



Thanksgiving Daddy (Harlequin Special Edition Conard County: The Next Generation)

By Rachel Lee



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After sharing her news, Edie is stunned by Seth's insistence on being a father to his child—and the bewildering feelings this practical stranger has stirred within her. This wasn't part of her life-in-the-navy plan! Should she flee back to military life for a desk job and single parenthood? Or give thanks for this unexpected family?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Rachel Lee was hooked on writing by the age of twelve, and practiced her craft as she moved from place to place all over the United States. This New York Times bestselling author now resides in Florida and has the joy of writing full-time.

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As she approached Conard City, Edith Clapton wondered if there was even a town out here. Endless miles of empty grazing land, cattle here and there and finally a couple of roadhouses were the only signs that people actually lived out here.

Her hands tightened on the wheel, and a glance at her GPS told her she was getting close. Not for the first time she wondered if she had lost her mind.

She was pregnant. Nearly five months. And she'd spent a whole lot of time gnawing around about whether she should tell Seth Hardin he was a father. She'd tried once to track him down through the military, and had been extraordinarily relieved when she couldn't find him. She didn't want to do this, didn't want to face it, but she kept feeling she at least owed it to him to tell him he was going to have a kid.

She didn't need child support, she didn't want a stranger intimately involved in her life. Lots of good reasons for just keeping her mouth shut. Except for that feeling that a father needed to know he had a child. Whether he wanted to be part of this kid's life or not.

She couldn't seem to get around that, and God knew she had tried. Maybe the thing that had hit her hardest was the idea of having to tell this child that his father didn't even know he existed. Boy, wouldn't that make her feel like slime.

So okay, she'd drop the bomb on his parents—easier than telling him—and leave. Just leave. Get her duty done then forget about it. If Seth wanted to hunt her up someday and meet his kid, nothing would stop him. It wasn't as if she was impossible to find.

Damn, everything was all messed up. Pulled off flying status, stuck behind a desk until after her maternity leave, superior officers hinting that she might want to consider some other career path with a kid to consider. She didn't want to give up flying. She loved it. And maybe she had a hankering for the adrenaline, too.

Regardless, she was feeling an adrenaline rush as she reached town at last, and houses sprang up, most close together, most older. The time was getting close.

She wondered how she'd be received. Probably like an unwelcome messenger. Probably with anger and doubt. Well, she didn't care. She would do what was right then shake the dust from her heels.

She would try to put back together a life and a career that had been shattered by unwelcome news. Her rise to the top had probably come to a halt. How could it not, unless she gave up the baby. She couldn't do that, though. Those thoughts had danced around in her head, even pummeled her at times, but somehow she couldn't bear the idea of giving up that little life growing in her, a life that had seemed real almost from the

instant she learned of it, that had become very real from the first little bubble of movement she felt.

Abandon the kid so she could continue rising? No way. She might be tied to a desk from here on out, but she'd be the best damn desk jockey in the air force, if it came to that. Maybe she had enough behind her to keep her going up, but she doubted it. Kids weren't supposed to be a factor in what assignments you could perform. You were supposed to have someone who could step in to parent while you had to be away.

She had no one. Raised by her grandmother after her mother had died of a drug overdose, she was now alone in the world. No one to turn to except herself. She was used to that. But farewell to her career, most likely. She'd make it twenty years, realize the promotions wouldn't come again, and she'd have to pull out.

Well, she wasn't going to abandon her kid the way her mother had abandoned her. That was the strongest determination in her right now.

And all of these thoughts had long since been worked out. All of them. She was just trying to avoid thinking about the uncomfortable conversation ahead. A conversation that she hoped would happen on a doorstep. Then she would turn and leave for good.

The town had slid into autumn. Leaves shone in brilliant gold. Those that had already fallen tumbled along sidewalks and streets in a light breeze. Here and there pumpkins, skeletons and waving white ghosts announced the approach of Halloween. Pretty place, she supposed, if you wanted to turn the clock back. Of course, she was a lousy judge. Sterile military environments had been her only home for a long time now.

