

GINNY STERLING



FOREVER

✂ A FLYBOYS SHORT STORY ✂

FRUITFUL

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GINNY STERLING

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INTRODUCTION

A stolen kiss...

Luke Fuller was a dead man – and he knew it the moment their secret was out. It was scary enough as it was to tell his father, but he knew he was going to need someone to have his back the moment that Nicolette's father, Valkyrie, found out.

A secret love...

Nicolette Saxon fell for Luke the moment he gave her that shy, tender smile... and fell hard. He had always been there, growing as friends, until that summer afternoon when she saw him truly for the first time. Now life was about to change... significantly!

What was she going to do... And how was she going to fix this mess with her family?

Zona Fannin

Sue Payton

Wren Woodland

*Thank you so much for always sharing, reviewing, and
commenting on Facebook! I'm really glad to have 'met' you
all*



Ginny Sterling Newsletter

Elyboys Facebook Group

Wow! I was finally able to get into this series and wow! Wow! WOW! It's starts with tragedy and there's almost tragedy near the end and then this amazing band of brothers pull through for each other. There's also an amazing love story woven throughout. Each of these men, egotistical, loud, cocky and wonderful have hearts of gold and their own personal demons to overcome. I can't wait to binge on the rest. Flyboys here I come.

— ~ AMAZON REVIEWER OF FOREVER FAITHFUL

CHAPTER 1



Gosh, she was beautiful...

Luke tried to avoid staring off into the distance where the woman of his dreams was standing in the bright sunshine talking with her father.

It was getting harder to ignore the enchanting girl that had grown into quite a woman. A woman that he'd known all his life... and that was slightly alarming because something had changed.

This was his sweet Nicolette!

The Saxon's middle child – except she wasn't a child anymore. She was an incredible woman, infinitely gorgeous, exceedingly smart, and wonderfully optimistic in her views of life. She was Valkyrie's precious daughter, off-limits, and completely out of his league.

... Nor was he dumb.

He played in the high school band with Toby and Caspar, her brothers, had gone trick-or-treating with the flock of children that he grew up with, and knew even considering anything with Nicolette... well, it was a bad idea.

How could there ever be anything at all when you grew up together, knew every single secret about the other person, and there was *zero* mystery?

... Except no one knew his secret.

Luke had been watching Nicolette for almost five years now, growing more and more attracted to her... and trying

harder to stay away.

Nearly four years older than her, he should be focusing on figuring out his life. He had taken to learning how to work on cars and was ‘*studying*’ under Glory, trying to help, and holding down two jobs. Working part-time at Flyboys in the hangar doing maintenance on the planes; he also worked as a meter reader for the town.

Neither was glorious. Both could be grueling in the hot Texas summers... but no one knew why he worked so hard, except his dad.

His father had guessed – and they had an endless talk about girls, priorities, families, and boundaries. So, he drew a big line in the sand, a gorge, the Grand Canyon, a definitive border, regarding his Nicolette.

If she was going out to Flyboys for a bonfire? Luke skipped it and blamed it on work.

If she was going roller-skating on Friday night with the other kids? He suddenly couldn’t go.

When he soloed for the first time? She’d been waiting there with the other potential pilots, waiting for her turn to fly, and made eye contact.

Luke buckled, nearly melting in his boots...

She looked so proud of him. Claspings her hands together over her chest, her bright blue eyes were glowing and her soft dark blond hair like Valkyrie’s was pulled over her shoulder in a loose braid. All three Saxon children had blue eyes... but Toby was the only one with dark black hair, like his mother.

That was the first time he desperately wanted to kiss Nicolette, nearly saying the soulful secret aloud. Instead, he smiled nervously, stared at her for what felt like forever, before pivoting and walking back to the offices.

He needed to move out of the way for the next student, and pick up the pieces of his mind, heart, and soul... because he was falling apart with that single glance and breathtaking smile.

... And she was completely off limits.

Luke cursed softly, realizing how stupid it was to sit there and fawn over someone he could never have.

Yanking off his baseball cap and flipping it around on his head as he leaned into the engine compartment of the Cessna that Glory had him working on today.

Glory was bound and determine to restore the old B-52 airplane that had sat for years and years, convinced they were going to fly it for marketing.

Oh, it absolutely *started!*

... It was the ‘*remaining running*’ portion of flight, however, that seemed to be a constant problem.

They’d gotten the massive plane out of the hangar to taxi three times over the years and just before take-off... *kaput.*

There would be engine failure, a leak, some sort of alert, or it would simply die, leading them back to square one. If there weren’t fifty electrical gremlins or fuel leaks, then there were over a hundred. Every time Glory fixed one gauge, something else went out.

This was no longer a viable airplane to use for the company, but a labor of love for her own pride – and her husband’s. Alpo bought the plane before Flyboys ever opened years ago and it was a great prop for events.

A prop.

An expensive, extremely large paperweight.

Alpo and Thumper even had a stunning Pinup girl dressed in a blue Flyboys uniform shirt painted on the side by a friend’s daughter - along with a Flyboys logo that was extremely eye-catching. No, this plane would never be one for instructor-led flights... but rather a marketing gimmick for air shows, events, or used to drum up business.

His wrench slipped again, rounding off the nut, as he sighed heavily, hanging his head. He was hot, tired, couldn’t focus, and...

“Hey Luke,” a voice said from nearby, causing him to stand immediately on the ladder he was on, banging his head on the cover of the engine bay. Putting his greasy hand on his head, he turned slowly to see if he was fantasizing or daydreaming.

Nicolette.

“I thought you might be thirsty,” she began, smiling up at him, looking nervously around, before holding up a bottle of Gatorade for him.

“I’m fine,” he mumbled, looking away. “But thank you.”

He quickly buried his head back into the engine compartment, staring blindly as he tried to focus.

Why was she back here, talking to him? This was insane! She never singled him out, tracked him down, or spent any time with him alone...

Well, he wasn’t exactly alone.

Glory was working under the dash of the B-52 on the wiring harness that had been patched, repaired, soldered, butt-spliced, and repaired thousands of times over the years... but he might as well be alone because, according to Glory?

‘Unless it’s on fire, seizing up, about to blow, or someone knocked you unconscious?... Gimme a few hours, undisturbed! Almost all of these looms are no longer red, yellow, green-wires-with-black-tracers, anymore... they are all ‘electrical-tape-black’ – and I can’t mix them up, Luke.’

Glory had been very determined in her efforts, taking masking tape with her so she could label as she worked through the multiple feet of chaos that looked like a bird’s nest under the dash.

“Luke?”

He yanked his head up in horror, banging it again even harder, and wincing at the pain as he spun around, nearly falling off the roll-around ladder... only to see that she’d come up a few of the steps to put the Gatorade bottle in the

‘*cupholder*’ that Alpo had welded to the ladder for Glory years ago.

“You can’t come up here,” he blurted out in a hushed voice.

“Have I done something wrong?” Nicolette asked openly, looking at him with those beautiful blue eyes that made him want to whimper like a puppy that needed to be let out into the yard.

“You? Never...” he whispered softly – and cleared his throat, looking away. “There’s just a weight limit on these things and...”

“Luke Fuller! Are you implying what I *think* you are?” she said, her blue eyes narrowing as she got this mutinous grind to her jaw that reminded him again of just who her parents were. “Are you calling me fat?”

“M-Me?” Luke stammered, gulping openly as his eyes widened in shock. “Heck no! You are the exact opposite! I mean, you’ve got curves where they are supposed to be, and those curves are...”

He swallowed nervously, realizing what he was blurting out, and couldn’t turn away from that slow satisfied smile that spread across her face.

“I’m gonna shut up now.”

“No, I think you should continue,” Nicolette said softly, coming up another step on the ladder towards him. “Tell me all about you lookin’ at my curves...”

“N-Nope,” he choked out.

“Are you playing hard to get?” she whispered softly to him – and he had to grab the railing of the rolling ladder to keep from flipping right over the edge onto the concrete floor below as she leaned towards him.

“Nicolette, I think your dad is in one of the Cessnas and should be here any...”

“Is it him that makes you nervous?”

“Yes? No? Yes, definitely, yes... but...”

“But what?” she said in a voice he’d never heard before, yet it spoke to him like a siren singing in the ocean to a weary sailor.

He made a slight squawk as she grasped the railing on either side of him, her hands brushing against his, and leaned forward, even closer to him.

“I’ve watched you for months now and know you are avoiding me,” Nicolette said, holding his eyes firmly as his mouth worked silently, trying desperately to deny it, yet nothing was coming out of his voice box. “Well, not anymore... okay?”

“Okay?” he said numbly, caught in her lure and felt like a fish flopping around on the banks, slowly succumbing.

“Good,” she whispered to him, leaning forward. “You are going to pick me up from work on Friday night. I get off work at five and we are going on a date.”

“*We are?*”

“Yes,” she smiled triumphantly. “I’m tired of waiting for you to get up the gumption to ask me out—and so, I’m *telling* you we are dating.”

“But what about your parents or...”

“You aren’t dating my parents – you are going out *with me*,” she uttered softly, smiling at him, before leaning forward to whisper in his ear. “I want to see what it’s like to kiss the boy I’ve always had a crush on...”

Luke dropped the crescent wrench, causing it to clatter noisily to the floor.

“And that’s my cue to leave,” she said intimately against his ear, before brushing her nose against his cheek, leaving his heart thumping so fast in his chest that he thought he might expire or have a heart attack, there on the spot.

“Friday at five,” she reminded him, backing away and hurrying down the ladder, before throwing her hair over her

shoulder. “And drink your Gatorade. It’s mighty hot where you are standing, Luke Fuller... nice jeans too, by the way.”

Her wink and the double-entendre were not lost on him as he stared in disbelief, watching her walk off into the sunlight, still clutching the railing because his knees were knocking against each other.

“What just happened?” he uttered aloud in a squeaky voice full of disbelief. “Did I bang my head too hard? Breathing fumes? Did Nicolette just *tell* me we were going on a *date*?... And did she call *me* hot?”

CHAPTER 2



Nicolette tried to ignore the trembling in her limbs – and the way she was reacting to Luke. She had known him forever, but there was something different there now and she could see it, feel it... and knew he did, too.

He had been ignoring her for months now – and she was heartily sick of it – deciding to corner him today.

... And she hadn't been wrong.

Oh, that feeling deep within her soul, that sensation of awareness flared to life before her as she stared into his beautiful hazel eyes and saw that simmering flare of interest just before he tried to *'bury'* it.

He was scared—and that was completely okay... because she was too!

You just didn't go and start dating a family friend. It was weird, awkward, and well... odd. They'd caught frogs together as children in the backyard growing up, made mud pies together, had chicken-pox together, and this was just all so...

Strangely wonderful.

She sighed.

Just seeing that familiar smile, the way she could *'read'* him, was in a way comforting to her. Oh, she'd been on dates with other guys but hated all the stupid mental games. *'Quit playing hard to get'*, *'I might call you'*, *'You're too pushy'*, or *'There's someone else'*...

Yet, with Luke?

You got what you saw... and he made no promises he didn't intend to keep. There was something in his eyes when he looked at her. Something that made her suddenly feel like the '*right person*' instead of always wondering '*what was wrong with her*' regarding those boys she'd dated before...

That's when it dawned on her – that maybe it wasn't *her*?

Maybe it was *them*?

Maybe she was sniffing around the wrong person and fighting the growing attraction she had to her childhood friend – Luke.

In the last six months, she'd gone out of her way to befriend his sisters a little more, casually making conversation about the eldest Fuller sibling just to find out more about him. She knew the entire family was exceedingly close, dedicated to family, and deeply religious in a quiet faith that was in everything they did.

He wasn't allowed to miss church on Sundays. You couldn't leave the table until the vegetables were eaten. They always had supper as a family with everyone present, no excuses, every evening. When the kids were little, if one of them had a band concert? The entire Fuller family went to support the one who was playing.

Luke's parents were super-loving, wonderfully supportive, but there were certain lines you didn't cross – or Armadillo, his dad, didn't hold back. His father would quietly tell you in a firm voice what was wrong, the '*why*' behind it, and exactly how '*you were going to fix it*'...

It reminded her a lot of her own dad. Stubborn, quiet, didn't have to raise a voice to get their points across, and never got mad... but when they did?

Stand back!

So when she realized she was attracted to Luke – and that he was avoiding her? She took a page from both fathers' book, combined them, and took things into her own hands.

She was going to quietly go talk to him, corner him, tell him what she thought, how he was going to fix it, what she

expected, the ‘why’ she was telling him this, give him a specific time frame, repeat it back to him, and then put the ball in his court... before she lost her cool.

She was a Saxon through and through... and Luke was the one for her.

Period.

End of story.

Her father had zeroed in on her mother. Toby was infatuated with Samantha Sloan. Luke was her person – he just didn’t want to accept it yet... and Caspar?

Well, Caspar... was Caspar, she thought, shaking her head.

Luke could ‘*attempt*’ to fight it, try his hardest to avoid her, or think that he was pulling a fast one by being ‘*busy*’ each time the families got together – but she was done waiting for him to finally come to his senses.

Climbing up that ladder was probably the worst thing she could have ever done in the world. Her eyes literally traveled up his body, boots-to-shoulders, taking in every inch of him. From his worn-out Wranglers, to his grey ‘*I wrench for a living*’ T-shirt, to his tiny gold cross he always wore around his neck... her eyes drank it all in and sighed in happiness.

He was beautiful – *and hers.*

The sooner he stopped fighting, the better and faster they could move on with life, let their families get accustomed to things, and she could indulge in the feelings that were swirling in her soul regarding Luke.



FRIDAY CAME AROUND FINALLY... and she was staring at the clock on the wall, wishing it would hurry up. She wondered what time he would show up, how things would go between them, and intended to drag him away from town so that way their families, friends, memories, eyes and ears, didn’t follow them every moment of their first date.

She wanted things to be easy between them, wonderful, and to give them a chance before the world intruded. In fact, she already was taking steps to make sure they had a wonderful evening that neither regretted. She called her mother to tell her she was going to miss dinner tonight, meeting up with a friend from school... which wasn't technically a lie.

There were two large sub sandwiches sitting in a cooler under her desk, complete with a bag of sour cream and onion Lays chips that he always selected growing up, two Little Debbie snacks, and four cold cans of soda.

Was it glamorous? No.

Would it keep them fed and away from town? Absolutely.

Was it something down to earth that he could appreciate? Yup.

And even better than that?

They would have a chance to be alone, talk, spend time together, and focus on getting to know each other a little better than they already did... in a way he could recognize.

The Fuller family always said grace, believed in family time, and recognized that without a sense of home in your soul? You had nothing. Well, Nicolette planned on being a part of Luke's home.

"But not in a weird-stalker-psychopath-way..." she muttered aloud, only to hear the sensor beep stating that the front door to her insurance office had opened – and unfortunately?

Closed.

The stupid sensor had a five second delay... and she was looking at Luke, standing there in her office.

He was wearing a white t-shirt covered by a plaid cowboy shirt that was buttoned neatly and tucked into his jeans. A 'mild' belt-buckle shone at his waist... and she almost smiled, thinking how sedate it was compared to some of the obnoxious ones Armadillo wore on his own belts.

Luke looked devastatingly handsome and was watching her curiously, looking slightly alarmed, holding flowers in his hand.

Nicolette shot to her feet, smiling.

“Hey! I was wondering if you would make it...”

“Of course, I would,” he replied quietly, just as he looked away nervously, his tanned face suddenly pale. “You don’t think I’m some weird-stalker-psychopath... do you?”

“No,” she whispered in embarrassment. “I was talking aloud about myself because I’m anxious and a little nervous about this.”

“We don’t have to go out – and probably shouldn’t. I mean, what would our families say and we’re friends, you know? We don’t want our friendship to be weird. I’ve always known you and...”

“Luke, stop... please,” she whispered painfully, interrupting him quickly, realizing that this wasn’t going how she planned.

