



TANYA STOWE

SANTA FE
SUNRISE

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Tanya Stowe

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Dedication

To my Mom, who inspired me with stories of Taos.

What People are Saying

Tender Touch

I loved this book, and can say in all honesty that it is one of the best I've read in the past year...and possibly longer. Stirring and thought-provoking, it also contains a sprinkle of humor and a dusting of fun. Truly inspired writing! ~ Delia Latham,

1

Brett Fraser couldn't move his neck. He'd caught a few hours' sleep hunkered into the crevice between his car seat and the door. His right hand throbbed with tiny needles as the circulation came back, and his knee, wrapped around the gearshift, wouldn't unbend even after he sat up.

As soon as I get off this back road and locate Santa Fe, I'm going to find a nice hotel, a shower and a king-sized bed.

Sleeping in his car had definitely lost its charm. After six months of a self-imposed sabbatical touring the great Southwest, he was ready for some creature comforts.

One thing for sure, he'd seen some spectacular country. The Grand Canyon with its sheer drop-offs and hidden valleys. Lake Powell's amazing mixture of colors—blue, green and a thousand variations of rust. Canyon de Chelly, the Navajos' sacred place, with its smooth, sheer walls of swirling sandstone and cliff dwellings. Absolutely unbelievable.

He might not know where or how he fit into it, but one thing was clear, God had a plan. Anyone who'd witnessed these spectacular sights had to recognize the Master Artist at work.

Case in point: the sunrise in front of him.

In Arizona, fire burned the skies during sunrise and sunset. Bright golden light and fireballs of orange and gold lit the horizon. But here, in New Mexico, the

colors were softer, more subtle. Above the dark ridge, the horizon was streaked as if by a paintbrush with bands of subtle gray blending into purple, then mauve, and finally pink.

Amazing.

Brett sat up straighter, peering closely.

A head appeared behind the ridge, coming over. When the runner reached the top, she turned and ran along the slender path with a smooth stride. A long ponytail swung behind her, giving her a graceful rhythm, almost like a dancer swaying from side to side. Completely shadowed with the pastel sunrise behind, her curvy figure stood out in dark relief.

Brett shoved the fast-food bags off the seat beside him, searching for his phone. If he could just get a snap of her with both feet off the ground, the pastel horizon showing beneath her...

"Come on, come on." The password lock took forever, and the camera even longer to open. At last he had the lens focused on the woman. He watched the mesmerizing rhythm of her movements, waiting for just the right moment.

Suddenly, the runner stumbled and disappeared from the lens. Brett lowered the phone just in time to see a dark running suit rolling down the sand-colored hill.

He threw his cell to the seat and bolted from the car, leaving the door open and the keys in the ignition. As he skidded down the gravel side of the road, his car set up an outraged beep. Ignoring the incessant sound, he leapt over a small tumbleweed and kept running.

Brett topped a small rise. The runner sat at the bottom of a culvert just below the ridge. One dark running shoe lay off to the side, and the woman was

bent over, gripping her right ankle.

“Are you all right?”

The injured woman screamed and nearly bounced off the ground.

“Where in the world did you come from?” Her voice was low and a bit husky...a bedroom kind of voice.

Brett purposely put that thought behind him as he knelt beside her. “I’m parked on the road down there. I saw you trip.”

“My shoelace broke.” She picked up the offending article and tossed it away with a disgusted flick of her wrist. “Just snapped. My shoe came loose and almost fell off. Of course, it had to happen right while I was running The Rope.”

“The Rope?”

Her chin nudged up. “That’s what I call that ridge. It’s narrow and has drop offs on both sides. Sometimes, when the wind blows, it feels as if I’m crossing a swaying rope bridge. I run over it every day and never had a problem...until this.” She pushed the shoe further away.

Brett picked it up and examined the broken lace’s smooth edges. Something about it bothered him but at that moment, the lovely runner gave a soft moan and rocked over her injured ankle again.