The voice of the GPS, silenced so often in the empty prairies, resurrected and offered her no mercy. It told her to turn left, and she did, until she reached what she supposed was a newer subdivision. Post-World War II at least. Maybe post-Vietnam. Despite looking like it had tumbled out of a box that contained only one design, it was neat and even colorful. She guessed no one here thought about deed restrictions. Some of the houses were almost blinding in their brightness. "You have arrived."

"Shut up," she said to the GPS. She slowed and stopped and looked at the house number. No escape. She was here.

The house was a white ranch-style, sprawling, set on a well-tended lawn that was beginning to fade with autumn. Rose bushes, barren of all but a few flowers, climbed a trellis beside the door. A sporty little car sat in the driveway.

She turned off the ignition and sat listening to the engine tick as it cooled. Hell, she didn't even feel this much trepidation before a dangerous mission. The neighborhood might have been empty. Not a soul in sight, not even a moving car. Unknown territory.

Well, maybe the Tates didn't live here anymore. If so, that would be the end of her search.

She realized she was thinking like a coward. Just do it. What was the worst that could happen? She got called a liar and a door slammed in her face? Hardly an incoming rocket-propelled grenade.

Sighing, she at last climbed out of the car and straightened her cammies. She refused to wear the air force's ugly pregnancy jumper, and she'd just started to show enough that she had to cover up somehow. A bigger cam-mie shirt, a larger waistband, they'd do for now. Later? She didn't want to think about it.

Her feet felt like lead as she walked up the path to the front door. She might be ruining someone else's life here. She didn't even know if Seth was married. Still, the sense of obligation drove her. He had a right to know, even if he wanted to forget it immediately.

And her kid had a right to know that his father had been told. If Seth wanted no part of him, she figured that would be easier to explain than not telling the kid's father at all.

Maybe.

Drawing a deep breath, she raised her hand and pressed the bell. For a minute or two there was no response, and just as she was beginning to hope no one was home, the door opened.

A pleasantly plump woman regarded her with a smile. Graying hair that still showed threads of red, bright green eyes. And damn, Edie could see Seth in her face.

"Yes?" the woman asked.

"Mrs. Tate, I'm Major Edith Clapton. I met Seth Har-din once. He's your son, right?"

"Of course he is. Would you like to come in?"

Edie shook her head quickly. "I just wanted him to know...I guess I need to tell him...well, I'm pregnant."

The woman's hand flew to her mouth. Then in an instant everything changed. Before Edie could march away as she intended, a hand clasped her arm and started drawing her inside.

"You have to come in," Mrs. Tate said. "Coffee? Tea? Maybe some milk and cookies? Oh, dear, this is...probably upsetting for you, but a pure delight to me. At least I think it is."

A delight for her? Edie felt stunned, which was probably the only reason she allowed herself to be ushered into a cheerful living room, seated on a sofa and then served cookies.

"Milk, tea, coffee?"

"Coffee if you don't mind," Edie said, almost numb with amazement. She hadn't been prepared for this kind of reception at all. "The doc says it's okay and I haven't had any yet today." Explaining something she shouldn't need to explain to this grandmotherly woman.

"Coffee is something we always have around here," the woman said wryly. "Call me Marge, please. I'll be right back."

It wasn't long before she held a mug of coffee in her hand. Those peanut butter cookies looked good, and her stomach was settling enough now that she felt she could eat one. Marge sat right beside her on the couch.

"So tell me," she said to Edie. "Everything."

Oh, God, tell this woman she'd had a one-nighter with her son at a base in Afghanistan? No way. But how could she lie? Starting with a lie would only get her in a tangle of mixed-up explanations.

Just bite the bullet.

"Seth and I met once," she said. "Over there. Just once."

"Ah." Understanding came to Marge's eyes. "I see. You haven't seen him since?"

"No. I thought about not telling him, but that didn't seem right. Anyway, if you could just let him know, I'll be on my way. I don't want anything."

"You don't want anything." Marge repeated the words. "Maybe not. You must be pretty self-sufficient to be a major wearing those wings. But what about what the rest of us want?"