“Let me get a vase for those... thank you by the way,” she hesitated and then cast a glance over her shoulder again as she opened a cabinet, pulling out a small white bubble-glass vase that had once been her Grandma Judy’s. Filling it with water, she returned to where he was standing and smiled at him.

“May I?”

“Oh! Yeah. Sorry...” he began and thrust the flowers at her with a shy smile. “I wanted this to feel like a date, if this is what... well... you know...”

“*If* this was a date?” she smiled easily. “The flowers are lovely and really sweet of you. I love daisies and lilies. Everyone expects roses, but they are cliché. I like something that is just me and stands out...”

“How are you like a daisy or a lily?” he asked quietly, watching her.

“I’m just there,” she smiled nervously, looking away. “People look for the glamorous flowers... and I’m just there,

in a field, growing in my own way, and pretty in a plain sort of fashion. So, unless you are looking for the prettiest weed in the world...?”

“You are far from a weed, Nicolette,” he interrupted hoarsely, causing her to look up in surprise at the emotion in his voice. “You are the most beautiful flower that I’ve ever seen and would put anything that I could have brought to shame.”

“Why Luke...” she breathed, touched and smiling at him. “That is the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me – and the most you’ve ever said to me in almost four years.”

He chuckled nervously and rubbed the back of his neck, looking away.

“Guess I have little to say...”

“I doubt that’s the case.”

“Where would you like to go tonight? I was thinkin’ maybe we could head into Tyler or...”

“I have an idea,” she admitted, smiling at him. “Now, hear me out, but...”

“Uh oh...” he began, causing her to look up from where she was bent over to pick up the cooler, before hefting it up and saw the start of his smile – suddenly drop.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Our date,” she said simply. “I’m very easy-going and I thought you knew that about me after all these years,” she teased. “I don’t want everyone in town snooping around and it will make for all sorts of gossip if they see us having dinner in Yonder, you know?”

“I k-know...”

“So, we leave Yonder,” she shrugged, lifting the cooler by the handle, and he took it immediately. “Let’s head out towards Ember Creek. There’s a park over there or we could...”

“You want to... picnic?”

“I do.”

“With me?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Is that so surprising?” she chuckled, smiling at him – only to see a nervous smile appear on his face.

“No. I like that idea... a lot. No pressure, no questions, no harassment from anyone – we can just see if this is weird tonight or if this might be inviting a second or a third date.”

“Oh, it will be,” she said easily, opening the door for him, indicating that they should leave and quickly locking it behind him. “There’s going to be about four or five dates before we go to the courthouse together.”

“DO WHAT?” he balked, tripping and falling off the curb, stumbling to keep from falling down in front of her.

“Oh, don’t act surprised, Luke,” she smiled openly, playfully tapping him on the nose as she stepped off the steep curb. “If you need to go on dates to have a few moments to think - or some fancy premise to be sure that *‘I’m the one’*... that’s fine. I think it would be fun to date you and see how you react to me, but there’s no changing things. You and I are a thing.”

“We are?” he gulped nervously, opening the truck door for her. “How do you figure?”

“That’s why we are dating...” she said mischievously, looking over her shoulder at him as she moved to climb into the truck. “So you can do all the ‘figuring’ you need to...”

He stared at her for a moment before shutting the passenger side door, looked at her again curiously, shook his head, then slowly walked around the truck before climbing in and buckling up.

As the truck started, he looked at her again with this bewildered look that caused a smile to touch her lips.

“What’s wrong?”

“I never expected... well... this or any of what you just said and I’m...”

“Luke,” she breathed, reaching out to touch his arm and feeling it jump under her fingertips. “It’s okay. That’s why we are going to take things slow so you can feel confident in this. I’m a Saxon. I’m my father’s daughter through-and-through... and you are the one for me.”

“How? Why? Why do you say that?”

“I can’t answer that,” she smiled, laying her other hand over her chest. “I just feel it here and know it deep down inside.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Drive...” she whispered softly. “I’m hungry, and we need to get out of town before someone sees us.”

That seemed to spur him into action. He nodded, swallowed audibly, and threw the truck into reverse, before quickly backing up and pulling out onto the main road.

Within minutes, Yonder was behind them and all you could see were the open fields of a pasture on both sides of the road with slight hills in the distance. They drove silently for several minutes before he turned off onto another country road that suddenly was dotted with pecan trees, elms, and oaks... with a large babbling creek ran along the road.

Crossing a small, ancient iron bridge with wooden slats along the bottom, they finally pulled into a park. He put the truck underneath a gathering of trees to give them some shade, and Nicolette immediately rolled down the window.

“Do you want to get out and walk around?” he asked nervously, unbuckling.

“Nope.”

“What do you...”

“We are going to eat, remember?” she beamed, patting the cooler between them and turning slightly in the bench seat of the truck. “Eat, talk, get to know each other a little better.”

“Nicolette,” he sighed heavily, closing his eyes, and put his head back on the headrest.

She marveled at the way he looked right now, stunned by his lack of conviction, understanding that he was doubting any of this. He thought he wasn’t good enough and simply was frightened to believe. Oh yes, she knew Luke quite well over the years and had seen him struggle before a few times.

“We both know that this will never happen. It’s sweet that you believe that there’s something between...”

She suddenly leaned upwards, tucking her knees underneath her, and the slight jostling movement was enough to cause him to turn to look at her.

“Nope. Close your eyes, Luke. You need a dose of faith in your heart...”

“I have faith...”

“Shhh... are you going to argue with me all the time when we date?” she began gently, smiling softly at him – only to see that hesitant smile returned. He was watching her, looking completely unsure, but that glimmer in his eyes spoke volumes to her soul.

“Close your eyes,” she repeated.

He did.

She was going to take his hand, but it was resting on his thigh and assumed if he was this shaken, he would probably let out a yelp and fly from the truck in that moment. Instead, she climbed a little closer and rested her head on his shoulder, leaning over the cooler.

“Nicolette?”

“Shh... just a few moments of peace and understanding...” she urged in a mere whisper. “Listen to the breeze and the water in the distance for a few moments.”

They sat there, just like that, until she could feel some of the tension slip from him. His shoulder sagged slightly where her head was and she glanced up to see his eyes were indeed

still closed, noticing the shadow on his chin that she'd never noticed before.

The teenager she once knew had certainly become quite a handsome man without her noticing - until recently. There was a quiet, steadiness to him that was comforting... and she really admired his serene presence. He was like a pillar, a rock, unmovable and strong, but it would take some chaotic weather to finally make an impression or leave a mark on him.

“Now...” she murmured in a hushed voice, trying to really reach him. “Keeping those eyes closed? Tell me what you hear...”

“You talkin’...” he said instantly and choked back a laugh as she swatted at his arm.

It was nice to hear him crack a joke – even if it was at her expense. She couldn't help but smile at her own reaction, watching his Adam's apple bob with his laugh and wishing she could touch it without him running away.

“Stop that... and listen,” she urged again, settling back down against his shoulder once more. “Really *listen*, Luke. Breathe, settle in for a moment, and feel the world around you.”

She heard his breath steady as his laughter faded away, both of them silent, and as the minutes ticked by. She felt the moment he tensed with awareness.

“There's the creek,” she breathed silently. “The trees waving in the breeze, the faint noises the truck makes as it cools down, your own heart beating silently... but if you keep listening... keep feeling...”

She let her voice fade off as she sat there beside him, her head resting on his shoulder, and let the comfort of his presence wash over her in amazement, recognition, and wonder at this blessing.

She wasn't one of those metaphysical believers with chakras, charms, or gadgets. She never believed in karma or chance... but she did believe that people were led, drawn to each other, for a purpose. You controlled your own destiny and

fate – but only by being strong enough to fight for your own happiness in your circle around you.

Her father had taught her the beauty of silence, feeling the world around her, and she had come to recognize that each person gave off a feeling. There was a steady comfort in her daddy, a nurturing feeling from within her mother.

Caspar was annoying, like any pesky brother.

Toby was a dreamer—staring at the clouds and pulled strongly away from the family. She could sense it, feel it, and she thought that was part of the reason her parents sometimes babied the oldest child.

They always encouraged Nicolette to fly, to be strong, to follow her dreams... the same with Caspar – but with Toby? They pushed him to return home every time he went somewhere.

If Toby went flying, he was told to be home at a certain time. If he went to band camp, it was ‘*we’ll be here Friday for you*’ and once she knew about his crush on Samantha – it was ‘*stay away from her and focus on growing into the man you need to be*’.

The ‘*baby birds*’ were being pushed out of the nest with the most love, care, and support a parent could give – but the eldest ‘*bird*’ had been ready to go *looong* before he could ever fly...

Yeah, she never got those pep-talks because her home was here, in Yonder, near her family, but she needed to make it her own somehow... and wanted it all with a fierceness that was staggering.

... *If her parents only knew*, she mused slightly.

“What do you feel?” she murmured in a soft, gentle, and encouraging voice.

“At peace...” he breathed softly, his voice full of wonder, so much so her eyes stung with tears.

“And in that peace, there is comfort...?”

“Yes...”

“What else?”

“Is this what meditation is like...” he asked quietly. “I never sit like this or...”

“Shhh...” she urged softly. “Don’t break it. These moments are hard to find sometimes.”

“M’kay...”

They sat there again as he finally settled once more... and was stunned to feel his hand touch hers, without a word. His warm hand lay over her fingers, needing the connection, and she drew in her breath, only to hear him sigh as he seemed to relax even further.

“I feel... whole...” he breathed silently a few minutes later, his voice aching with disbelief and wonder.

“That’s it. Now just let it flow and feel... let it wash over you and truly feel that presence all around you, in the air, in your soul.”

She closed her eyes once more, ignored the feeling of a tear tracking down her cheek into her hair, as she realized just how wondrous it felt to have him beside her, here in this moment, recognizing what she felt too just being near him. It was like he’d zeroed in on that sensation with a lightning-fast recognition that ricocheted in her heart.

“Have faith...” she repeated softly and felt his fingers lace with hers.

“I do...” he breathed reverently. “This is...”

She sighed gently in dawning understanding of just how stunning it was when it hit you. There were no words for what this sensation was. A miracle? A recognition? Two beings on the same wavelength?

Nicolette didn’t need to be entertained, wooed, dated or toyed with, because she felt that sense of home, that resonance of wonder, that understanding that this is where she felt whole. There didn’t need to be anything fancy between them... because she had looked into his eyes one summer afternoon, felt that sensation of heaven, and recognized her home, her

happiness, and all her dreams lay in the boy she'd known forever.

Luke.

“This feeling... is *us*,” she confessed faintly, her voice a hushed whisper of awe and understanding beyond her years.

CHAPTER 3



Luke heard her words, relished this sensation, and felt such a sense of completion within him that was staggering. Instead of Nicolette's crazy statement scaring him, making him nervous or antsy?

He felt recognition.

Understanding.

He wanted to look at her, to see those beautiful eyes, but didn't want this feeling of perfection to disappear yet. Remaining there, he heard the brook in the distance, felt the breeze carry the scent of green grass and flowers, smelled her shampoo from where her head was resting on his shoulder... and marveled at the feeling of her hand in his.

This was crazy.

Valkyrie was going to kill him for even thinking about his daughter like this—which was enough to draw him right *out* of that feeling.

Luke turned to look at Nicolette beside him, to suggest that they go ahead and eat, talk, or do whatever this '*date*' was, so he could drop her back off at the office to get her car... and...

He looked into her eyes.

Everything went completely blank in his mind in that moment as something snapped deep within his soul. There was a feeling of falling, a humbling peace that he felt during his most soulful moments of prayer, flying, or on a perfect summer day when the world was serene.

Her beautiful blue eyes, framed with those tawny lashes, were holding his and he knew he was lost in that moment. He couldn't even see anything else around them... just her.

His hand was suddenly there, touching her cheek, as he leaned forward to brush his lips against hers, unable to control any of this anymore.

There was an achingly sweet sensation of *'finally'* within his soul as they kissed. Her hand was touching his jaw, pulling his head closer to hers, as the innocent embrace suddenly deepened with a flare of awareness that was incendiary between them.

He pulled back, looking at her with wide eyes and understanding.

“How...?” he swallowed nervously.

“I hoped...” she admitted, biting her lip, and he felt his eyes drop to watch, before yanking his eyes away from her.

“I thought you were hungry...” he began anxiously and hesitated. “For food – I mean. Oh mercy! This is not what I expected in the slightest, and...”

“Relax,” she laughed nervously beside him. “You can kiss me again when our date is over. That should give you time to recoup... and yes. I am hungry... *for food.*”

It was that gentle teasing that he remembered, causing him to laugh nervously as he glanced at her. Nicolette looked away and scooted back over to her side of the bench seat, reaching for the cooler once again.

“I brought sandwiches, chips, and...”

“Thank you,” he replied softly, realizing that while it was intimidating to be actually out on a date with the woman that he was hopelessly attracted to? He wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her being so pushy with him.

He would have continued to hide, avoid, or run from her... but instead? He was here, spending time in her presence. They were going to eat dinner together, and he'd already kissed her.

If tomorrow never comes, he knew he would die a fortunate man in this moment.

Nicolette looked at him, smiled tenderly at him as she put two Coke cans in the cup-holders, removed the sandwiches and handed him the bag of Lays.

“Sour cream and onion...”

“My favorite.”

“I remembered...”

“Nicolette...” he began and hesitated, feeling almost adrift and trying to center himself, reaching for that sense of peace he’d felt a few minutes earlier, struggling.

As if she seemed to sense it, she reached over the cab of the truck and took her hand in his. He felt that sense of whole, tangible and thick, like some invisible fog surrounded him, suddenly encroaching on him... looking at her.

“Quit thinking,” she urged gently. “Quit trying to reason this, figure it out, analyze it, or make sense of things. Just let them be, Luke. Ride this moment, float in this feeling, like if you were flying a plane.”

Both of them had their pilot’s licenses, because as a child of one of the instructors? They assumed you would love flying as much as they did... which he certainly did. He’d always gone flying with his dad for as long as he could remember.

“In a plane, I’m in control of whether I soar, crash, or change altitude... and right now I feel distinctly *out* of control.”

“Do you need to take control of this?” she asked, her voice hesitant. “Honestly, I’ve been waiting for you to, but you seem like you weren’t ready or kept turning me away.”

“Because I’m afraid of what happens to us if this is a mistake,” he croaked, his voice hoarse with fear and understanding as he gazed at the woman he’d always yearned for. “I would rather spend a million days having you in the world close by and wondering ‘*what if*’... than to have you

look at me with hate or disgust in your eyes because I ruined a beautiful friendship.”

“Reach for me, Luke...” she whispered; her voice was full of emotion as she gawked at him openly, not holding back. “I’m right here waiting for you to say the word and...”

“You aren’t scared?”

“Only that it will be another four or five years before you notice me again.”

“Four or five...? What?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to look twice at me since I graduated high school. I’ve watched you talk with those other girls, tried to look like them, act like them, and...”

“Is that why you colored your hair red that one time?”

“Yes.”

“Oh Niki...” he choked out in disbelief and wonder, staring at her in amazement and touched to see the emotion in her blue eyes.

“I like the way you shorten my name,” she smiled tearfully.

“I don’t want to hurt you...”

“Then stop running,” she urged. “Stop pushing me away. Instead - take my hand, take a chance, and take *me* for once...”

Luke gulped, his eyes nearly popping out of his head as her words set off a flurry of fireworks behind his forehead.

“Choose *me* this time to be in your life,” she pleaded, wiping her eyes painfully. “You are always talking to other people and...”

Luke picked up the sandwiches off the bench of the truck between them, putting them on the dash quickly as he reached over, pulling her closer in the exact moment that he was scooting towards her.

They met in the middle, kissing wildly, arms embracing as they clung to each other.

As they finally separated, he wasn't willing to let her go. Instead, he clung to her, holding her in his arms, hugging her tightly, her head resting under his chin against his collarbone.

“Don't say ‘*take me*’...” he choked out nervously, in a hushed whisper – only to hear her laugh softly in a voice that seemed to be keenly aware of the implications of her words.

