

# Back Before You Know it

—*Tabitha Clark*

“SO KISS ME and smile for me, tell me that you’ll wait for me, hold me like you’ll never let me go...” Charlie sang while he held Tristan in his arms, not wanting to let her go.

Tristan smiled against his shoulder, knowing that he was being cheesy, but that was Charlie. He knew how to make her smile through the tears.

Charlie opened his mouth to say something, but his voice was drowned out by the roar of the aircraft’s engines coming to life. Tristan looked up at the gray C-130 Hercules that loomed over the crowd. The hulking piece of metal cast a monstrous shadow in the winter sun.

Glancing at the crowd around them, Tristan saw all the troops wearing desert camouflage. These uniforms made them indistinguishable in rank unless an eye caught the glint of metal from the officers’ collars. The Marines and their loved ones were saying goodbyes and giving last minute words of encouragement. Some cried while others kissed deeply in the final moments before departure. Young children, their eyes red rimmed from crying, were clinging to their parents pant legs. Fathers and mothers held babies, playing with

their small feet and hands. One man knelt and kissed his wife’s stomach, whispering goodbye to the child that would be born while he served overseas. On the outskirts of the crowd, Tristan noticed some of the Marines were still working. These were the men without families. The Marine Corps was their family, and they were the glue of the unit, keeping everything moving while others finished their farewells. Tristan, overwhelmed by the scene, turned to Charlie and buried her face in his chest, trying to hide her tears. Charlie whispered reassuring words into her ear.

“It’s ok sweetie. I’m going to Africa; it’s just a training deployment. At least I’m not going to Iraq, right?”

Tristan pulled back from Charlie a bit. She wanted to look into his eyes. That way, she would know if he meant what he said. She knew deployments were always dangerous, but she sensed that he was being honest with her. He wasn’t worried about this deployment.

The couple stared deep into each others eyes, trying to make a mental picture before being pulled several thousand miles apart. The moment was broken by the Commanding Of-

**CLARK**

ficer's voice. It was time to go.

Charlie hugged Tristan one last time, then turned to walk away. He swiveled back to her and waved. "I'll be back before you know it babe. I love you."

Tristan watched him get on the plane. It raced down the runway before becoming airborne and drifted off into forever. As she willed her eyes to keep contact with the ever shrinking aircraft, she began to feel dizzy. The ground beneath her started rolling like waves breaking on the coast. Everything around her became fuzzy and indistinguishable. The earth became a tilt-a-whirl, spinning her in all directions. She looked up, and the clouds formed a spiral, almost as if they were a stairway to heaven. Her heart pounded while her stomach knotted more with each twirling sensation. To stave off the nausea, she shut her eyes tightly. That was when she heard it; a lone bugle.

She was standing in a familiar cemetery. She had been there four months ago. The trees made a dark canopy, shutting out the sunlight and making the scenery more grave. In front of her was a casket draped in an American Flag. The wind picked up, catching the flag and throwing it onto Tristan. The flag twisted

around her, a cotton python, squeezing her tighter and tighter until she felt as though she couldn't breathe. Tristan thrashed, kicked, and screamed. She lurched forward and fell into a freshly dug plot.

A pair of beady eyes peered at her from under her bed. Startled at first, she soon realized they belonged to her fuzzy bunny slippers. She tried to get up, but was trapped in her sheet. Ripping out of her linen prison, she stumbled and stood up. Tristan rubbed the side of her head. It throbbed, and she felt a bump. "Still night," she sighed and slipped into bed, willing herself back to sleep.

A cool gust of air cut through the oppressive heat and tickled Tristan's nose. Tristan was thankful for the chill washing over her drenched body. She rolled onto her side, attempting to stay as far away from the other person in her bed as possible. Her mind flashed back to the scene in the bar earlier that evening. She thought about how she threw herself at him, not caring what he looked like. She craved the touch of a man, wanting to push all the bad feelings away for one night. Now she felt even worse. Every time she brushed against him it made her skin crawl. His clammy, rough body stuck to her as she tried to move, not like

the strong, smooth bed mate of her past. Tristan felt the bile rising in her throat as she thought – this man is not my husband.

The stranger rolled over, “Well, hello there sexy. What’s wrong? Did you fall out of bed? Are you ok? Come over here and let me make it all better.”

As he tried to put his arms around her, Tristan lost control of her emotions. Anger flashed in her eyes, her mind thinking of Charlie and how this man would never take his place. She threw back the covers, and vaulted out of bed. “Get the hell out of my house!” Tristan shoved him out of the bed, feeling a small tingle of wicked delight when she heard

him yelp and hit the floor.

“Fuck! That really hurt! What in the hell is wrong with you?”

“There is nothing wrong with me! I don’t want you here. I should have never let you come home with me. You need to leave right now!”

“Ok, ok, you crazy bitch, I’ll leave!” The stranger got up, grabbed his clothes, and walked out of the room cursing under his breath.

Tristan heard something made of glass break against the floor and then the front door slammed. She began pacing. She was angry, and there was nothing she could do to alleviate the heaviness in her chest.

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“You lied to me Charlie!” she yelled into the silence. “You told me you would never leave me. You told me you would be back before I knew it! Well, you aren’t here Charlie, and I’m well aware of it! What in the hell am I supposed to do without you, huh??”

Tristan took a deep breath, prepared to scream some more and stopped. She crossed the dark room; the hardwood floor creaked with every step. Collapsing onto her window seat, defeated, she curled her legs under her and looked out into the moonlit backyard. She pressed her forehead against the pane and sighed before leaning back and opening the window. She needed to call the air conditioning repairman tomorrow. Tristan had never dealt with the house repairs before. That was Charlie’s department. Tears crept down her cheeks. His blue green smiling eyes flashed through her memory, and she lost her breath.

Tristan heard a sound – a man’s voice, but wispy; a whisper carried on the wind. The hair on her arms prickled up. She knew that voice even though she could barely hear it. Tristan ran from the room. She rushed down the stairs and paused in the kitchen, holding her breath and listening.

“Back...back before you know it...” She heard it again! It was coming from the backyard. Tristan opened the back door and ran outside. She was met by the thick August night air but nothing else. Even the wind had stopped. Her eyes darted to every part of the yard, searching for any glimpse of Charlie, but she couldn’t find him.

Tristan’s eyes widened in disbelief; she heard his voice, he had to be out there. She began to tremble and sat down on the porch step. Had she heard anything? Was she still dreaming? Tristan didn’t know; she wondered if she was going crazy. She rested her head in her hands and began to sob out of sadness and confusion. The wind picked up and she heard the music again; a lone bugle playing “Taps.” As exhaustion began to envelop her, her mind drifted off to a happier time – a time before the knock on the door and the twenty one guns.

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Tristan felt the warm sunlight on her eyelids. She stretched her arms out, feeling the sheets around her. She was back in bed. Was last night a dream? Have the last four months been a horrible nightmare? Tristan prayed inwardly, attempting to will Charlie back into existence.

She was alone in the room. She took a deep breath to keep herself from crying; her eyes were sore from the night before. She lost the battle and the tears leaked down her face. She stared at the ceiling. "I need you, Charlie. I can't figure out how my life works without you."

The clock radio switched on. Tristan smiled through her tears as she heard, "So kiss me and smile for me, tell me that you'll wait for me, hold me like you'll never let me go..." 