rearrange your face.”

“Sir, I’d suggest you calm down.”

“Fuck you, I’ll calm down,” Mark said as he lunged toward David. David was quick, quicker than he looked. He sidestepped Mark, grabbed his arm, and threw him straight to the floor. Mark smacked his face on a seat on the way down.

“Guess I failed to mention I’m a U.S. Air Marshall. Now let’s see who you are.”

David removed the man’s wallet and pulled out his driver’s license. “Mark Lipsit. I guess I should call you Mark Dipshit, huh?”

He looked up at Tara and continued, “Ma’am, you ok?”

Tara replied, “Yes sir, thank you very much. He wouldn’t keep his hands off me.” Love Lost and Found 13

“Yes ma’am, I saw what happened. When we land, I’m taking dipshit here in for harassment, sexual assault, and battery. In the meantime, would you mind changing seats with me?”

Tara glanced over at Mick and a frowned creased her forehead.

Another strange man?

David noticed her hesitation. “Ma’am, he’s a Marine flying on leave from Iraq. He’s been in the air nearly twenty-five hours and just wants to get some rest. Besides, if he tries anything, I’m right here.”

Tara smiled, her forehead became smooth again. She pushed up out of her seat, and crossed the aisle. Mick stood up to slip into the aisle so Tara could take the window seat. From under thick lashes she looked him up and down. *He seems okay. Hmm, pretty tall, maybe five eleven, broad shoulders, brown hair, eyes the color of melted caramel. Not bad.*

* * * *

“I’m Mick. Don’t worry about me, I’m going to sleep,” he said, before rolling on his side and closing his eyes.

Mick slept for fifteen minutes, but woke up again. *Damn conditioning. I wanted to sleep.* Now that he was awake he glanced at Tara, who was engrossed in her book, checking her out. *Slim—not skinny, beautiful auburn hair...to her shoulders, perfect breasts, cute nose with a few freckles—pretty.* As she turned the pages, he noticed the white mark on her finger from a ring, but no ring. Something she was reading must have struck her as funny because a grin lit up her face. *Wow.* Tara glanced at him out of the corner of her eye then her gaze met his.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to stare. Can’t sleep. You’re...uh...well...um, really pretty. Please forgive me, don’t be scared, which—after what happened I’m sure you are. Go back to your book, I won’t bother you.” Color crept into his cheeks.

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