“Someday, when you've decided there's been enough dawdling? We'll go to the courthouse, and you'll be mine... and then you can ‘*take me*’.”

“Niki...”

“Shhh... don't ruin things by letting reality in or getting all stuffy again. Can we just dream for a few moments and savor this?”

“Yeah,” he chuckled in amazement at the way her mind worked, and he never knew, kissing the top of her head. “We can...”



THEY SAT THERE TOGETHER in the truck for a while. Just talking, watching the sunset off in the distance, and relaxing. This free side of Nicolette enchanted him, that hidden part of her heart she seemed to keep away from everyone. She had this way about her, this openness that was just so down-to-earth.

Sitting there on the passenger side of the truck, she'd kicked off her sandals and had her feet propped on the dash, all cozy-like, prompting him to do the same. He'd yanked off his boots, had a cold coke in his hand, leaning against the driver's side door and his feet, enclosed in socks, were propped up close by.

Every once in a while, she'd poke him in the arch of his foot with her toe... making him laugh or smile. It was simply

wonderful to be around her, both having let down their guards to let the other person in.

“Soooo... ‘*Mr. I’m-in-control-man*,’” she teased lightly. “What’s on the docent for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Oh yes,” she beamed playfully. “After this spectacular date, a bunch of kissing when you drop me off tonight at my car, text me later than you can’t stop thinking about me... what are we doing tomorrow?”

He met her smile with one of his own, feeling his heart light in his chest as he gazed at her. What would it be like to see her more often like this?

“Well, I suppose I should take advantage of my time off of work, eh?”

“Absolutely.”

“That means we are going to spend the day together Saturday...”

“And Sunday...” she prompted innocently.

“And Sunday,” he laughed, feeling his heart surge with joy at her chuckle of delight as she grinned at him, poking the sole of his foot again. “I suppose we could secretly meet up, drive into Tyler, and find something to do...”

“I suppose that could certainly work.”

“Maybe I should pick you up around nine – at the office?”

“Perfect. I can park my car out back and no one else will know.”

“Won’t your parents ask where you are off to?”

“Overtime...” she laughed. “An insurance agent’s life is never dull.”

“Do you have so many clients?”

“Always recruiting,” she countered – and lifted an eyebrow. “And why are you not insured with me?”

“Guess I should change companies, huh?”

“Absolutely, you should!” she sputtered indignantly, before peeling with laughter. “Monday morning you can show up with coffee and woo me for about the twenty minutes it will take to move your policy.”

“Such sweet pillow talk...” he laughed.

“You have nooooo idea...”

“I bet I don’t!”

Both of them laughed wildly, continuing bantering easily between them like this was nothing – and everything – all at once.

They talked about their dreams, hopes, wishes, fears... and nothing was off limits. It was like they finally had a chance to connect, to really reach past those imagined barriers, and it was breathtaking to behold that this beautiful person before him was actually here, with him.

Hours later, it was getting dark. Luke said that needed to get home so there weren’t too many questions and drove her back to the office. As he put it in park, he walked around to her side and opened the door... only to pull her into his arms once again.

He stood there, kissing her, his arms wrapped around her waist, as she hooked her feet behind his back, urging him closer to her.

“I need to let you get home...” he said tenderly, his lips hovering over hers. “I’m afraid you’ve got me stuck.”

“Yep...” she said breathlessly.

“Niki...”

“Oh gosh, I love that so much, Luke...” she whispered poignantly, her voice husky, making him shiver in awareness.

“Sweetheart, from where I’m standing right now, there’s a lot of this that I love so much, but can’t act on. I need to get you into your car safely – and you need to head home before we do something either of us regrets,” he admitted pointedly in a hushed voice.

“Would we really regret it?” she beckoned seductively.

“You are incredible,” he began, his hands tightening around her waist where he held her. “But we need to slow things down. I mean, we just went on our first date and...”

“I want you to think of me,” she whispered, leaning forward to whisper against his ear, driving him wild. “Think of me like this, all the possibilities, dreams, and what *forever* could look like for us...”

“Oh, heavens...” he muttered, closing his eyes against the feelings exploding within him. “I gotta leave, Niki.”

“Then go... and don’t forget what I said.”

“I don’t think I ever will.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning – *here* – at nine?”

“Yes. I’ll bring something for breakfast.”

“I’ll bring a thermos of coffee.”

“Niki...” he hesitated, hating to let her go and loving the feeling of her here in his arms. “Sweet dreams, darlin’... will you text me when you get home?”

“You know it,” she teased, leaning up to kiss his lower lip. “Sweet dreams, Luke.”

He stepped back from her, hands trembling, and reached for her sandals on the floorboard. Slipping one shoe on like she was his own country Cinderella. He couldn’t help but glimpse at her legs in the moonlight, before putting the other shoe on.

“You are going to spoil me,” she breathed.

“Then I’m doing something right...”

“Yeah, you are.”

Luke smiled.

“Goodnight, Niki. I’ll see you soon.”

Walking back to his truck, he watched her climb into her car and drive off before he pulled out of the parking lot... just in time to hear his phone ring.

It was his dad.

“Hey Dad... I’m on my way home and...”

“Where have you been? We had supper three hours ago and your mother is starting to worry.”

“I know. I’m sorry, but I had something come up...”

“Oh? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll see you when you get home, buster...”

“Thanks, Dad. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

As he pulled up to the house, Luke felt a hammer of awareness in him seeing his dad sitting on the front porch, waiting.

It wasn’t angry or upset, just a concerning love a father felt for his son... even if he wasn’t his biological father. He’d been there forever, always open and accepting, and this man was his dad like no other.

He sat there, in his jeans, boots hanging off the concrete slab porch, dangling... with two beers beside him.

Point taken.

His dad wanted to talk – *alone* – man-to-man.

“Hey...” Luke said simply, getting out of the truck and walking up to the house.

“Hey yourself,” his dad said, smiling. “Take a seat.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” he smiled. “A man can’t sit with his grown son, ask how he’s doing, or wonder how things are?”

There was something in his father’s eyes, a shrewdness and understanding lurking in those depths, that caught him unawares. Oh yes, his step-dad ‘*Toady*’ had always known when he was sneaking around or doing something mischievous.

“You know...” Luke said softly in amazement.

“Suspected...” he chuckled, leaning over and bumping his shoulder against his, handing him a beer. “I didn’t raise you from a three-year-old boy to not learn some of your thoughts, habits, and quirks, young man. You’re twenty-eight and stepping out into the world, wanting to take strides in learning who you are, what you want to be, and becoming your own person. I get that... but sometimes things stay the same, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Still hate broccoli?”

“Ugh...” Luke said, shivering with disgust. “Yes, and you know it.”

“Love pizza?”

“Yup.”

“Still sniffin’ after Nicolette Saxon?”

Luke glanced up in awareness as his father took a long drink from his beer bottle innocently in that moment. Finally, his father laughed quietly and shook his head, knowingly.

“For a while now, you’ve been makin’ ‘*moon-eyes*’ at her... and she watches you, too. Just be careful and know that you need to do right by that girl,” his dad said quietly. “You can’t fool ‘round with that young lady. If you are just sowin’ your wild oats? You better find another field, because you’ll *die* in that one if you hurt Valkyrie’s daughter. Am I clear?”

“She’s incredible,” Luke admitted quietly, “And I’m scared to mess things up or ruin a friendship, you know? I mean, I’ve known Niki forever and...”

“Niki, huh?”

“Dad...” Luke hesitated, looking at his father’s profile as he took another sip of his beer, looking deep in thought. “How did you know you loved mom?”

His father looked at him slowly, a smile touching his face.

“Something I saw in your beautiful mama’s eyes struck me,” his father said softly, and Luke nodded silently.

He didn't remember when 'Toady' first came into the picture, but he did remember the way his dad cried when he first called him 'Daddy' ... and he was his daddy ever since.

"She had the softest smile, the most beautiful heart, and was so magical that I couldn't imagine ever lookin' at anyone else. I didn't rush into things, kissing her or pushing for more, but instead let her set the pace in our relationship because that suited us... but every person is different. Every relationship is unique."

"I've always known Niki, but something's changed along the way and now it's just different," Luke admitted. "... And I'm afraid."

"I'm sure," he smiled, reaching over to ruffly Luke's shorn hair. "You're alright, you know that? Just take your time, do right by her, and don't rush things. You are both young..."

"Dad..."

"You have your whole lives to fall in love," his father said quietly, pulling him into an awkward hug under his arm. "You hear me? You're *my* boy, always will be, and I'm not ready to be a grandpa... and I can tell you, Luke, that you aren't ready to be a daddy - yet."

Luke drew in his breath and tried to pull away, but his dad kept him locked under his arm, making him laugh as the man wrestled to keep him in a place like they used to do when he was little.

"Keep things on the '*straight-and-narrow*' kiddo. Find yourself, think of where you want to be or how you can provide five years from now - and when you find that man? Then you are ready to consider moving forward with whomever you fall in love with."

"Are ya' gonna let me up?"

"Are ya' gonna take things slow with Nicolette Saxon?"

"SHHHHH!" he hissed and wrested himself free from his dad, looking around nervously. "We don't want anyone to know in case things don't work out."

“And if they do?” his dad chuckled.

Luke grew quiet and looked at his boots, suddenly alarmed as he realized he needed to figure out a future, find a place of his own, and start putting things into place if he was ready to move forward in his life – just like his dad mentioned.

He suddenly saw in his mind the way Niki smiled at him, remembered the taste of her kisses, and the way she sighed his name.

“If they work out, then I found a miracle,” Luke whispered openly, feeling a little overwhelmed by everything and needed to start grasping all these loose ends to put them into place.

“I think she’s the one who found the miracle,” his dad said thickly, smiling at him with his eyes shining with pride. “I love you, boy... always have.”

“I love you, too...”

Luke hesitated, looking openly at his father.

“I need help to find an actual full-time job,” he confessed nervously, searching his dad’s eyes. “And a really cheap place to live.”

“It’s like that, huh?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Well, okay then. Let’s talk about what you want to do, what you *can* do, and what potential bills will look like as a grown man.”

“You don’t think I’m a fool?”

“We all are when we find the right girl.”

His dad smiled at him, tapped his beer bottle against Luke’s – which was still unopened in his hands.

Luke couldn’t help the nervous laugh that escaped him as he realized that he needed to start thinking about things, putting it together tonight, because he planned on spending the day with Nicolette tomorrow.

CHAPTER 4



Nicolette was ready to go when Luke pulled up – and had everything together for their date. She wanted to spend the entire day with him, not letting him out of her sight, and just savor these moments as much as possible. She brought a picnic blanket, packed a meal again, a few snacks, wore some shorts with a swimsuit underneath and was ready for anything.

“Good morning,” she beamed happily. “One thermos of java juice...”

Luke started laughing and held up a thermos, too.

“I think I got things mixed up,” he said sheepishly and hesitated, getting out of the truck quickly. “How about I run in and grab a few donuts in the next town over?”

“Sounds like a plan,” she smiled easily, and saw him walking over to her.

He took the cooler from her and the blanket. Luke put the blanket on the floorboard before hefting up the cooler into the bed of the truck. As he turned towards her, she hesitated as he held out his hand.

“Milady?”

“Thank you, kind sir...” she murmured and climbed up into the truck as Luke closed it. He jogged over to the other side and quickly climbed in. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Perfect,” she smiled. “You are mine for the day and I want nothing to ruin this chance at happiness.”

She reached for his hand where it rested on his leg, scooping it up easily and lacing her fingers with his.

He smiled softly at her, his eyes warm and heady – and she felt that warmth roll over her as she recognized that joy that came from just being near him.

“Where to?”

“I thought we could go back to our spot,” she began. “I brought a picnic blanket, plenty of snacks, and I could handle a little wading in the creek...”

“I didn’t bring anything,” he laughed nervously.

“Sounds like that’s your problem,” she said innocently, causing him to laugh even harder as they looked at each other, both blushing furiously.

“I’ll stop and grab a cheap pair of shorts or something... or I can just get these jeans wet. Won’t be the first time I’ve fallen into a creek,” he admitted. “Boots can be slippery on the bank.”

“I bet.”

Thirty minutes later, she was stunned that Luke had shrugged off his button-up shirt, removed his leather belt, his boots, socks, and rolled up his jeans before wading in. She’d immediately shucked her things, wading into the creek in her one-piece swimsuit... only to have him pluck a crawdad from the bank and threaten her with it.

It was downhill from there.

They played like children without a care in the world. Playing in the water together, splashing each other and talking, they felt so carefree... so reckless. The girl in her would squeal in laughter as Luke would pick her up around the waist, before dunking her in the thigh deep water... and she would yank him down.

The woman in her was keenly aware of his wet t-shirt, the way his jeans clung to him. The fact that she was in a swimsuit... and they were alone, was not lost on her.

The park was about a half mile up the way and most of the fishermen were much farther away from where the water was deeper.

As she stood up in the creek, she was bent over, laughing at him, her hair hanging around her in ropy tendrils as he was chuckling easily, before pulling her easily into his arms, kissing her deeply.

“Hey...” she whispered softly in his arms, stroking the back of his wet head and smiling at him.

“Hey yourself...” he murmured tenderly, his eyes searching hers. “I really like this between us and never imagined this could ever be real.”

“I think you are incredible,” she confessed, the words just slipping from her so easily. “I know it’s a lot, but...”

“I think you’re incredible, too,” he confessed hoarsely. “But I really want to do right by you. You aren’t just some girl, Niki... you are *the* girl I’ve always known, my best friend, and...”

“And?” she whispered huskily.

“So much more,” he replied, kissing her again as she twined her arms around his neck, pulling him to her and kissing him deeply... until he slipped, and they both landed hard in the water.

“C’mon,” he choked, laughing, and wiping the water from his eyes. “Let’s get out, have something to snack on, and lay in the sun for a while to dry off...”



AS THE DAY PASSED, Nicolette found herself talking to Luke, listening, and offering suggestions. He was deep in thought regarding what to do for a career, because working two jobs was really hard on him – and neither was going anywhere, if he couldn’t work full time.

“I’m actually going to see about ironing out a few things and...”

“Like what?”

“Well, I mean, I need a full-time job but...”

“Have you talked to anyone at Flyboys?”

“No,” he said sheepishly. “I worry that they won’t take me seriously.”

“Luke!” Nicolette said, stunned. “You’ve been working on the planes with Glory for nearly ten years. Why not see if you can do more there or...”

“Because if your dad is upset about this between us and he becomes my boss? It won’t go well,” he confessed quietly, putting his hands behind his head. “I really need a little distance in case it’s not received well. Your dad can be a little... intense.”

“He’s a softie.”

“So says his only child...” Luke said flatly, looking at her with an arched eyebrow. “I think if he finds out that I have designs on his daughter and trying to figure out how to provide a home for her...”

“You are?” Nicolette whispered, stunned, and looked at him with amazement in her eyes. “Are you really?”

“I’m not gonna mess this up between us,” Luke replied tenderly. “If this is going to be a relationship, then we need certain things in line. I need to work forty hours a week, have a place for us to hang out, and then someday...”

“Yes?”

“Someday, Nicolette Saxon,” Luke said gruffly. His heart was there in his eyes as he spoke to her with so much emotion. “Someday, I’m going to marry you and I don’t want you to ever be ashamed of me, because I didn’t go to the Academy like Toby or go to medical school like Caspar...”

“You work harder than either of them,” she whispered tearfully. “I could *never* be ashamed of you. Are you ashamed

of me?”

“Never!” he said forcefully, looking at her intently. “You have your life together and I’m just scrambling to put it all into place now, because I never had a reason to focus... before now.”

“Oh, Luke...” she smiled tremulously. “Can I help?”

“Just be supportive. Laugh at me if I screw things up, and if I make a mistake? Please be there to listen, because I have a hard time opening up sometimes...”

“I understand and would be honored to be the one you talk to.”