“Mind if I take a look?”

She nodded, her teeth clenched in pain.

Brett eased back the short sock. Purple bruising already showed around the rapidly swelling ankle. “This needs ice and maybe even a doctor. Let’s get you back to my car.”

“I can’t stand on it. I already tried.”

“All right. Just let me do the work.” He rose to his

feet, picked up the shoe, and tucked it in his coat pocket. The thick tread barely fit, but he wiggled it in as best he could. Then he braced his feet. "Just let me lift you. Don't put any weight on your foot, OK?"

She nodded and Brett grasped her upper arms. She got her good leg beneath her and stood to her full height with surprising speed, considering her injury. On the ridge she'd seemed much taller but in reality, she couldn't have been more two or three inches over five feet.

Up close, her olive skin was pale and had a soft sheen—not from running, but pain. Full pink lips were clenched tight, and when she leaned into Brett for better balance, something sweet and exotic wafted up from her black hair.

Get a grip, Fraser. She's in pain.

That didn't stop him from wishing she'd look up so he could see the color of her eyes. But a little moan of pain banished even that thought from his mind. He gripped her arms to steady her.

"Gravity is sending all the blood straight to the injury. Give it a second and the pain will ease up a bit. When it does, just nod and we'll get moving."

"OK." A near whimper. But the woman was a trooper. After just a few minutes she nodded.

He looped her right arm over his shoulder and gripped her waist. "Your job is to keep off that ankle no matter what, got it? Let me do all the work. You just keep your other leg balanced."

She nodded again and Brett started up the hill. Her petite frame couldn't match his five-eleven one, so he ended up carrying her most of the way up. At the top, he had to pause and catch his breath before making their way down the other side.

Half an hour later, they finally reached the road. Brett climbed the gravel side of the highway with his limp, exhausted runner cradled in his arms and set her on the dust-covered fender of his car.

“Rest here for a moment.”

She leaned to her side, trying to pull her ankle up.

“When we get inside,” Brett said between breaths, “prop it up on the dash. Elevating it will relieve some of the pain.”

“How do you know so much about injured ankles?”

Brett bent over to stretch his taut back muscles. “My best friend was in a car crash. I helped out with the recuperation therapy.” Straightening, he opened the passenger door. The scent of old French fries wafted out along with other stale odors. The injured woman looked at the hardened fries scattered across the seat, then leaned forward, openly gaping at his clothes, thrown helter-skelter over the back.

“Are you...living in your car?”

“Not exactly. I prefer to call this experience a sabbatical.”

She straightened and pulled a cellphone out of her jacket pocket. “I—I think I’ll call my mother and let her know what’s happened.”

Brett chuckled. “Good idea. Call her and let her know a man named Brett Fraser will be taking you to the doctor in a sports car.” He recited the license plate and model of his car.

She paused, the phone halfway to her ear. “Brett Fraser? *The* Brett Fraser, director of the Fallon School of Art?”

A solid ball of disappointment slid straight down Brett’s throat and settled in his stomach. “Ex-director.

I'm the ex-director." He pulled her shoe out of his pocket and tossed it to the back.

"That's right. You resigned after some sort of scandal."

Brett glanced back at the beautiful horizon, now washed white by bright sunlight. "It's good to know my life in Sedona was important enough to make the headlines in Santa Fe."

"Not the headlines." She looked up and directly into his eyes.

Brown. Her eyes were the darkest, richest chocolate he'd ever seen. Rimmed with long black lashes, they rivaled anything he'd viewed in a painting.

"I own a gallery," she said. "Art is my business. To me, the Fallon school opening so close to home was big news."

"I see. And do I get to know your name?"

"Rafaela."

Figured. Even her name was exotic and beautiful.

"Well, Rafaela, now that you know all about me and my past, am I safe enough to take you to the doctor?"

Those lovely full lips thinned into another grimace of pain before she nodded. "Yes, please."

~*~

"Now, Rafaela, you absolutely must rest and keep all strain off this ankle."

