

THE NIKKI BOYD FILES, #3

PURSUED



LISA HARRIS


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To the Master Storyteller
who pursues us
and longs to bring us home.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

2 Corinthians 4:17 NIV

1

11:24 a.m., Tuesday

Flight 1545 from Houston to Nashville

Nikki Boyd grabbed the armrest of the aisle seat as the plane hit another air pocket and the FASTEN SEAT BELT light flickered on above row 29 on the Airbus. Her stomach lurched at the sensation, rattling her nerves like it had throughout the past hour of the flight.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has just turned on the seat belt sign again. We need all passengers to return to their seats immediately and ensure that your seat belt is on.”

Nikki frowned, not amused with the flight attendant’s sing-song voice making it sound as if they were on a ride at an amusement park instead of thirty thousand feet above the ground, flying on the edges of a storm. She tugged on the end of her seat belt, then glanced out the window, where rain slashed against the pane and streaks of lightning flashed in the distance. Flying on a commercial airline across the country should be a piece of cake compared to her day job, where risking her life had become routine. If one could ever call risking one’s life routine.

Shooting up another prayer that they'd make it to Nashville safely, she let go of the armrest and slid out the photo of Tyler Grant tucked away in the pocket of the e-reader in her lap. She willed herself to relax. If she were honest, the constant turbulence over the past hour wasn't the only thing that had her stomach tied up in knots. Even more nerve-wracking than the bumpy flight was the fact that Tyler would be waiting for her once they touched down.

The plane dipped again, rattling her tray table. The twenty-something brunette sitting in the middle seat beside her snapped shut the book she'd had her nose buried in most of the trip and gripped both armrests. "I thought reading would distract me, but even that's not helping anymore."

"You okay?" Nikki asked as the other woman grabbed a couple pills from her purse and washed them down with a half-empty bottle of water.

"I will be once we land." She shoved the bottle back into the seat pocket. "The next time I have to make this trip, though, I'm going to drive."

"Hopefully we'll be through this turbulence soon," Nikki said, catching a flicker of fear in the woman's brown eyes. "But I'm sure we'll be fine. I've always heard flying is safer than driving."

"Maybe, but a lot can go wrong at thirty thousand feet." She clutched the book between her fingers until her knuckles turned white. "Sorry. It's just that I was nervous about this trip before I stepped on the plane. Add a turbulent flight and I feel like my heart's about to burst out of my chest."

Nikki nodded, wondering how the man sitting next to the window with the military haircut had managed to sleep through the entire nerve-wracking flight without noticing the light display across the darkening skyline outside his window. She flicked the edge of Tyler's photo with the edge of her fingernail, completely

understanding the woman's unease. She wasn't the only one trying to get her nerves in check.

"Boyfriend? Husband?" the woman said, then shot her an apologetic look. "I know it's none of my business, but he's gorgeous."

Nikki chuckled at the description, but as far as she was concerned, the woman was right. She'd taken the photo of him three months ago, right before Tyler had left for Liberia. As former military, he still wore his hair short. Add to that a five-o'clock shadow and those familiar brown eyes that could always see straight through her, and yeah . . . he was definitely gorgeous.

"He's . . ." Nikki paused, trying to find a logical response to the question. "Honestly, I'm not sure what to call him. It's a long story, actually. And a bit complicated."

Nikki slipped the photo back into the e-reader. She never talked about her personal life with strangers. Or her job and certainly not her relationships. And talking about Tyler was definitely personal. Three months ago, he'd left for Liberia to work with the State Department in an effort to help improve regional stability. That and to figure out how to deal with life as a single dad and widower. But before he left, he'd asked her to wait for him. Something she was still half certain she'd dreamed up. Because not very long ago she would have laughed at the idea of falling in love with her best friend's husband. Then somehow over the past few months, everything had changed.

"I've got time for complicated." The other woman grinned. "Because by the look in your eyes, I'm thinking you're already smitten."

"You can tell that by my eyes?" No. Nikki wasn't ready to believe that she was actually that far gone.

"Definitely. I've always been told I'm perceptive. When it comes to other people's relationships anyway. My own perceptions of men usually leave something to be desired."

Nikki laughed, still not ready to admit the woman was right. “For now, he’s just a friend. Well, maybe a bit more than a friend. He’s been overseas the past three months, so we’ve never even been on an official date. I’ve been waiting for him to come back so we can figure things out.”

Three months in Liberia had been the perfect combination of time away to figure out his new role in life, as well as giving him the extra experience he needed that would allow him a foothold into a new career path here in the US.

Nikki’s finger ran along the edge of his photo. And time for him to decide if he was ready to start a new relationship after losing Katie. Something she knew she couldn’t do for him. What she hoped, though, was that after being away for so long, he’d discovered there was a place for her—full time—in his life.

The woman beside her glanced down at the book she’d been reading. “Sounds far more romantic than this story. So no wedding plans yet?”

“Wedding plans?” Nikki felt a blush creep across her face at the personal question. No. They definitely weren’t at that stage. Not that she hadn’t thought about it. When that day did come, she knew her mother would try to talk her only daughter into a large, catered reception in some swanky Nashville hotel ballroom, but all she wanted was a small wedding and reception at her church with family and a few close friends.