“You aren’t scared at how fast this is – or how intense it is between us?”

Nicolette shook her head.

“I’ve waited for you forever, Luke Fuller...” she whispered. “Just let me help however I can, and we’ll figure it out together.”

He pulled his arm out from behind his head and lay back on the blanket again, taking her hand in his, linking their fingers tightly.

“Just give me time...” he whispered openly.

“You’ve got it,” she promised easily.



HOURS LATER, they were kissing passionately in the truck behind her office. Luke was trying to be the perfect gentleman, walking her to her car and opening her door... but she practically grappled him, pulling him to her.

Seeing him there in the moonlight, remembering his words about how he wanted to take care of her, that someday was going to marry her? She just felt this overwhelming feeling of love towards the boy she’d always cared for.

She nearly dragged him back into the truck, kissing him deeply and not letting go... and he barely fought or countered her attentions.

Instead, he sat there, kissing her back.

“Niki...” Luke whispered painfully. “Honey... we’ve gotta stop. I’m not doing any of this in my pickup truck.”

“I know...” she breathed, arching her neck against him, where he was kissing her jaw. “I know we aren’t.”

“You’ve got to go... and I need to leave...”

“I know...”

“Then why are we still sitting here...” he chuckled in a panicked, desperate voice. “I’m not taking you to bed until we are married.”

“I told you three or four dates,” she countered distractedly, turning his lips towards her again – only for him to pull away laughing again.

“Honey, you said *four* or *five* dates,” he countered playfully. “We’ve been on two dates.”

“Two to go,” she shrugged, beaming at him. “One can be at the courthouse on Monday morning.”

“I thought I was bringing you coffee and moving my insurance policy to your office,” he grinned.

“And then we’ll go get married.”

“Niki...” he whispered, pulling her hands off his shoulders. “Honey, we’ve got to stop because I refuse to cross a line without doing the right thing by you.”

“Then do it,” she said simply.

“Marriage is important,” he whispered, searching her eyes. “Do you know what you are asking of me? I mean, this is forever. I don’t intend to get married ever again and you have to be sure. If you told me ‘*No*’ now, then it wouldn’t be a problem. I would someday heal, my heart would scar over, and eventually I would pick up the pieces of my soul.”

“I know what marriage is,” she whispered softly, not turning away from him. “I want your name, your heart, your soul, your love, Luke. Marriage *is* forever – a bond between us that can never be broken. You would be mine and I would be yours. We would make a home, have a family, and I love the idea of knowing that my best friend would be my lover - and my husband.”

“You aren’t scared that we would be making a huge mistake?”

“Do you see a mistake in my eyes when you look at me, touch me, or when we talk?”

“Never...” Luke whispered to her, his eyes holding hers, shiny with emotion, as he tucked her hair behind her ear tenderly. “You are the brightest diamond in a world full of pebbles, lost in a riverbed... just waiting until some lucky person wins your heart and discovers the real you.”

“I’ve been waiting for *you*...” she breathed emphatically.

“You are *pressuring* me, and I cannot provide for you yet,” he said softly, his voice full of apology. “Let’s go flying tomorrow and you’ll see how others react to us being together. Just think what it will be like if they find out that we snuck off to get married?”

“They’ll be happy.”

“They’ll *bury* me,” he blurted out in a nervous chuckle.

“Then let’s go flying. We’ll see how everyone responds, and finish talking tomorrow – deal?”

“Deal,” he smiled tenderly. “Now off my lap, so I can think.”

“I kinda like where I am.”

“I kinda like where you are, too... but dang, Niki?! You are killing me slowly.”

“Doesn’t *Nicolette Fuller* sound incredible?”

“Yeah, it does,” he laughed tenderly, hugging her. “You are scary-pushy when you set your mind on something, aren’t you,

honey?”

“It’s a Saxon trait, you lucky boy.”

“I guess so.”

CHAPTER 5



Sunday morning, they drove out to have breakfast together before heading towards Flyboys. She knew he was incredibly nervous and had every right to be.

Her father was working today.

As they pulled up, Luke cleared his throat nervously, and whispered to her under his breath as he stared out the front windshield of the truck.

“Your dad is watching us. Can you please take it easy on me so I can live to see another day?” he said in a hushed voice. “That means no grabbing, no kissing, no holding hands... no to *everything*, honey, please.”

“I promise,” she agreed, waving to her dad happily. “We need to get out of the truck and say hello.”

“I know, but my knees won’t hold me yet. They are still shaking.”

“It will be fine,” she said easily, laughing softly. “We went to grab something to eat after church, okay?”

“Sounds good.”

Nicolette climbed out of the truck.

Luke followed behind her, yanking his baseball cap onto his head as if it was some helmet to afford him a little protection.

“Hey Daddy...” she said easily, walking up to the tall man that was looking at Luke curiously with a flat expression. “I

thought I would come surprise you and go up for a little bit.”

“What are you doing with Armadillo’s boy?”

“Luke? Oh, we ran into each other at church, and he was going flying, too. I suggested we take a spin together, so we don’t tie up two planes or use up a bunch of fuel.”

“Mr. Saxon,” Luke said bravely, extending his hand.

“What happened to calling me Valkyrie?” Nicolette’s dad said bluntly, his eyes narrowing as he looked at him – and back at her. “Are you kids playing a joke on me?”

“Never, Daddy,” she smiled, leaning up to kiss him on the cheek. “Is there a plane available?”

“Always, pumpkin...”

She beamed at her father before hugging him tightly, and whispering ‘I love you’ to him, as he kissed her on the top of her head. Luke was watching them, and she knew he was sweating buckets just standing there before him.

“C’mon,” she began, turning towards him. “No showing off, Luke.”

“Nope. Right as rain when I’ve got someone else in the plane.”

“Good answer, kid!” Valkyrie yelled out from behind them, standing there with his arms crossed over his chest, just watching them.

“Hurry, so we can get out of sight and out of hearing,” she urged quickly, yanking open the door and heard her father yell loudly as Luke was already on a step, draining fuel as part of the pre-check.

“NICOLETTE – DO YOUR OWN PRE-CHECK, YOUNG LADY!” her father yelled pointedly, glaring at her.

She knew he frowned upon her relying that the planes were maintained and preached it to all of them repeatedly for safety’s sake. As she backed down out of the plane, she glanced at Luke, who was smirking and pouring the fuel back into the opening properly.

“Behave,” she hissed at him, smirking as she glanced at him.

“Everything has to be proper, remember? No clues or indications that I’m interested in his beautiful daughter...”

“Awww Luke,” she whispered softly, smiling at him as they walked around the plane, checking the flaps. “Just interested?”

“How about *‘falling for her’*...”

“Hmm... good! I think I’m falling for you too,” Nicolette whispered, reaching out to touch his chest and peering over his shoulder, causing him to dart away nervously.

“No touching, remember?”

“How can I not when I think about all those kisses and...”

“Niki, are you *trying* to get me killed?”

“Nope. I kinda like you in my life and just want the world to know it.”

“Three dates, honey...” he chuckled, opening the door to the plane for her as she climbed inside, smiling. “We’ve been on three incredible dates.”

“Almost that magic number.”

“Behave and call us in,” Luke laughed softly. “Let’s finish the pre-check.”

They flipped several buttons, checking oil pressures, flaps, and started up the propellers, adjusting throttle, as they started to taxi forward slowly.

Flyboys, do you copy? This is Saxony and Monkeywrench in Cessna-five-seven-three-niner requesting take off...

“Saxony, I’ve got you cleared for take-off, sweetheart...”

Luke and Nicolette looked at each other in awareness. Her father was on the coms, so there would be very little talking because he could be listening in at any time. She shrugged helplessly as they both reached for the controls at the same time.

“Ladies first...” Luke said, his voice crackling in the speakers as she looked at him. Nicolette blew him a quick kiss, only to see him pretend to catch it and lay it on his chest, over his heart, silently.

“Let’s go...” she said firmly, taking control of the plane as they soared into the sky aggressively. As they climbed, she looked at him and smiled sadly. This would be a really hushed flight between the two of them.

“How’s work?” Luke said casually.

“Good.”

“I think I’m going to come by Monday morning and switch my auto policy.”

“Oh? Great! Maybe we should look at a renter’s policy, too... especially since you mentioned you were looking for a place of your own.”

He looked at her sharply and she winked at him, beaming.

“That sounds great.”

“I think it’s fantastic that you are taking hold of your life, you know? Taking steps for your future. I’m a little envious. I have my office, but I’ve been working on building a nest egg instead to make sure if something comes up? It’s all handled. I worry a lot sometimes and need someone to talk to. I appreciate you listening earlier.”

“Of course.”

He looked at her pointedly, causing her to chuckle in amusement as she realized it was getting to be a little too uncomfortable for him... only to see him smile mischievously.

“What about you?” he asked, trying to turn the tables on her.

“What about me?” she countered – and this was the young girl he remembered that could argue her way out of a cardboard box.

“What’s going on in your life? You’ve been really quiet, and it’s been a while since we could all hang out... you

know?”

“Oh, things are going well in my world. I started seeing this guy who’s incredible and it might be really serious.”

“Oh, really?” he said, trying to keep his voice steady, but his expression was one of shock and disbelief that she was talking about this on the radio! Anyone could pick that up at Flyboys. “Do your parents know?”

“Nah. He’s dating *me* – not my parents. It’s my life, and he’s simply incredible, so sweet, and really just amazing. I feel very lucky to have him in my life.”

“I’m happy for you, Nicolette.”

“What about you?”

“I’m dating this girl that’s really sweet. I haven’t introduced her to my parents because things are new between us – but I can see forever in her eyes. She could be the one for me.

“I’m so happy for you, Luke.”

Nicolette looked at him tearfully, seeing such love in his gaze that it was breathtaking to behold. He leaned towards her, kissing her softly, and then straightening up quickly to make sure they were steady on their flight.

“I feel pretty blessed to have met her finally.”

“I know what you mean,” she replied tenderly.

They flew for about two hours, just taking their time, talking about the past, dreams for the future, and tried to keep things evasive... except that he looked so handsome beside her.

She stared at him dreamily, memorizing his profile, seeing his amiable smile and that gentle way about him that touched her heart. Admiration filled her as she realized he would do everything he could to keep his promises, trying to make things work somehow.

He wasn’t a quitter and believed in taking a deep breath in order to focus and solve any problem. If he was like that with

problems, she couldn't imagine how driven he would be regarding something he truly wanted.

... And everything in her believed that was the case with their budding relationship.

She never noticed how cramped the small planes were, until she could smell his cologne, and felt his presence. Her shoulder was pressed to his, her leg close, and she reached out to touch his hand... and immediately felt that sense of wonder wash over her.

He was her forever – and she understood his words so deeply from earlier as he looked at her. His hazel eyes met hers and she could see a future with him, so clear, so bright and wondrous. It was enchanting.

“Monday morning, huh?”

“Monday morning,” he confirmed slowly. “I’ll bring coffee and be there early before work.”

“You’re not nervous?”

“It’s fading really fast,” he breathed. “The more I think about it, the more I want to... and while I never imagined it happening? I feel it’s the right thing, a feeling so deep inside that it’s humbling.”

“Moving your policy?” she quipped playfully.

“Yep...” Luke laughed nervously and looked away, as if he realized what he was inferring for anyone listening – and to her. He looked at her again, laced his fingers with hers, and smiled tenderly.

“Will you transfer my insurance policy on Monday morning? Will you be my agent, take care of my truck, and build a renter’s policy to protect my future?”

Nicolette felt tears sting her eyes as she chuckled happily. This was certainly the weirdest and strangest proposal she could have ever imagined – and it was perfect.

“I would be honored to... to be your agent,” she breathed openly, staring at the joy and love simmering in his eyes, as he brought her hand to his lips, kissing her ring finger pointedly.

Nicolette nodded, grinning – and saw his own wide smile.

“Should we land this bird and get some coffee or something?” he asked, almost excitedly. “We should probably talk about this more because it’s a big move for me. I mean, when I sign on with an agent... I don’t plan on ever changing. I want to make sure this is the right move.”

“We should definitely talk, and I’d be happy to answer any questions.”

“Do you need my VIN number off my truck?”

“I’ll need all sorts of information. Where it will be parked, things like that...”

“Yeah, we should probably talk a lot then because I don’t know how much time I’ll have Monday morning...”

“I’m so glad we’re actually talking about this.”

“I figured, especially when you tried to talk me into it a few days ago.”

“I’m very persuasive.”

“You are indeed. Do you want to call it in?”

Nicolette nodded, making her announcement... and both of them started at the sound of Armadillo’s voice: Luke’s father.

She swallowed nervously, realizing both of their parents were going to be onsite when they landed the plane and was sure to realize something was going on eventually between them... if they hadn’t already picked up on it.

“This is Flyboys, Cessna-five-seven-three-niner... you are cleared to land, Saxony.”

“Thank you, Armadillo,” Nicolette said openly, acting like nothing was wrong. “Coming in now.”

Moments later, the second the airplane was on the runway, both jerked off their headphones and looked at each other in alarm.

“Just act natural...”

“This was completely innocent...”

“Of course it was – it’s not like there was a bunch of kissing or anything weird up there. I mean, we’ve known each other forever and...”

“Will you marry me, Nicolette?” Luke said suddenly in a hushed whisper. “Before the rest of the world intrudes, or I panic about this all being too soon. Will you marry me, give me your heart, your love, and...”

“Yes,” she breathed, stunned that he was finally coming around to what she wanted more than anything.

“I’ve got a lot to figure out, but maybe we can figure it out together. I want us to have a home and...”

“We’ll figure this out. I promise.”

“One step at a time?”

“Exactly.”

“I’m going to talk to Harley and Thumper on my next shift to see if I can go full-time, so we have a chance to make ends meet... and...”

“I think you would be a wonderful addition to the team.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” she smiled tearfully. “You love Flyboys as much as any of us – which is why I got into insurance. Their policies - all the planes, the building, all of it is in my agency... and they are coming towards us.”

“We need to go then,” he nodded. “I was serious about that coffee, you know?”

“Me too...”

“Good,” he smiled and nodded – and saw her dad nearby. “Careful...”

Luke stuck out his hand and shook hers, almost overly polite, trying to throw them off the scent. As they cut the engines, she nodded, and tried to look animated, like they were talking about anything else.

“Someday we are going to have to explain this all because they will never understand, will they?”

“There’s going to be a lot of opinions.”

“There’s only one that matters,” he said openly. “Let’s go.”

Nicolette nodded, opening her door and smiling as her father was standing there, holding out his hand.

“Hey Daddy...”

“You two certainly are talkative and chummy...”

“Business stuff. Luke is transferring his policy over to my office.”

“He hasn’t already?”

“Not yet... but don’t get grumbly. Sometimes change is hard.”

“Y’all are awfully cozy and chit-chatty in there,” Armadillo said openly, staring at Luke. “Everything okay?”

“Yep,” Luke said easily. “Just talking about a few things.”

“I see.”

Luke looked over his shoulder at where she was standing – and she knew he was nervous, but looked exceedingly calm.

“Hey Nicolette, you want to grab that coffee?”

“Sure.”

“We’ve got coffee here,” Valkyrie said flatly. “Armadillo, you want a cup, too?”

“Daddy,” she smiled, brushing him off and leaning up to kiss him on the cheek. “Love you, but I’m craving a Frappuccino with extra whipped cream.”

“So not *real* coffee?” Luke grinned. “More like ice cream with caffeine?”

“That’s my boy,” Armadillo chuckled, patting him on the back.

Nicolette smiled at Luke.

“Let’s go,” she invited. “We need to go over what kind of policy you want. Do you have like a bunch of computer stuff to insure? Are you wanting liability only or full coverage?” she began, waving to her father and walking off towards his truck – as he quickly joined her.

“What kind of deductible are you looking for? There’s a whole lot of variances plus we need to look at the state minimums to see if you need to increase it from there and...” she looked around, seeing them still standing there. “It’s overwhelming, but I’ll help you through it.”