She nodded dutifully. Doctor Aguilar had been her doctor most of her life so he knew her very well. She wasn't at all surprised when he raised a finger and pointed it directly at her nose.

“I mean it, young lady. Absolutely no weight. The X-rays show nothing broken, but tissue damage can be even worse. If you don’t stay off it, you can turn a four-week recuperation into two months or longer.”

Rafaela promised and crossed her heart.

The doctor *hmp*hed with disbelief. “Well, just in case, I’ll be calling your mother with the same instructions.” The white-haired man turned away. “Now, I’m writing a prescription for pain. I want you to sleep today. It’s still the best treatment for injuries. But I’m only prescribing enough pills for today and tomorrow. I don’t want you taking these, thinking they’ll help you to go back to work. No work for at least a week.”

Rafaela stifled the hasty words on her lips. She didn’t need to tell Dr. Aguilar that she had to work. He knew—almost everyone knew—how badly Rafaela needed the money. The de Silva Gallery was the only thing keeping her family afloat.

Her mother, Lucia, tried to help out by teaching dance lessons at their home. But Mama had scaled back even those efforts after Sofia’s illness had grown worse.

In fact, they’d almost lost Rafaela’s younger sister after her latest bout with anorexia.

Rafaela squeezed her eyes shut as the image of more hospital bills floated through her mind. Now she could add hers to Sofia’s growing pile.

“No need to buy crutches,” Dr. Aguilar said, almost as if reading her thoughts. “I have a pair I keep in the office. They won’t be missed in the short three to four weeks you’ll be on them, right?” The older man peered at her over the rim of his glasses, waiting for the appropriate response.

Rafaela couldn’t stop the smile that slipped over

her lips. "Absolutely, Doctor. Three or four weeks maximum."

"Good." He ripped the prescription paper off the tablet and handed it to her. "Now you wait right there while I go get those crutches and your young man."

"He's not..."

The doctor was gone before she could explain that Brett Fraser wasn't her young man. Not that deep down, in some dark hidden part of her, Rafaela didn't wish it might be so. Something utterly charming about Brett Fraser gave him an irresistible appeal. Not just his good looks either, although he had those in abundance.

Brown hair parted to one side with a tendency to fall slightly forward. Light-colored eyes. Were they brown or green? She couldn't remember. Even the shadow of three or more days' worth of whiskers couldn't hide his fine features.

Maybe it was the beard that gave him that devil-may-care impression. No, that was definitely his fined-tuned wry humor. If she hadn't been in pain, she would have laughed at some of his clever little remarks.

A wave of dizziness forced Rafaela to lean back on the examining table. The shot Dr. Aguilar had given her for pain was definitely having an impact—in more ways than one. Rafaela never, ever mooned or daydreamed over a man. She didn't have time for relationships and certainly wasn't the type to fantasize over a strong jaw and chin...even if the chin did have a very nice little cleft.

She giggled out loud. OK. So what if Brett Fraser was going to get a relaxed—make that a very relaxed—version of the real Rafaela? Tomorrow, he'd be on his way...gone from her life, and she could get back to the

business of being cold, shut down, and aloof. *Where in the world did that come from?* She took several deep, cleansing breaths. They helped to clear her head, but that didn't stop her from grinning like a fool when Brett walked in.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" His hazel eyes—yes, definitely hazel—were wide and shadowed with concern.

"I'm feeling fine now that the shot's starting to work."

"Ahhh, a shot." A smile slid into place. "So you're feeling no pain."

"Nope. No pain." She giggled.

Brett chuckled with her.

"Well, it won't last long." Dr. Aguilar stepped up behind Brett. "So the sooner we get these crutches adjusted and you on your way, the better."

As soon as the crutches fit Rafaela's short arms, the doctor settled her in a wheelchair and pointed Brett towards the door. "It's a long way to her ranch so you'd better get started."

Brett turned her around while Rafaela thanked the doctor and his nurse.