She brushed away the thought. “No. A wedding—even if it does happen—won’t be for a long, long time.”

The plane hit another pocket of turbulence, rattling the carts in the galley behind them.

Nikki glanced out the window at the darkening sky, wondering if the bad weather was going to follow them all the way to Nashville. The problem was, talking about Tyler was not only personal, it was still new. Something she preferred to think about while she was by herself. And while her mother had a

habit of trying to set her up with men she believed to be perfect marriage material, Nikki hadn't even told anyone in her family about her relationship with Tyler. Which was why saying it out loud made it feel real.

While he'd been in Liberia, they'd stayed connected via Skype and texts. And while they hadn't exactly skirted around the subject of their relationship, it wasn't the same as the two of them sitting down face-to-face and exploring their feelings. But she hadn't minded. Building a relationship that went beyond friendship was going to take time, something she was willing to take. Tyler had gone from being her best friend's husband, to a grieving widower, to the man who'd managed to completely steal her heart. Completely unplanned. Completely unexpected. And yet she knew for herself, anyway, there was no turning back to just the friendship they'd had for so many years.

She really had no idea what the future held. The only thing she did know was that whatever did happen, she wanted to spend that future with him. But getting to that point—for both of them—wasn't going to be easy.

If she closed her eyes for a moment, she could feel the lingering kiss he'd given her at the airport the day he'd told her goodbye. Their first kiss had left her breathless and promising she'd wait for him. But the waiting had been harder than she'd expected.

"Is he going to be there to pick you up?" The woman's question pulled her out of her thoughts.

Nikki glanced at her watch and nodded as another wave of anticipation fluttered through her. She'd been counting down the weeks to his return. Then the days. Then the hours. And now she could finally count the minutes. They'd land in twenty. In another ten or so she'd be at the baggage claim, where he'd promised to meet her. His scheduled return hadn't exactly meshed with hers. He arrived back in Nashville three days ago. Four days after she'd left for a week of required training

in Houston. On the positive side, she knew it had given him time to connect again with his son, Liam, leaving her out of the mix. But that hadn't taken away her longing to be there with him. With both of them.

"What about you?" Nikki asked, ready to change the subject. "Going to visit family?"

"Now, that's a long story," she said with a laugh. "I lived in Nashville for a long time, then moved to Houston because of a guy. I'm coming back to see some old friends and take care of some business." She glanced at the man next to her, but he was still asleep and wasn't paying attention to either of them. "Your relationship sounds so romantic. Mine on the other hand . . . well . . . it's been pretty turbulent."

Nikki wasn't sure what to read into the statement. An abusive boyfriend? Cheating spouse?

"Relationships can be complicated sometimes," Nikki said. Tyler had told her their relationship didn't have to be complicated, but she still wasn't sure that was possible.

"Though I am looking forward to one thing while I'm there," the woman continued. "I'm a bit of a country music fan. I never miss a chance to go to at least a concert or two when I'm in town."

Nikki smiled, not minding the conversation, but glad the subject had finally shifted away from Tyler. "My brother's one of the hundreds of aspiring musicians, so I go listen to him play from time to time."

The plane dipped again, shuddering from side to side.

"I'm not sure how much more of this I can take." The woman's face paled as she turned to look out the window. "And on top of that, they booked me in a middle seat. I hate the middle seat." She leaned over to slide her book into her bag, then groaned as her watch snagged on her red cardigan and dropped into her lap. "Can you believe I just had the clasp fixed?"

Nikki looked at the beautiful detail on the watch. “It’s lovely.”
“Thanks—it was my mother’s, and—”

A deafening explosion rocked the back of the plane before the woman could finish. Nikki’s stomach heaved as the plane dropped several hundred feet. She glanced out the window and caught a glimpse of the forested ground below. This wasn’t normal turbulence. Something was very wrong.

“This is the pilot speaking. I need everyone to stay calm and brace for impact. We’re expecting a rough landing.”

A coffeepot smashed to the floor as the plane made a sharp descent. Someone screamed behind her. Nikki glanced at her seatmate’s terrified expression as she leaned forward and braced herself on the seat in front of her. The man at the end of the row was now wide awake as the plane plummeted toward the ground. Her mind spun, unable to focus. So this was what it was like to die? To watch her life flash before her during these final seconds? Her parents, her sister, Tyler . . .

Her body strained against the seat belt. Funny how she’d accepted years ago that the possibility of dying in the line of duty was high, but this way—a plane crash—this was never what she’d imagined.

And why was it that all of a sudden she felt like so many things had been left undone? So many things she wanted to tell her family. Instead, all that was left was a fleeting kaleidoscope of memories of people she loved. Random thoughts of things she wanted to say to her family and friends.

Like how her parents had already lost her sister. How were they going to survive the loss of another child?

And then there was Tyler—

I’m not ready to die, God. Not yet.

Nikki held her breath as the ground rose up to meet them. Instead of panicked screams, the passengers around her seemed lost in a state of confusion. As if the reality of what

was happening had yet to fully sink in. The feeling of weightlessness washed over her as gravity seemed to disappear completely, and the landscape appeared beside them in the window. Then for a few brief seconds after impact there was only silence.