“Sounds good,” Luke said easily, climbing into the driver’s seat and frowning. “I hate not being able to open your door for you in front of them.”

“Are we really going for coffee?”

“We should talk... but no,” he smiled shyly.

“Where are we going?”

“To look for wedding bands,” he murmured, starting his truck up. “And to find some place alone where I can kiss my fiancée for hours on end.”

“That sounds perfect,” she said dreamily.



HOURS LATER, they were unexpectedly taking a tour of an apartment that had a sign in front that it was for rent that they happened to drive past. It was a little place, nothing fancy, and barely eight-hundred square feet in space... but it was also convenient.

Located south of Flyboys, on the road towards Ember Creek, it was just out of sight. It would give them a little space and privacy... and most of all?

It was affordable.

As they walked inside, they smiled at each other knowingly. This would be their first place together.

“We are really doing this, aren’t we?” he breathed, stunned. “Tell me this isn’t a dream? That someone’s not about to splash me with cold water to wake me up...”

“This is real,” she whispered, kissing him tenderly. “I love you and always have.”

“It’s the same for me, Niki,” he confessed. “I’ve always loved you and been so scared to acknowledge it... yet here we are.”

“I can’t wait for tomorrow.”

“Me neither.”

CHAPTER 6



Monday morning arrived, and she was wearing a very crisp white blouse with pearls, blue slacks, and brought in a clip to fix her hair before going to the courthouse. Luke looked completely apologetic, but he was in his work uniform because he was reading meters this morning – and working at Flyboys this afternoon.

“You look fine...” she assured him.

“You look breathtaking,” he whispered, kissing her tenderly. “Are you sure about this? It’s never too late to back out.”

“I would have married you four days ago, buster,” she teased. “You are the one dragging your feet.”

... And an hour later, they were both standing in front of the magistrate in Ember Creek.

They were afraid to get married in Yonder – just in case they were recognized. The worst that could happen here would be that Betsy’s fiancé might see them or ask what was going on. Firefly’s step-daughter was currently planning her wedding and was head-over-heels in love with a firefighter.

“I, Lucas Nicholas Fuller, take you, Nicolette Marie Saxon, for my wife. To have and to hold...” Luke began and hesitated, looking at her, causing a stab of anxiety to rocket through her for only a brief moment before he continued.

“I’ve known you forever, Niki,” he murmured openly, not following the script but speaking directly from his heart. “You’ve been my best friend through the years, teased me

about eating my vegetables... only to help me clear my plate. You've been there through each of the difficulties, but it was in those clear moments that I truly saw you... and fell in love."

He cleared his throat, and she felt tears sting her eyes as everything got blurry, realizing she was going to cry some serious tears if he started bawling.

"I saw you one day, the *real* you, and noticed the happiness that you have in your soul. It shines from your eyes and everything in me suddenly wanted to be the man that put that joy there – and couldn't. I was a friend, a nobody, yet somehow? You still found me."

Luke looked at their hands where they were joined and let out a shaky breath.

"I never imagined what it would feel like to have every single thing my heart desires... yet here I am," he whispered openly. "Marrying the woman of my dreams, the girl that was always there beside me, promising myself to the most incredible person in the world. I love you, Nicolette. I promise to cherish and honor you, through it all... and will forever be grateful for that Gatorade that day," he chuckled tearfully, gazing at her.

She smiled at him tearfully, her heart bursting with love.

"I, Nicolette Marie Saxon, take you, Lucas Nicholas Fuller, for my husband, to have with lots of holding..." she teased openly, causing him to chuckle again as he actually started blushing.

"I knew we were friends, childhood playmates, but there was always something else there that I couldn't put my finger on... until one day? I truly saw the *real* you."

She drew in a shaky breath, feeling herself overcome with emotion, realizing that she was indeed marrying the man of her dreams.

"You were there, like someone had lifted a veil from my eyes... beautiful, caring, strong, steady, and everything that I could have ever wished for. You were always my best friend,

my love, my confidant, but that day? That fateful day? I saw my other half, Luke...”

A sob slipped past her as she gazed at him lovingly.

“I saw my better half, my soulmate, my partner... and desperately wanted you to see me. I know we both waited, wondered, fought this, but I’m so glad that we took the leap of faith together and never looked back. I am proud to be your wife, *always* your friend, forever your partner... and can’t wait to be your lover,” she choked out, laughing through the tears as he chuckled openly, blushing furiously a bright shade of red.

“I love that I can make you laugh and smile – and plan on doing so for the rest of my life.”

“Same for me,” Luke replied.

Moments later, they were kissing, sealing their bond... before signing their marriage license, and hurrying back to the truck. She’d been gone for a while and needed to get back to work – and Luke was due on the job in forty minutes.

“I’m working at Flyboys until seven tonight... can I see you later?”

“I’m counting on it.”

“I love you, Mrs. Fuller...” he smiled proudly as he pulled up in front of her office, kissing her boldly.

“I love you, husband,” Nicolette smiled, hopping out and waving at him as he sped off.

Their marriage license was in her hand, and she was putting it in the safe for good measure.

While this was all wildly crazy, felt a little rushed, it amazed her at how completely perfect and whole she felt knowing that her best friend would be her partner and husband forever.

... And their *forever* started today.



THAT EVENING, they secretly met up at the new apartment he'd signed the lease on yesterday. They had a slice of cake that Nicolette had bought during her lunch break at Dixie's café. Luke brought a small bottle of bubbly... but forgot the cups.

They laughed nervously at each other, drank from the bottle, shoved bites of cake into each other's mouths playfully, before things took a turn and everything changed...

Nicolette found peace in the arms of the man she'd always loved and longed for.

CHAPTER 7



The next two months were sheer bliss.

Stolen kisses, reckless moments of passion, laughs, secret rendezvous, and trying to keep everything a secret so they could slowly ‘wean’ both families into what was going on between them.

They had invited Nicolette over for coffee at the Fuller house – and made her excuses to leave twenty minutes later because she felt like all eyes were on her.

She mentioned Luke coming over for dinner one evening, yet Toby’s return from the Academy took over the conversation before either could answer... especially as her parents rushed out of the house the moment that they got a phone call her brother had landed at Flyboys.

Yes, everything was a mess... including her stomach.

The next morning, it wasn’t much better – and that is when it hit her. She was overdue for her period and suddenly very much afraid. That timeline, that whole ‘*take it slow*’ for their families, was no longer workable if she was pregnant.

“I can’t be...” she whispered in disbelief, suddenly terrified.

Oh, she loved children, loved the idea of being the mother of Luke’s child. But telling her father that she was married and pregnant?

No.

If her dad might have gotten upset before? He would completely lose his cool... and she'd only seen her daddy mad once.

That was enough.

Stopping at the store, she bought a pregnancy test and kept it hidden in her purse, completely alarmed and distracted the rest of the day. Even that afternoon, she had told Luke that she had a stomachache and passed on the chance to be alone.

... And bless him?!

Luke was the sweetest husband a girl could ask for! He showed up at her office with about five bottles of medicine for her... and a bouquet of flowers.

“How are you feeling?”

“My stomach is churning,” she admitted, not wanting to look him in the eyes because she knew he would flip. “I’m really not feeling too well.”

“Niki, what’s wrong, honey?” he whispered, feeling her forehead. “You feel fine. Are you sick to your...”

Niki yanked out her trashcan in that moment and vomited – only to hear Luke’s panicked exclamation as he moved into action.

He grabbed some paper towels, wetting them, and putting them on the back of her neck, before getting her some water.

“There’s nausea medication in here... some mints... and...”

Luke froze and looked at her slowly from where he knelt beside her. Nicolette looked up at him silently as his mouth dropped open in silent understanding.

“Niki?”

“I think I’m going to be sick again...” she whispered painfully.

“When was your last period?” he asked in a hushed voice that was exceedingly calm, despite his pale features.

“Eight weeks ago,” she admitted, gagging.

“We were careful,” he breathed. “I mean, we were *really* careful...”

“Maybe it’s a stomach bug?”

“Have you taken a pregnancy test?”

“I have one in my purse for in the morning.”

“Take it now,” he blurted out anxiously.

“No,” she muttered, spitting in the trashcan again as her stomach rolled. “Can I have a mint, please?”

“Niki, you need to see a doctor...”

“Luke, the directions said to use the first stream in the morning for accurate results and...”

“You call me as soon as you test,” he ordered shakily. “Then we’ll figure out what to do. I mean, we’ve never even talked about children yet. Do you even want children?”

“More than anything,” she admitted tearfully, looking at him. “I’m just... I never thought it would be this fast, you know? I just now ordered my business cards with my new last name, hoping to have them ready to go. You just started full-time at Flyboys...”

“I work with your father...” Luke whispered in shock, and she realized that it hadn’t hit him yet at how far this ‘ripple’ would extend in their ‘pond’. “He’s gonna kill me – if I don’t end up fired first.”

“I guess if Toby and Samantha don’t give him heart failure? We’ll finish the job.”

“Wait! *What?* Toby and Samantha are a couple?”

“I overheard him on the phone with her last night. He’s having dinner at the Sloan house tomorrow night.”

“Oh wow. So, it’s serious?”

“I’m pretty sure...”

“Maybe we should tell everyone that we are in love and got married?”

“Maybe we should? I just want nothing to hurt our relationship.”

“Honey...” Luke said tenderly, smoothing back her hair. “If anything, I think it would bring us closer. I love you – and marrying you was the best thing I could have ever done. A dream that I never imagined would become real... and now we might have a baby?” he paused, smiling at her. “If that isn’t heaven, I don’t know what is...”

He met her eyes and leaned upwards to kiss her on the cheek.

“We’ll take care of this together, just like any other thing, and be stronger for it. You are my friend, my lover, and my partner... and this is just another title to add to the list.”

“Wife?”

“And mother...” he breathed. “I love you – and it will be okay.”

Nicolette closed her eyes and took several deep breaths as he stood, taking the trash can from her, moving to clean it out. Grabbing a mint, she took a sip of water, rinsing her mouth before trying to calm herself.

Maybe it was anxiety?

Maybe she had a bug?

... *Maybe it was a baby?*

Luke re-entered the office, smiling at her before putting the trashcan back under her desk. “There’s Sprite in there, crackers, a few suckers, and medicine, but I don’t know if it’s safe to take... just in case.”

“I know.”

“Niki, breathe,” he urged, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “It’s going to be okay. I promise.”

She nodded tearfully.

“I’ve got to get back to work. My lunch is almost over.”

“You aren’t upset?”

“Never,” he smiled tenderly at her. “I am the luckiest man on the planet right now, with everything I could ever wish for appearing before my very eyes. I feel very undeserving and incredibly blessed.”

“I hope you always feel that way.”

“I do...” he murmured, smiling. “And never regretted saying it months ago.”

“I love you,” she smiled nervously. “We’re going to be okay?”

“We are *wonderful*, my love.”

CHAPTER 8



Nicolette stared at the pregnancy test the next morning and closed her eyes. Disbelief, wonder, joy, and trepidation took turns popping up in her mind, their insidious voices nagging at her.

There were two lines staring at her on the test.

Everything was chaos around her, starting with this, then Toby and Samantha's relationship, plus Caspar graduating from college and moving on to another term for in order to specialize in his field. Her brother, who was younger than her by barely a year, was a doctor now...

It was almost as shocking as her pregnancy.

"Did you fall in?" Caspar yelled angrily from the hallway. "I've got to get over to Quinn's house in a bit and waiting on you, Nic..."

"I'm coming," she volunteered quickly, throwing everything away and gathering up the trashcan. Getting to her feet, she looked at her face in the mirror, not feeling any different... just that constant twinge of nausea.

Yanking open the door, she glared at Caspar.

"I was just picking up because I have two disgusting brothers sometimes..." she taunted, walking out of the bathroom with the little trash can.

"Good morning to you too..." her brother said, sounding just like her father. She shrugged past him, cradling the trash to her in order to hide the test, and dashed downstairs,

emptying it in the larger can, before mashing it down in an effort to bury it.

She needed to talk to Luke.

“Dr. Caspar, maybe you can manage to put this back, huh?” she hollered, putting the can on the bottom step, before grabbing her purse and leaving quickly. She had taken today off because of her brother’s graduation, the party, everything happening at once... and the way her stomach flopped just now? She was really glad about it.

Getting into her car, she immediately yanked out her phone – and heard Luke’s voice not two seconds later.

“Hello?”

“Hey...”

They both sat there for a few moments, silent. Neither speaking as she felt tears sting her eyes again. She sure was an emotional ninny lately, and it seemed like all her emotions were much more intense.

“It was positive...” she whispered.

“We’re gonna have a baby?” he replied softly, his voice so full of love and joy that she couldn’t help the sob that escaped her.

“You’re not mad?”

“You’ve asked me that twice,” he chuckled softly. “I’m thrilled. A little nervous – but honestly thrilled. I never imagined any of this and we should probably talk to our families sooner rather than later.”

“I agree.”

“Can you come over tomorrow night and we’ll tell my parents? I might go ahead and tell my dad because he already knows something’s going on between us...”

“Really?”

“Yes. He guessed.”

“Let’s tell my parents this evening at the party. They will already be happy about Caspar and...”

“Are you sure?”

“No,” she admitted. “They’ve been really touchy lately...”

“Then we’ll tell them in a day or two.”

“Are you sure?”

“No,” he laughed, his voice parroting her own thoughts a moment ago. “But touchy or not, they are going to be grandparents, and I can’t wait to brag to the world that you are my wife.”

“I love you,” she breathed softly.

“I love you too... and don’t worry, Niki.”

Ending the call a few minutes later, she walked back inside the house and trudged up the stairs – taking the trashcan with her and rolling her eyes at her brother singing loudly in the shower in the background.

As she disappeared into her bedroom, she flopped down on the bed and sighed. They were going to be setting up for the graduation party tomorrow night, and she was beyond tired.

Setting an alarm on her phone, she gave in to the fatigue, closing her eyes for a quick nap.



DISORIENTED, Nicolette opened her eyes in confusion and lay there trying to get her center, realizing something had awoken her... but it wasn’t her alarm.

“NICOLETTE MARIES AXON GET DOWN HERE NOW!” her father roared, *literally roared*, from down the stairs, and she could hear him yelling angrily at someone in the distance.

Her mother?

Her father never, *ever*, raised his voice to her mother...

“No! No, Marisol! Don’t you cover this up! If this isn’t ours, then it has to be hers...”

“Aeron, please... just listen...”

“**NICOLETTE!**”

“Aeron, you are going to scare her and if she’s...”

“Don’t you even say it...”

Nicolette perched at her doorway, listening in disbelief and shock as she looked up to meet Caspar’s ashen face.

“What did you do?” he whispered, stunned at the angry display downstairs. “Did you wreck his plane or something?”

“I married Luke Fuller...”

“What?” he hissed, looking at her in disbelief. “Dad’s gonna seriously straight-up kill you. Do you want me to dial 911 now?”

“NICOLETTE!” her father yelled again angrily. “No Marisol, if we aren’t having a baby then there’s only one other woman in this house...”

“Aeron, stop, please...”

“Oh I’m gonna! ...NICOLETTE, GET DOWN HERE NOW! DON’T MAKE ME COME UP THERE!”

“Don’t make him come up here!” Caspar blurted out in a panic.

“Why?”

“It’s nothing...”

“What are you hiding?”

“She’s coming, Dad!” Caspar yelled out immediately, her younger brother completely ratting her out. He kept his gaze trained on her, not looking away from her eyes, and there was genuine fear on his face that caused her to pause for a moment... until she heard it.

He wasn’t alone!

A hand tugged on his sleeve with bright pink fingernail polish.

“*You’ve got a girl in there?*” Nicolette hissed in disbelief, pointing.

“*You’re married!*” Caspar retorted, pointing at her.

“And pregnant...” she muttered, looking away from his stunned face as both of them drew up in understanding at how bad this was about to be for her downstairs.