Release papers and receipts clutched in her hand, she turned back just in time to see a tall, broad-shouldered man enter the clinic.

"Tío! What are you doing here?" Rafaela sagged. "Oh never mind, I know. My mother called you, didn't she?"

"Of course she did. Fortunately, she caught me between meetings while my phone was still on."

"Well, even more fortunately, you can head right back to those meetings." Rafaela gestured to her wrapped ankle. "As you can see, it's just a sprain. I'm

going to follow the doctor's orders and rest. Oh, this is Brett Fraser. He found me, and now he's offered to finish the job and drive me home."

Her uncle's little jolt of surprise caught her off guard. Did he recognize Brett's name, too? Or was the drug still pushing her imagination into overdrive? That must have been the case because her uncle said nothing, only extended his hand toward Brett for a shake.

"Thank you, Mr. Fraser. We truly appreciate your help, but I'll take over now."

In her condition, Rafaela couldn't stop the impulsive giggle that slipped out. "Tío, you're acting like an over-protective father. Everything's fine, truly fine."

"She's right, Mr. ..."

"Pomeroy. Aaron Pomeroy."

"Mr. Pomeroy, I'm on vacation. I have nothing planned for the rest of the day, and you've already said you have meetings. I'll be more than happy to take Rafaela home."

"Thank you, Mr. Fraser, but no meeting is more important to me than Rafaela's welfare. Besides, her mother would never let me hear the end of it if I let her go home with a perfect stranger."

With that, Tío pulled the wheelchair forward, out of Brett's hands, and pushed it toward the door.

Brett hurried ahead to hold the door open as her uncle pushed her out.

Tío's car was parked right in front of the clinic, the motor running.

How like Tío, thinking the laws don't apply to him. Rafaela smiled at her own thoughts. In truth, rules and regulations usually didn't apply to a man as important

as her adopted uncle.

He stopped the wheelchair, lifted Rafaela into the comfortable passenger seat, and pushed the chair back toward Brett. "If you wouldn't mind taking that back inside, I'd appreciate it. I want to get Rafaela home as quickly as possible." He pulled out a business card and handed it to Brett. "Here's my number if you'd like to contact me about her condition. We can't thank you enough for all your help. Her mother is most grateful. If you're staying long, maybe I can offer you dinner. It's the least I can do."

As he shut her car door, Rafaela murmured a thank you and waved at her handsome rescuer.

Tío came around, slid into the driver's seat beside her, and punched the car into gear.

Rafaela looked back to see a rather forlorn-looking Brett still standing on the curb.

2

Brett stretched to his full length in the king-sized bed. Crisp sheets and a clean smell wrapped around him. Definitely much better than yesterday morning.

He'd found a five-star hotel close to downtown, right next to an interesting little chapel he wanted to check out. But more importantly, the hotel was located just a few blocks from Santa Fe's central plaza. Last night, as he glanced through the hotel's welcome brochure, he'd seen an advertisement for the de Silva Gallery, situated right on the plaza.

As soon as he enjoyed a hot shower, a sit-down breakfast complete with a waitress, and cleaned out his car, he was going to check on his lovely little runner. And he had no intention of going through her high-handed uncle, Aaron Pomeroy.

Granted, Brett was a stranger in Santa Fe. He could understand Rafaela's family might have concerns. But her uncle had been just plain rude, and her mother sounded like a dragon lady with her mama claws out. If they'd intended to put him off, they'd missed the mark, only succeeding in creating more mystery. Rafaela was a capable, competent young woman. So why were they so overprotective?

No wonder she took long runs in the back of beyond. She likely needed every escape she could find. And Brett was just the man to provide one.

Of course, dark brown eyes and a desire to see her

with her hair down had nothing to do with it. He was a man on a rescue mission. Grinning, he flipped back the covers and headed for the shower.