Us? It was a concept Edie hadn't considered. "Seth can decide if he wants any part of this. I didn't come to pressure him. I just felt he had a right to know."

"He absolutely has a right. But then there's me. I'd like to be part of my grandchild's life. So would Seth's father, Nate. I'm sure of that."

The complications were mounting rapidly. She hadn't bargained on a whole damn family. This was supposed to be her decision, and maybe Seth's, but not anybody else's.

"Mrs. Tate... Marge...this has to be my decision, and Seth's."

"You're not giving it up, are you?" The woman looked troubled now.

"No, I'm not giving it up. I'll raise it. But...it's my decision."

"Ultimately, yes." Marge hesitated, then shook her head. "I'm going to tell you a story. It's still painful after all these years. How well do you know Seth?"

"Not at all, embarrassingly enough."

Marge nodded. "That's all right. Things happen. I ought to know. Years ago before we married, I became pregnant by Seth's father. He went back to Vietnam and, well, my father got involved. I didn't know it, but he was stealing my letters to Nate, and stealing Nate's to me. So I thought Nate didn't want me. End result, I got shipped off to a cousin to have Seth, and he was put up for adoption."

Edie hadn't expected this. Even less had she expected her reaction to this news. She felt a twist of anguish for this woman, and for Seth, too. "I wouldn't do that."

"Times have changed. Back then, well, a girl just didn't get pregnant. It was the worst shame possible. I was young. I thought Nate had abandoned me. I was a mess and did what I was told because I couldn't see another option."

"I'm sorry."

"So was I for a long time. Then I got even sorrier. Twenty-seven years later, Seth turned up on the doorstep. I had to come clean and it nearly destroyed my marriage to Nate. It took him a while to get over the deception. So yes, you absolutely must tell Seth. I think he'd be furious if you did anything else. He has

experience of those lies, you see."

Edie nodded numbly, feeling things were moving too fast, spiraling out of control. "But it's not my place to make up for your past."

Marge's face tightened. "No, it's not. All I'm asking is for you to be smarter than I was."

"I'm here." As if that answered everything. "And I need to get back." To what, she didn't know. She had a month's leave on her hands and no plans past getting this news to Seth. Marge could pass it along. "You tell him. I'm stationed at Minot right now. He can find me—us—if he wants."

She put her coffee mug on the end table and started to rise. Marge's hand on her arm stayed her.

"Please don't rush off. Nate should be here any minute, and Seth will be here for dinner. You should join us."

All of a sudden everything was mixed up. She had come here with the single-minded focus she applied to her missions. Do the job and get out. She hadn't even been sure if her self-imposed orders had been the right ones, but she had completed them. Evidently getting out wasn't going to be easy.

But how difficult could it be to appease this woman with the warm eyes, who was pleading with her to stay? Dinner? Meeting Seth's father? Seeing Seth again? Surely she had faced harder things, things she had wanted to do even less.

But she couldn't escape the fact that her mouth was growing dry and her palms damp with nameless fear, a kind of fear she hadn't felt in a long time. How could she be so afraid of seeing two people? And while Seth was a virtual stranger, she had already known him in the most intimate way possible.

So what could happen? Likely Nate would be as warm as Marge. Seth might be cold, or he might be friendly, but one way or another this would get settled and she could return to her life without any more questions hanging over her. Her duty would be well and fully completed.

"All right," she heard herself say. "Thank you." What the hell was she getting into?

The next hour passed easily enough. Marge changed the topic to safer things, talking about her six daughters, their husbands and what seemed to be a mob of grandchildren. Edie's head was soon awhirl with names she would never sort out and was sure she wouldn't need to. Then there was some talk about how Seth's father had been the sheriff here until he retired and how glad Marge was to have him underfoot all the time. And how glad she was to have Seth home for good.

"He never blamed me for giving him up," Marge said. "Nate did, though. It was hard."

And somehow they had come back to the central reason for Edie's visit. She was actually relieved to hear the front door open. Once she got through this dinner, this meeting with Seth and his father, she could leave. She *would* leave. Six daughters? Really?

Users Review

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Jack Crawford:

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