“Oh, my gosh... you’ve got to warn Luke,” Caspar urged softly. “Nic, he’s going to be furious!”

“Get your girl out of here because that will only make it worse.”

“I’M COMING UP THERE NOW YOUNG LADY...”

“Coming, Daddy...” she hollered – and swallowed heavily.

Making her way down the stairs, her knees trembling, she rounded the corner to see her parents standing there. Her father had his arms crossed over his chest, glaring at everything... while her mother looked at her with limpid, tearful, happy eyes.

“Baby, what’s...” her mother began – only to have her dad interrupt.

“A very poor choice of words, Mari...”

“Aeron, wait...”

“What’s this?” her father said bluntly, holding up the pregnancy stick.

“Plastic, chemicals, and a bit of urine?”

“Don’t get smart with me, young lady!”

“Can you please stop yelling so I can talk to you both?” Nicolette whispered nervously, feeling tears she had tried to hold back, suddenly running down her face. “Please?”

“What’s going on, baby?” her mother said.

“WRONG TERM, MARISOL!” her father snapped, glaring at her pointedly. “Are you *actually* pregnant?”

“It’s a long story...” Nicolette hedged.

“No, it’s not! It’s a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ question!”

“Daddy...”

“‘Yes’ or ‘no’, Nicolette!”

“Yes,” she whispered, closing her eyes.

“And who is the father?” her dad said in an exceedingly quiet voice that was almost eerie.

She looked at him, seeing him standing there taking several deep breaths, his eyes closed and she knew he was trying to be patient... and failing.

“That’s what I want to talk to you about – and why I said it’s a long story.”

“So spit it out...”

Nicolette sighed and sat down at the kitchen table, feeling more tired than before she had laid down for her nap and distinctly nauseated as she struggled to stop crying. Yanking off a paper towel, she quickly wiped her eyes and felt her parents watching her.

“I’m in love,” she whispered openly, staring at her hands and realizing she would never have to hide her wedding band anymore.

While this was not how she wanted to tell her parents.

This was probably the easiest, just getting it out all in the open so her father could blow up – *away from Luke* – and then proceed to calm down... eventually.

“Good, sweetie. I’m glad you found someone special...”

“Marisol,” her father stopped her mother, putting out his arm. “With *who*, Nicolette? Who are you in love with? Who’s the father?”

“Aeron, settle down...” her mother encouraged softly.

“I *am* settled...” her father snapped, glaring at Nicolette. “Keep talking, young lady.”

“Daddy,” Nicolette whispered painfully. “I love him, and I want you to understand that. I’m a grown woman and really need you to...”

“I know him...?” her father said, stunned, his blue eyes widening in surprise, hurt, and disbelief as he grabbed the back of a chair. She realized that a powerful gust of wind could have blown him over in that moment because he was so stunned.

“Daddy – yes. I married...”

“YOU’RE MARRIED?” he roared angrily – and then stopped.

It was like watching a volcano ready to explode only to settle down with a deadly awareness that not only was it going to blow? It was going to take the side of the entire mountain and everything in its path at the same time...

“What?” her mother hissed tearfully, looking at her dad’s face – which had a strange tic along his jaw. “Aeron, baby, honey, calm down. I know you wanted to walk her down the aisle, but things change and...”

“I married Luke two months ago...” Nicolette said quietly.

“Luke... *Fuller*?” her mother whispered – and looked at her father again.

“Yes.”

“Oh, my gosh...” her mother breathed, stunned.

The world seemed to explode within seconds around her.

“***I’LL KILL HIM!***” her father screamed, flinging the pregnancy test at the wall where it imbedded with a thunk into the drywall, shocking both her mother and Nicolette – who promptly burst into tears.

“Daddy, NO!” she wailed, getting up from her seat and reaching for him, pulling desperately on the fabric of his shirt, trying to slow him down and get his attention. “Daddy! Wait! No! Daddy, please! I love Luke...”

“HE MARRIED YOU AND GOT YOU PREGNANT?” her father was still screaming angrily, looking completely out of control. “I was going to walk you down the aisle! I was going to give my ONLY DAUGHTER away in her wedding... and that BOY-CHILD stole that moment from me? You got married and KEPT it from us? From all of us...?”

Her father hesitated, turning ever so slowly to look at Nicolette again.

“Do the Fuller’s know?”

His voice was eerily calm again.

“We have told no one yet.”

“But you are pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“And married?”

Nicolette let out her breath for a moment, realizing that he might be calming down just a bit so they could all sit down together and talk.

“Yes.”

“I’ll be back,” her father said quietly – and her mother started to freak out from behind her, instantly setting off warning bells in Nicolette’s mind.

“Aeron! Wait! Aeron don’t do this! Think about it?! Luke is Armadillo’s son – his oldest child – and you can’t... *AERON!*”

Her father ignored her mother, who was now the one pulling at his shoulders bodily, reaching over him, and trying to take the keys from her father.

“Daddy?” Nicolette said in a high-pitched voice, suddenly terrified... only to see her father’s broken gaze turn to her.

“I can’t believe you two did this...” he whispered, his voice full of tears. “I’m gonna kill that boy for what he did to my little girl.”

... And with that?

The front door slammed shut behind him.

“*AEROOOOON!*” her mother screamed out, sobbing. “Oh, my gosh! Where’s the keys to the car? Where’s the keys, Nicolette? Where’s YOUR KEYS? Where are *all* the car keys? Oh, my gosh! AERON TOOK THEM ALL!”

Nicolette stood there, heartbroken at the look on her father’s face and the desperation and panic in her mothers, before realizing that her father was indeed on the way to kill Luke.

He’d snapped.

Nicolette yanked her phone out of her pocket, hands trembling and barely able to press a button – only to hear Luke pick up.

“Hey Niki...”

“Run...” she whispered tearfully—and heard his audible intake of breath. “Run. My dad knows, and he’s on the way...”

“Got it...” he said quickly, hanging up – and her mother was already on the phone doing the same thing.

“Harley! Harley please.... Listen! I need Thumper to stop Aeron from killing Luke Fuller. He apparently married Nicolette in a secret wedding and she’s pregnant. I’ve never... oh my gosh, he’s going to kill my grandbaby’s daddy. He’s going to kill Armadillo’s boy...” her mother broke down sobbing.

“Mama...” Nicolette began.

“Call the Fuller house and warn them!” she barked out tearfully — and Nicolette did. Thankfully it was Armadillo who answered the phone.

“I married Luke – we are going to have a baby and...”

Armadillo cursed wildly, so much so that she held the phone away from her ear and felt heat touch her cheeks as her mother’s eyes widened in shock.

“Where’s Valkyrie?” Armadillo bit out.

“On his way to find Luke...”

“Thanks, Nicolette,” Armadillo said openly, his voice hoarse with gratitude for her having reached out to him. “Don’t call the police – and welcome to the family, sweetheart.”

Nicolette sobbed tearfully, wishing her own father’s reaction had been different – because it should have been a beautiful union of two families that had been friends forever.

Armadillo and her father were stationed together for years, had been through so much, for something like this to drive them apart?... To think her father was so hurt, so disappointed, so angry – and he was going to kill the man she loved?

It just shattered her soul into pieces.

She looked at her mother, who was crying angrily and dialing the phone, trying to get a hold of her father – who was ignoring the calls. Her mother then called Reaper, her father’s best friend, who reacted almost the same way as Armadillo... cursing wildly and hanging up on her.

Everyone was coming together to help stop her dad from committing a crime that would forever rip apart their families, stain his soul, and destroy her own.

Numbly, she got up and started looking for car keys—just in case her mother overlooked them... to see Caspar looking on from the stairwell.

“He went after Luke?” Caspar whispered nervously, looking unsure of what to say in this moment – and extremely protective of his sister.

“You knew?” her mother hissed tearfully in betrayal.

“I just found out like five minutes ago, mom...” Caspar blurted out, holding up both hands defensively.

“Where’s dad... whoa...” her brother finished weakly, noticing the pregnancy test sticking out of the wall – and staring at it in horror.

He turned to her slowly, like something out of a nightmare.

“Dad’s going to actually kill Luke,” Caspar said in growing horror and understanding.

“No, he’s not...” Nicolette sobbed. “Don’t *say* that. Where’s your car keys?”

“They were right there.”

“Where?”

“They are gone?!”

“Can you hot-wire a car?”

“No! *Can you?*” Caspar asked bluntly, looking surprised.

“Can *either* of you?” her mother questioned immediately, shocking them both.

“No,” they said in unison.

“I need to get to Luke...”

“You need to let your father cool down...”

“Mom...”

“Toby! Oh my gosh – where are you? Tell me you are with your dad right now...” her mother blurted out into the telephone desperately, looking up at Nicolette, who was still beside herself.

This is what an out-of-body experience feels like, she thought numbly and stared at her brother, still sobbing – yet not.

She felt like something had splintered apart within her, broken, as she listened to her mother unloading the last few minutes to her brother, Toby.

“I asked your father to help get the house ready for the graduation party and he found a pregnancy test in the trash. Next thing I know, he was in here, hugging me and celebrating... and I didn’t know why - until he showed me the test. Then he started screaming up at the ceiling for Nicolette to come down from her room – and he threw the pregnancy test at the wall... he’s absolutely furious...”

Her brother said something unintelligible – and she looked at Caspar to see him trying to pull the test out of the wall with avid curiosity at how it was imbedded so deeply.

Caspar looked at her, smirked that infamous Saxon smile, and arched an eyebrow pointed.

“Daddy-dearest doesn’t like secrets, Nicolette...”

“Then maybe you should go ahead and tell him who you were fooling around with in your bedroom,” she whispered angrily, almost hoping her mother heard her just to draw some of the attention from her own catastrophe...

Except her mother was too upset – but she had the satisfaction of seeing Caspar pale before getting angry.

“Toby – I’m going to need help to patch the wall. The pregnancy test is embedded in it,” his mother sobbed. “I’m going to be a grandmother and your father is going to kill Armadillo’s son...”

Her brother must have said something, because her mother started snapping angrily.

“You’ve never seen your father this angry – but I have!”

... And then held the phone away from her in disbelief.

“They hung up on me?” her mother whispered, looking at Caspar and Nicolette. “Samantha and Toby are together right now – and your brother hung up on me.”

“Wait?” Caspar burst out laughing. “Toby and Samantha are together? Like right now, together? Did you interrupt them doing what she obviously did...”

“I swear, you are a troll, Caspar,” Nicolette muttered weakly.

“No! Get your mind out of the gutter,” her mother snapped angrily, getting madder and madder. “Someone find me some stupid car keys so I can track down your father!”

CHAPTER 9



Luke sprinted from the Flyboys hangar... leaving Alpo and Glory looking at him in shock and alarm where he'd dropped his tools, slid down the ladder in a rush, and raced out of the building.

“Are we gonna blowup or something?” Alpo said nervously in alarm, shoving Glory forward bodily and plucking the tools out of her hands.

It took the two people barely a moment to recognize something was seriously wrong.

“Glory – get out of the building! NOW!”

“Luke! Luke!” Glory began running behind him, hollering for her protégé... as well as for her husband, who was running behind her. “Hunter! Get out of the building until we... Wait! Are you seriously on the phone?”

Luke flung himself bodily into the truck, peeling out of the gravel parking lot, leaving the two stunned people behind.

As he flew down the country roads, he called his father.

“Where are you, son?”

“Dad! I need help...”

“Where are you?”

“On my way to the apartment...”

“Why?”

“Because that’s where my hunting rifle is...”

“Whoa...whoa... whoa!” his father said openly. “Listen to me! Do *not* get out your rifle and calm down. No one is going to do anything. Ya’ hear me?”

“Valkyrie is going to kill me.”

“I warned you.”

“Now isn’t the time for a big lecture or an ‘*I told you so*’...”

“I know,” his father said bluntly, and he could hear the humor in his voice. “Get to your apartment, lock yourself inside, and do not open that door until I get there.”

“What if Nicolette shows up?”

“She’ll be with her daddy – and you do not want him using her as bait. She will never get over seeing you beat to a pulp, nor will you. Which is why you will *not* get out your hunting rifle. Tensions are high, but they are gonna be much higher if someone gets injured or killed.”

“Omigosh...” he breathed fearfully. “He’s never going to forgive me, is he?”

“I can honestly say it might take a while... but I’m really glad you married her, son. That says a lot of a man that will commit to someone, give a woman your name, and work on a future together. You just got to get past the ‘*I kept it a secret*’ thing.”

“I was afraid of how everyone would react.”

“I’m sure...”

“I mean, I saw how they treated Toby over the years – and this is my home, you know? Toby could retreat to the Academy, but all I have is this.”

“You have your family – always.”

Luke felt tears sting his eyes as he pulled up to his apartment.

“Thanks Dad...”

“I love you—and don’t you ever forget that,” his father said softly in a husky voice. “We’ll get through this together. Now, go get barricaded in your place and I’m about five minutes away – which means Valkyrie might get there first. I think I see his taillights in front of me on the road.”

“Yep. I’m going.”

“Love you, boy.”

“Love you, too.”

Luke flew out of his truck, launching himself up the stairs, only to hear a car coming in the distance. He didn’t even bother to look over his shoulder. Instead, he hurried to let himself in.

Shutting the door behind him, he threw the deadbolts, yanked the couch that he’d bought at a yard sale over towards the door, and silently called Niki.

She answered on the first ring, sobbing.

“Baby, I never meant to have any of this happen,” he whispered openly. “Please don’t cry.”

“Is my father there yet?”

“I think so. Honestly, I’m doing exactly what my dad said right now and... wanted to check on you. Are you okay?”

“My heart is breaking because I just want him to understand...”

“I’m so sorry, Niki...”

“It’s not you. You’ve been the best part of my world the last few months, and I want my daddy to understand that.”

“He will. I promise.”

“We’ve got to get married again,” Nicolette said – and he caught his breath. His heart filling with joy and understanding that she wasn’t rejecting him, but instead choosing him all over again.

“I need to mend this with my daddy. He wanted to walk me down the aisle... but I didn’t know because we never

talked about it. Can we get married again?”

“I would marry you every single day for the rest of my life,” he murmured openly, closing his eyes as he heard tires squealing and yelling outside. “Might only be another day or two – but yes.”

“Don’t say that,” she admonished.

“Niki... your dad is definitely here, and I need to let you go for a few. I feel terrible that we kept this a secret now. How’s your mom taking all of this?”

“She’s here with me, furious at my father and everything happening, but I’ve been talking to her about how it all happened. Oh—and Mom said you are coming to dinner Sunday night, period. Your whole family is.”

“Sounds good to me,” Luke said tenderly, feeling himself smile and letting himself grab at that glimmer of hope to keep some of the panic at bay.

“I love you...”

“Baby, I love you, too.”

Hanging up the phone, he looked out the window to see Nicolette’s father get tackled by his best friend, Reaper, knocking him into the grass as several other pilots tried to hold him down.

Luke watched in disbelief as Nicolette’s father easily tossed them off of him like they were nothing... only to see her brother, Toby, suddenly appear, tackling him again.

... And his own father was coming up the stairs to the apartment.

He could see his dad’s tight expression, full of concern, as he got closer. Pushing the couch out of the way, he opened the door silently to let his father in... and threw the locks again.

Peering out the window, he heard his father speak.

“You know you need to face him, right?”

“I know.”

“I understand you are scared, but one thing Valkyrie will appreciate is mettle and backbone. You need to show him you are the man for his daughter, to take care of his grandchild, and that this was never meant to hurt him...” his father said quietly.

“Because that man out there will make your life hard if he doesn’t respect you, son. Having a child is tough enough and will change things between you and Nicolette. You do not need her father picking away at the ‘foundation’ of your marriage, too.”

“I never meant to hurt anyone...”

“You should tell *him* that.”

“Is it chicken to admit I’m scared and might wet myself? He’s furious and I could hear him screaming at me.”