~*~

The hot August sun turned Brett's dark shirt into a heating pad. Yesterday, the tail end of a storm had brought cooler temperatures, but today the summer temps were back with a vengeance. Sweat trickled down between his shoulder blades as he stood in the center plaza of downtown Santa Fe.

Roads and storefronts surrounded the small park on four sides. Behind Brett, the Palace of the Governors covered an entire block. Built in the seventeenth century, the adobe building had once been Spain's seat of government for the American Southwest. Now, Native Americans displayed their crafts and handmade jewelry on colorful woven blankets spread beneath the palace's massive covered portico.

Cleaning out his car had taken longer than he'd anticipated. He'd stacked the boxes from his car in his hotel room, where he'd sorted a month's worth of dirty clothes and sent them to the hotel laundry. Finding a place to have his car washed inside and out ate up another hour.

All his extra efforts and time had paid off. Buried in the pile of soiled laundry, he'd found the excuse he needed to see Rafaela again. He'd forgotten her very new, very expensive running shoe. Of course he had to return it. Ready to storm the castle and free the princess, he flipped the shoe in the air, caught it and crossed the street.

When Rafaela first mentioned her gallery, the

name had struck a bell. While preparing to open the Fallon School of Art, Brett had researched the larger cities and art centers of the Southwest. Santa Fe definitely fit the bill as a cultural center.

Artists and musicians flocked to the quaint capital of New Mexico with its Pueblo architecture, unique fashion flair, and desert mountain atmosphere. Nestled in the surrounding hills was the spectacular open-air Santa Fe Opera House. Live theatre, music and food festivals filled the social calendar, and some of the finest galleries in the States could be found on these streets.

Brett didn't remember exactly why the de Silva Gallery had stood out from the crowd, but he definitely remembered the name. He spotted the gallery directly in front of him, waited for the traffic to clear, and crossed.

A small, moveable display wall, painted gray, stood prominently in the gallery's floor-to-ground window. Centered on the wall, a painting with bright-blue jagged lines, yellow suns, and orange lizards caught his eye. The colors exploded on the neutral backdrop. Not far away, a wood carving of a horse reared on a deep purple pedestal. Beyond that, glass shelves with a soft, pale-pink backlight showcased artfully arranged pottery pieces in stark black.

Tastefully done. The lighting, the moveable walls, and the open space, provided tremendous visual appeal. A real class act, the de Silva Gallery.

Brett's appreciative gaze took in the spectacular sunrise colors he had witnessed yesterday morning.

Did Rafaela use them because they worked or because they reminded her of her majestic morning runs? Was she caught in the spell of this land of

enchantment, too?

Brett anticipated a pleasurable search for those answers. Pulling the door open, he stepped inside. Flamingo music echoed softly over the air, bringing back not-so-pleasant memories of his recent experiences. That tune was almost certainly the work of Alexander Summers. *Great! Just what I need right now. A reminder of how badly I failed.*

“Can I help you?”

Busy cataloging the mistakes Summers’s music jolted from his memory, Brett didn’t notice the woman’s approach. Seeing her rendered him momentarily speechless.

Talk about beautiful. Tall. Ultra slender. Black hair shot through with white. On anyone else, the silver streaks might have been unattractive but on this woman, with her nearly seamless skin, they were perfect. She wore a long, dark-blue, print skirt with a matching top. Around her neck rested a spectacular, shiny, squash-blossom necklace with a matching bracelet on her wrist. A concho belt nestled over slim hips. She studied him with dark, liquid eyes. Something about those eyes...

“I’m sorry.” He’d been staring. Great way to make an impression. He’d clearly been away from polite society too long. “I’m Brett Fraser.”

“Oh, Mr. Fraser.” The woman crossed the space and cupped his hands with hers.

A little surprised, he gripped Rafaela’s running shoe tighter.

“I’m so glad you came.” Her husky tones soothed something in Brett’s soul. “I was very annoyed with Aaron when he told me he didn’t get a number where we could reach you. I’m Lucia de Silva, Rafaela’s