“No,” his father said tenderly, smiling at him. “It’s recognizing your opponent and being truthful. Courage comes from facing your demons and when that baby gets here? You need to be the man that sets the tone for your family.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can be a pushover, stern, a fearful parent, or...” his father paused, smiling wryly. “You can be open, loving, accepting, and exceedingly protective of your eldest boy, because you have complete confidence in him, knowing you raised him right.”

Luke hugged his father tightly.

“I’m still scared.”

“I’ve seen him hit someone,” his father uttered, hugging him and chuckling. “You’re a smart kid. Just don’t wet yourself. It will come up at every family gathering.”

“Oh, gosh...” Luke began nervously, taking a deep breath and swallowing as he unlocked the door.

He saw Nicolette’s dad was on the telephone, walking towards his car, silently, and realized that the man was going to leave. Coming down the stairs, he felt everyone’s eyes on

him and saw Toby nod in the distance, just before he turned to speak to Samantha.

Every pilot there was waiting and watching as he walked towards Nicolette's father, who turned at the last minute.

"Can I call you back, Marisol?" Valkyrie said quietly. "Luke is standing right here, and I would like to talk to him... yes, *talk*. Yes. I love you, too."

Nicolette's father hung up the phone and stood there, looking at him as Luke's heart pounded in his chest. He could see so much of Nicolette right now, realizing that she was very similar to her dad... and he imagined she was probably the most precious thing to him in the world – just like he felt about her.

"Sir," Luke began softly. "We never meant to cause problems or hurt anyone..."

"You crossed a line, *boy*."

"I know I did – because I know no one will ever be good enough for Nicolette, but that doesn't change the fact that I love her."

"You *withheld* it from me," her father started and there was a telltale tic in his jaw, realizing that Valkyrie was holding back.

"We hid it from everyone, because we didn't want any problems or heartache after seeing how things were between Toby and Samantha..."

"That's not the same."

"Sir? Thumper being angry, aggressive, or upset with Toby for the last several years – is *very much* the same thing," Luke said quietly, trying not to get pounded into the ground by this man that had at least seventy pounds and five inches in height on him.

"With the way Toby felt ostracized, left for the academy, and avoided people? I didn't want things to be like that for us. This is my home. Nicolette is my world. I want things to be good between our families."

“By keeping this all a secret?”

“By giving you time to get used to us being a couple,” Luke countered. “Neither of us meant for you to find out like this.”

“You understand that it’s not just about the secret, right? You took my only daughter and...” Valkyrie grew quiet, looking away, clearing his throat emotionally – and Luke realized that he’d hurt the man who was his new father-in-law.

Deeply.

“We want to have a small ceremony again—with our friends and family, sir. She wants to have her daddy walk her down the aisle. The only reason we went to the courthouse is because I would not dishonor her without giving her my name. I love her with every ounce of my being... and you don’t have to accept me,” Luke said openly, feeling his throat close off with emotion. “But for Niki’s sake? Can you please pretend like you don’t hate me when she is around – and don’t hold it against our child?”

Valkyrie cursed under his breath.

“The boy did the right thing, even if he kept it from you...”

Luke turned to see Reaper, Firefly, his father, and Alpo standing there in silent support. Thumper was talking with Toby and his family, looking at them quietly, before nodding to Luke.

While this was a mess?

It wasn’t unrepairable.

“I need to go talk to my wife and save my own hide,” Valkyrie finally said bluntly, sticking out his hand towards Luke. “Come over after work so we can talk.”

“I’d like that, sir...” Luke said gratefully, reaching out to shake his hand – only to have Valkyrie pull him into a hug.

“Don’t you hide anything from me again – are we clear, young man?” her father whispered to him. “That’s my baby girl and someday you’ll understand.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And would you call me Valkyrie like you used to? I don’t think I’m ready for ‘dad’ yet...”

Luke nodded silently as the man released him, clearing his throat, and looking at him sternly.

“Call when you are on the way.”

“Will do.”

“Thank you, Valkyrie,” Luke heard his father speaking from behind him, just as he felt a hand land on his shoulder possessively.

“No one is good enough for my baby girl... but he might be close,” Valkyrie said gruffly, yanking open the car door before sliding inside.

Luke was pretty sure he didn’t breathe until the car was gone – only to feel his father slap him upside the head.

Hard.

“I told you to be careful, boy...”

Luke laughed easily as his father hugged him, smiling.

“Now, are you going to tell your mother she’s going to be a grandma – or am I?”

CHAPTER 10



Six months later...

LIFE HAD CHANGED SIGNIFICANTLY for Nicolette and Luke.

Now that the ‘*cat was out of the bag*’, they made no secret of sharing their love and marriage with the world. They held hands, went to the grocery store together, made obstetrician appointments together, and planned their small ceremony with both family’s involvement.

He wanted all of their siblings there, encircled around them, a part of their wedding, so they understood what true love felt and looked like. Toby and Samantha were getting married soon... and Caspar claimed that he wasn’t ready in the slightest.

They decided to have their marriage celebrated outdoors in the place where they had first fallen in love unknowingly, and where Nicolette had asked him out, telling him he was going to marry her.

... At Flyboys.

The grassy field behind the airstrip where they had played during many of the yearly picnics, had sat around roasting marshmallows as children during the bonfires they held, and where they had learned to fly airplanes... seemed to be the perfect place.

The grasses were turning yellow from lack of rain and a brutal snap in the wintertime... but today?

Today it was like everything was perfect.

It was late March, and the sun was shining, the birds were singing, the weather was perfect... and his bride was enchanting. He couldn't help but stare and marvel at this miracle before him.

Nicolette was walking towards him, on the arms of her father, as they looked at each other with so much love that Luke knew in his heart this was the way they should have done things – because not only could he see the joy on their families faces?

... But he would never forget the way his bride looked right now.

Her dress flowed around her loosely, just a cotton gown made of eyelet that reminded him of diety statue of Mother Earth he'd seen in a book. Her body was swollen with their child, her eyes glowed with pride and love, and her smile was encompassing, so full of joy.

He had never seen her look more beautiful than she did right now.

As she slowly walked up to him, he watched as Valkyrie took his seat beside Marisol and nodded to him.

Luke nodded politely, turning to Nicolette, and couldn't help the smile that touched his lips as he gazed at the open love shining from her expression.

“I love you,” he whispered, unable to hold it back.

“I told you that you were mine,” she chuckled tenderly, reaching to touch his face. He immediately turned his head to kiss her palm – and caught Valkyrie's eyes on him.

Tearful and full of pride.

Nicolette's father was watching the two of them, preparing to say their vows, with his arm around his wife, Marisol. He looked appreciative and happy to see that they were truly committed to each other, in love, and taking these steps, sharing their moment with them.

That worry and wonder if he was good enough for Nicolette faded almost immediately, as he recognized that the older man wasn't doubting their love or marriage at all.

Valkyrie was just exceedingly close to his family, his beloved children, and simply wanted to be a part of their joy... and understood so much now.

Smiling at his bride, he took her hands in his and repeated his vows before everyone.



TWO WEEKS LATER...

“Niki?” Luke whispered in the middle of the night, reaching for her – only to see that she was curled up beside him with a strange look on her face in the shadows, eyes wide open. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m waiting to call my mom...”

“Why?” he said in confusion. “It’s almost three in the morning...”

“I’m not sure if I’m in labor or not,” she breathed and drew in a harsh breath, closing her eyes.

“What’s going on?”

“Hurts in my back...”

“Your spine?” he asked in confusion and remembering that she had a lot of pain in her tailbone area the last few days, causing her to have a hard time sitting at work or on the couch.

“No, the muscles. It’s like a have a Charlie horse or a sprained ankle but in my kidneys like they are trying to migrate to my belly button from my back.”

“If you are hurting, then we need to get you checked out.”

“What if it’s not labor? What if I have a kidney stone or something?”

“Still gotta get you checked out, honey,” he laughed tenderly, getting up and throwing on some clothes. “Let me get you something to...”

“Oh, never mind about all the wondering,” she said nervously.

“What?”

“I think my water just broke... or I wet the bed.”

“Well then, that’s pretty much a done deal – we are going to the hospital.”

“Luke?”

“Yeah, babe?”

“I’m scared,” she admitted in a low, hushed voice for the first time since she had become pregnant.

It nearly broke his heart.

His beloved wife was fearless and always had been, charging forward into every moment of her life with an aggression and openness that was incredible to behold... yet here?

In these tiny, dark moments, alone and away from the world – she was letting him in once again.

... Revealing her innermost mind, heart, and soul.

“I know you are, my love,” he whispered, sitting beside her on the bed. “I am too, but you will never go through this alone. You will be surrounded by friends and family...”

“But that’s just it,” she began tearfully. “You’ll be there – but I *do* go through this alone and no one can help me. I mean, you’ll be holding my hand and sharing part of the experience with me... but this pain? This pain is real and no one else can feel it.”

“If I could take it from you – I would,” he admitted, pulling her into his arms. “I can make sure they give you something for the pain and try to keep you comfortable, but yes. You are right. I can only share in part of the experience.”

“I’m sorry,” she murmured reaching for him, and kissing his cheek. “I’m not trying to be mean or griping. I’m just blabbering on, because I’m afraid of how much worse this will get.”

He gave her a pointed look in the shadows, only to see her bright smile just before she laughed in understanding.

“Exactly!... I know it’s going to get *much* worse.”

“But it’s for a finite time – and then we get to say ‘hello’ to our little one,” he began, smoothing back her hair from her face. “I’m going to get your bag by the door. Do you need any help?”

“Waddling? No, I’m good.”

“You know I would never say that you waddled...”

“I’m teasing you and...*ohhhhhh*... we should probably get going,” she hissed, holding her stomach again and looking at him with wide eyes.

Moments later, Luke was helping her down the exterior stairs of the building towards the car – having already texted both their families despite her protests at the early hour.

The next several hours were a whirlwind of chaos around them. Doctors and nurses flowed to-and-fro from her hospital room, checking on Nicolette and the baby. It was a little comforting, yet unsettling at the same time.

His beautiful bride was completely miserable, and he was seeing a fresh, new side to her persona that was terrifying. There was a very brutal, indignant side to his smiling girl he’d never seen before... and she was growing exceedingly agitated the stronger the contractions were getting to be.

Luke did not know that she’d signed a form refusing all medication prior to going into labor – and she was regretting it with a passion. He knew it was the discomfort and pain speaking, yet it was painful to hear her struggling... swamping him with feelings of guilt, remorse, and frustration.

“This... is... your fault...” she panted angrily amidst a contraction, clenching his hand and trying to ride the pain. Her

eyes were wild, unseeing, and out of focus.

This was – *and wasn't* – her true thoughts, but it certainly was humbling. She was saying things he was already thinking in his mind and heart, as he took it all.

“Yes, it is, darling,” he admitted, not flinching as her fingernails dug into his palms painfully because it was nothing like what she was going through – and was so animalistic before him, it was fascinating and terrifying at the same time.

He couldn't look away.

“Alright, Mrs. Fuller... it's 'go' time. I want you to bear down and pushing with all your might when I tell you too, okay?” the doctor instructed and nodded towards Luke.

He was supposed to be her cheerleader, help her through these moments, and be encouraging... when, in fact? All he wanted to do right now was to tell her it was almost over and would be okay – and that he loved her.

None of that would help right now.

Niki let out another wail of pain, gritted her teeth, and began panting once again, looking at him wildly with glazed eyes as her body struggled.

“You can do this,” he said openly. “You are doing incredible, Niki! Just push with everything you can...”

They went on like this for almost forty minutes – before something in her pinched, painful expression suddenly changed. She looked exceedingly alarmed, her entire being trembling, as she met his eyes.

“Push!” he said, realizing that everything was coming to a head... and heard her breath escape her as she trembled, both of them turning towards the doctor, only to see their child slip from her body.

Alive.

Angry.

A genuine miracle.

“Omigosh, Luke...” Niki was stammering on, tearfully, as they laid their screaming baby against her chest. Little arms and legs were flailing with supreme hostility and covered with remnants of fluid, while the little puffy face was scrunched up with outrage, screaming wildly. “Omigosh... she’s so beautiful...”

He stared in sheer wonder, feeling something give within him... and cried. His hand trembled unabashedly as he reached out to touch the baby and saw Niki’s own, smoothing the child’s back, glancing at him in almost as much unfettered love as he.

“Niki...” he croaked – and had no words.

Nothing could describe this moment or the ones following. A nurse guided him to come to the doctor’s side, to cut the baby’s umbilical cord and thought he would be ill with the fear that he was hurting his daughter.

They had a daughter! he thought distractedly...

He looked up, saw his wife’s body, her joy, such love on her face, and knew he would never see such a thing again. There was such a painful rawness, so alive and visceral, that it would be burned into his memory for all time...

“Alright Mrs. Fuller, we are going to clean up your little angel a bit while the doctor stitches you up.”

Oh yes, he could never unsee some things.

“Mr. Fuller, can you come with us for a few to the nursery with Baby Fuller? We are going to get you a new scrub top with some little ink footprints, and you are going to want to tell your family that your daughter is here...”

He nodded numbly, glancing at Niki, who was completely engrossed elsewhere as they stitched up a part of her that had torn during the delivery.

Following, acutely aware he was in shock, Luke found himself in the nursery for a few minutes... before donning a hospital shirt that had two tiny black footprints on there – and led away to another set of doors.

They were talking to him, instructing him what to do, and he was completely out of it.

Taking a few steps forward, he looked up to see his father standing there... and Valkyrie.

... And started weeping again.

His father pulled him into his arms, hugging him, and he realized while he might be a grown man with a child of his own? He would always be a young boy who'd just had his life altered, needing his papa.

"She's beautiful..." Luke whispered hoarsely, hearing his father laugh softly as he hugged him. "I've never seen anything like that."

"Life is a miracle," his father said softly, smiling at him and grasping his cheeks, like he'd just skinned his knees after falling from his bicycle. "You've got to pull yourself together now because your wife and daughter are going to need you to be strong for them from here on out. You are a daddy now."

"I'm *her* daddy..." Luke whispered, feeling himself crumbling again, and looking at Valkyrie, who was smiling at him tearfully in the distance.

His father nodded and released him. Luke moved towards the other man, hugging him wildly as he let out another shaky breath, holding back tears.

"How's my girl?" Valkyrie said gruffly.

"She's incredible," Luke breathed tearfully. "Hated my guts for a while there..." Both men laughed openly at this, before pulling him back into their arms, the trio hugging each other and then releasing him.

"Niki was a champ through it all... and the baby is so beautiful," he whispered, feeling himself teetering on tears again. "And so incredibly angry."

Valkyrie laughed, wiping his eyes.

"Niki was incensed at the world until she was about three or four... and then everything was a joy. I've never seen a happier child."

“She’s so beautiful,” Luke whispered, smiling. “I keep saying that and thinking it – but there aren’t enough words to explain it.”

“No,” his father smiled, looking at him – and then at Valkyrie. “And nothing can teach you how to be a dad.”

“You do the best you can and try to ‘*hang on*’ when something completely bowls you over,” Valkyrie said openly. “Sometimes you make mistakes, but you simply try to make them better... like admitting when you are wrong.”

Luke looked at him.

“Picture how you are feeling right now and try to imagine what you’ll feel like in twenty years or so when some boy comes into her life,” Valkyrie said openly, his voice hoarse as his eyes shone with tears. “You make mistakes because that’s your baby and always will be... but I’m really glad she found you, Luke. You are quite the young man and perfect for my Nicolette.”

Luke sucked in his breath and knew he was about to cry again, feeling so emotionally raw and grateful for his family — and hers.

“Now, how much does my granddaughter weigh?” Valkyrie said gruffly, wiping his eyes. “What does she look like? What color is her hair?”

“I don’t know...” Luke said sheepishly. “Red and gooey?”

“Oh, my gosh...” his father guffawed wildly, wrapping an arm around Luke’s shoulders, as Valkyrie smiled at him in understanding.

“How long is the baby?”

“Not sure...”

“Kid,” Valkyrie began, grinning at them both, “...Get back there, tell my daughter congratulations, and get some details for us!”

Luke laughed as they both ruffled his head playfully, pushing the button along the wall to allow the hospital doors to open. As he walked back, he waved over his shoulder as a

nurse greeted him. They led him down the hallway towards a room and stepped inside, seeing Nicolette holding the baby in her arms.

He felt such love, so much tenderness welling up in him, and such a humbleness realizing that this incredible woman was his partner in life.

“Hey...” she smiled up at him, reminding him of the day she’d shown up in the hangar with a Gatorade for him. There was that glimmer of recognition, that joy that simmered in her soul, there in her eyes for the universe to see.

“Hey yourself...” he murmured, coming to stand beside her. “Do you mind if I text our parents a photo of you and the baby?”

“I look terrible...”

“You’ve never looked more magnificent in your entire life,” he breathed hoarsely, looking into her eyes – before leaning forward to kiss her softly.

As their lips brushed, he recognized that feeling of peace that stole into his soul, recognizing his other half.

Nicolette gazed at him, smiling with such worldliness and a sense of completion it was staggering. He was right. She had never looked more beautiful than she did right now – and he was so lucky to have her in his life.

“Take your picture... *Daddy*,” she whispered lovingly.

Instead of responding, he nodded, holding back from crying as Valkyrie’s words rang in his head. He would need to be strong, to be a guide for his new family, and be the one she could rely upon.

Taking the photo, he quickly sent it... and heard Niki speak.

“I want to call her Erin, if that is okay with you?”

“It’s beautiful,” Luke whispered and smiled, realizing that she was giving their daughter a feminine version of her father’s name to honor him.

His wife would always be a ‘*Daddy’s girl*’ deep down inside – and Erin seemed to fit the little girl that was bundled into Niki’s arms.

The baby sighed heavily... and then worked a tiny little pacifier, making little sucking sounds that were enchanting.

“Erin is perfect.”

“Oh, and Luke?” Nicolette began, causing him to look up from the baby back to her.

“Yeah, sweetheart?”

“I want another one in a year,” she said openly, smiling at him. “I can’t imagine anything more beautiful than seeing what we create together.”

“You want another... already?”

“Well, I want my stitches to heal and...”

“Niki,” he laughed softly, leaning forward to kiss her again – and the baby’s forehead tenderly. “You can have whatever you want, and I will do my best to make sure you always have it.”

“I love you.”

“I have always loved you,” he breathed openly, brushing his nose against hers, marveling again that she had chosen him.

EPILOGUE



Three years later...

NICOLETTE WAS PUSHING the double stroller down the sidewalk that Luke had put in for her that ran from the gravel parking lot directly to the hangar on the property at Flyboys.

Today was a big day, internally, for the company. No huge celebration, no massive event with fliers or banners, but it was going to be *eventful* for sure.

“There’s all my beautiful girls!” her father hollered, coming out of the building just as Luke was jogging in their direction. “C’mere Erin. Come, give me a kissy, my sweet baby girl.”

Sure enough, as her dad scooped up their daughter, Er was already reaching playfully for his nose and ears, shrieking with delight as he held her high in the air before blowing kisses all over her tummy and cheeks.

Her dad was seriously spoiling both of their girls – and couldn’t imagine what he would be like with their son.

Nicolette rested her hand on her growing stomach.

“Hey Niki,” Luke greeted her, kissing her tenderly in a rushed, almost distracted manner. “Are you excited? I’m hoping this works...”

“I’m sure it will,” she smiled encouragingly, hiding all her fears and doubts that lingered silently in her mind.

Today, the B-52 was going up... *again*.

The last time it stalled – and the time before that a fuel line ruptured, spraying fuel everywhere. Yeah, the behemoth of a plane had serious problems and even Alpo admitted as much last year during Thanksgiving. He said that if he had any idea, it would be such a mess and money pit? He would have never bought it.

To which, his words seemed to spur Luke and Glory on with an intensity and passion to get the plane into the air. They had gone over the plane, every fitting, every hose, every wire... from propeller to tail.

Until now.

Today, her father was going to attempt to take it on its maiden flight – for the first time in almost three decades. It had been started several times over the years... but hadn't flown.

Her mother was not thrilled with this – at all.

Luke assured her that the plane was fit for flight and promised her repeatedly that he wouldn't let anything happen to her father. The fear was there. It was the sheer love, faith, and strength in his being, his words, that had kept her feeling secure several times over the years.

Every time she needed strength, she turned to Luke, and he always was waiting with whatever she needed, almost as if he could read her mind.

He was there for the first panicked phone call when Erin swallowed a button before she could fish it out of her child's mouth. He was strong for her during her pregnancy when she started spotting during her fifth month... and held her when she cried in relief that everything was fine.

Luke was *always* there for her – heart and soul.

As the cars arrived, everyone began pouring out of the buildings to say hello... she knew this was what everyone wanted more than anything – including her father.

Her dad had arm-wrestled Thumper for the privilege of flying it.

It was sweet because apparently Thumper and Harley had a history with the plane, having their first date in the beast's belly when they were first founding Flyboys — and financially broke beyond belief.

Everyone loved that plane, wanted it to fly, almost like it was a symbol of the business. Having it sit for years and years was a disgrace in their minds... and Flyboys was anything but that.

It was a dream, a hope, and provided well for their families, giving them the chance to thrive in what they all loved.

Flying.

Now it was time for the old bomber to soar into the skies once again.

“Let's get this going,” Valkyrie began, kissing the baby once more, before leaning forward to kiss Nicolette on the cheek and turning to her mother. “Quit worrying. I'll be fine.”

“You better be,” her mother said tightly, plastering a smile on her face that was completely fake.

As the crowds melted back from the runway, Nicolette smiled as Luke kissed her again, before jogging back to rejoin Glory and Alpo in the hangar with any last-minute items that came up.

It always took her breath away when the huge hangar doors would lift, like some massive animal opening its maw... but this time was different. Instead of the B-52 being towards the back of the hangar on display?

It was directly in front, ready for flight.

Nicolette swallowed – and dutifully picked up the sippy cup Erin dropped, only to see that her other child, sweet little Marie, was still sound asleep in the stroller. Her stomach gave a lurch, as if her son was making his presence known once

again, saying hello, or could feel her anxiety that she was trying to hide.

Pushing the stroller towards the building, she smiled gratefully as Houdini helped lift the front of the stroller, getting it into the building.

Luke had suggested she watch from Harley's office window, the big bay window on the front of the building. It was actually a fantastic idea, too. Air-conditioned, comfortable seating, and it would help muffle the noise for the children... plus protect them if there was another fuel leak.

She could also dial 911 if something went wrong.

Waiting patiently, she gave Erin a piece of paper and a highlighter to 'color' with, watching out the window patiently... only to hear a roar in the distance that caused all of them to be startled.

Erin looked at her nervously, and Nicolette immediately smoothed her daughter's dark blond curls.

"It's okay. Grandpa is going to fly the big plane today."

"Poppy?"

"Yes. Poppy is going to fly."

Before her very eyes, the roaring grew louder – combined with a massive cheer that went up from everyone standing there waiting. She saw Luke, Glory, and Alpo run out of the hangar after the plane – before cheering, jumping into the air, and hugging each other wildly as it lumbered with such a force down the runway it was staggering.

It also made her wonder if the runway was long enough!

The plane suddenly lifted – and everyone grew silent as the massive roaring and rumbling suddenly faded as it careened into the sky... a black smear against a bright blue horizon.

The radio suddenly crackled behind her.

"Flyboys this is Valkyrie... we've got liftoff, and she's sailing beautifully."

Moving over to the speaker, she smiled at her daughter.

“Let’s tell Poppy hello... okay?”

Pressing the button, she smiled tearfully – so happy for Luke, her father, and being able to share these moments and events with the people that mattered the most.

Her family.

“Poppy – congratulations and land that bird safely soon. Okay?” Nicolette said openly, smiling at her daughter, who hollered happily ‘Poppy, Poppy!’ as a way of saying hello.

“You betcha, pumpkin. I’ll see you soon.”

“Love you, Daddy.”

“Love you, too.”

Looking up, she smiled happily to see Luke had entered the building and was standing in the doorway. He looked so proud, so content and full of love.

“Look who’s here, Erin? Daddy!”

“C’mere, princess...” Luke exclaimed, taking the toddler from her arms and kissing her playfully, causing Erin to squirm in happiness – as he leaned forward to kiss Nicolette tenderly.

She smiled at him, adoring the way her husband would get this soft longing in his eyes as he gazed at her. That look had never changed, only she didn’t recognize it before that fateful day.

She was indeed truly blessed.

All because a young boy fell in love with a girl.

AFTERWORD

I hope you enjoyed this sweet little story! When I wrote Toby & Samantha's book, I knew I needed to tell Nicolette's too.

The idea of Luke and Nicolette fighting against falling in love, just like Toby and Samantha, just really struck me. I kinda feel bad for Aeron because he got a double whammy – both kids fell for a family friend's child.

... Maybe it will be different for Caspar?

(Maybe not...)

Did you catch the reference for Betsy? *Hmm?* I wonder what firefighter she falls for?

I love sharing another slice-of-life with you because I really enjoyed bringing these characters to life.

Who do you want to hear about next?

Let me know or post in on our [Flyboys Facebook Page](#) who you want to see – and let's make it happen!

XOXO,

Ginny

P.S. Be sure to leave a review if you liked the story. I read them all and take them to heart. Your words, comments, and sharing your moments mean so much and are truly appreciated!

FOREVER FRUSTRATING

Forever Frustrating



Luke Hody had never met anyone as infuriating as Jillian. She was always trying to ‘one-up’ him, challenging him, and then the moment he asked her out? She *laughed?!!*

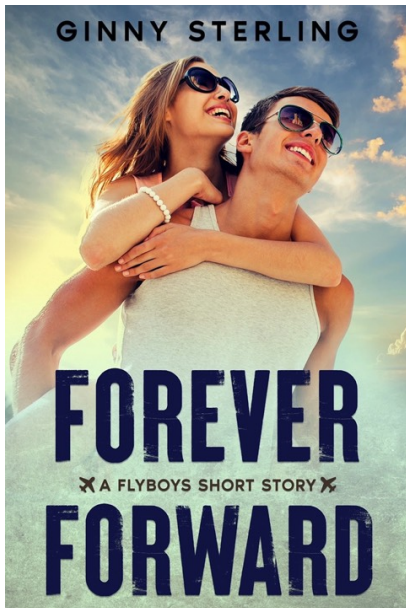
He was serious, fascinated, and terribly jealous of those Flyboys she was always hanging around.

Jillian Clark was sick of Luke’s arrogant attitude. Competitive, irritating, beyond attractive, and completely annoying like some pest or gnat! How dare he tell her that she wasn’t capable of learning how to pilot one of the planes – and to stay away from her friends.

When emotions soar high, how do you tell the girl you love that you are scared to lose her?

FOREVER FORWARD

Forever Forward



How often do you get a second chance to win over your childhood crush?

Tobias Saxon always knew he adored Samantha Sloan. They grew up together, were childhood friends, and the first time he tried to change their relationship? It backfired... badly. Now, years later, Toby has a chance to reconnect with his soul mate in the town of Yonder, Texas.

A life-long series of awkwardness had only one solution to both their families: to separate the two of them.

Can true love prevail after all?

FOREVER FAIRYTALE

Forever Fairytale



Ben ‘*Phantom*’ Merrick certainly wasn’t expecting a damsel in distress... nor the *fierce dragon* who showed up to protect her! Why should he have to jump through hoops to talk to some girl? Normally he could show up in uniform, flash a smile, and have a girl on each arm.

... But this wasn’t just *any* girl.

It was his beloved Rose, and he stayed away from her for an excellent reason.

Her dad.

Rose Griffin knew everyone in town, it seemed, or they knew her. In a small town, there were no covert agendas, no hidden mysteries... except the one she kept hushed all these years.

What happens when her secret suddenly is revealed?

... And what will Ben say?

FOREVER FLIPPANT



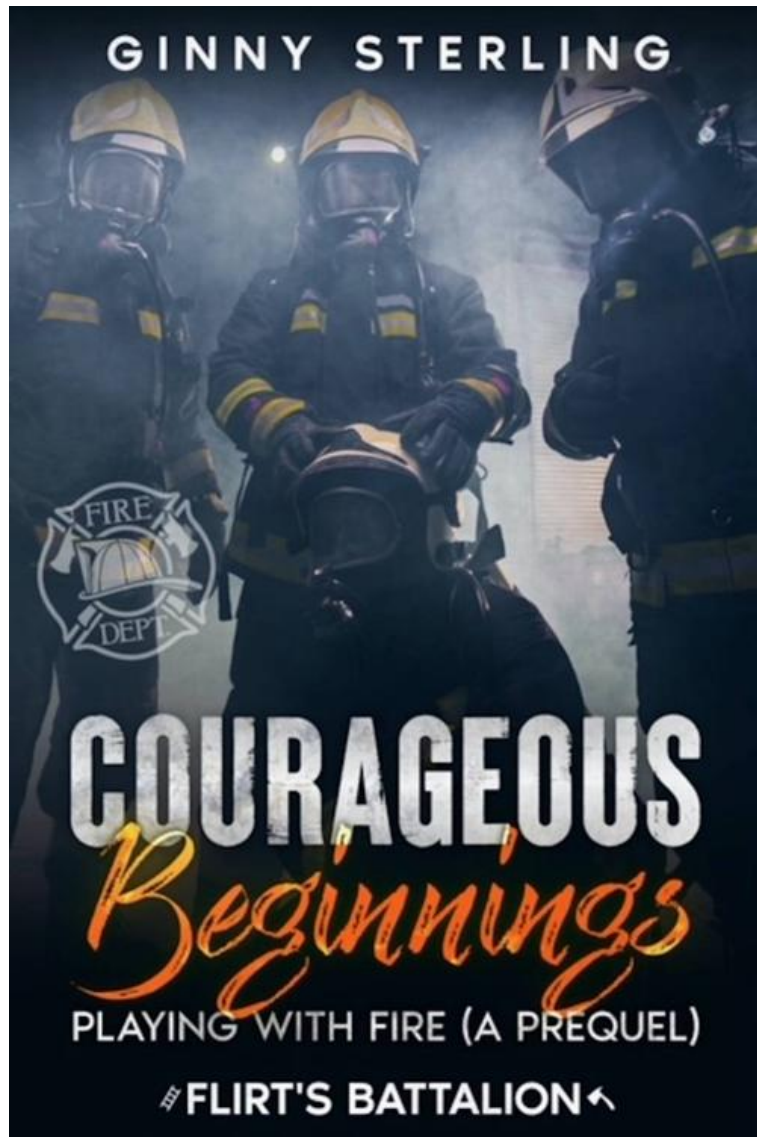
Forever Flippant

Julian ‘*Caesar*’ Barlow was a know-it-all and completely irritating. Every comment had a comeback, a retort, or a smart remark. Nothing was ever serious, and he had such a commanding presence, bossing people around constantly... but not her.

Charlotte Reed had the patience of a saint – except when it came to the arrogant man on the coms. She knew exactly who this guy was, had met his family a few times, and it seemed like everyone just fell into line when he spoke... except that *he* had to listen to *her*.

So why was he picking on her - again?

What happens when he finally stops?



The Flirt's Battalion – A new series coming in 2023

Introducing an adventurous, daring team of fearless, gritty men who battle uncontrollable blazes. Equipped with an indomitable code of valor that ferocity only matched by the inferno of emotions within them, as they find their soulmates.

Meet the crew of smokejumpers, firefighters, and rugged hotshots of Ember Creek, Texas... where the lifeblood of hope, the comfort of warm laughter, reckless loves, and breathtaking happily-ever-afters ignite with only a spark!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ginny Sterling is a Texas transplant living in Kentucky. She spends her free time (Ha!) writing, quilting, and spending time with her husband and two children. Ginny can be reached on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) or via email at GinnySterlingBooks@gmail.com

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