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## **Point of No Return**

by [Skye Rutherford](#)

(with creative input by co-conspirator and friend, Sandy Williams )

### **Chapter Two**

" Nothing comes without a price."

Fingers closing about the light saber Obi Wan had given him, Luke sat forward on the semi-circular acceleration couch, his thoughts unsettled, his grief for an old man who could have taught him so much, building in his heart. Momentarily, his blue eyes glanced in the general direction of the cockpit; it was--blissfully--quiet.

Now alone, he couldn't forget that last image of Ben lowering his saber, allowing Vader a clear and fatal strike. It was hard to believe his friend, his mentor, was gone. Tears threatened but he forced them back. On Tatooine he had been a boy, subject and privy to a boy's emotions and reactions. But boyhood was over now, brutally put to an end when his family, the only one he'd ever had or known, were killed in a callous, malicious attempt to find the droids he had taken to Ben. He blamed himself for his aunt and uncle's deaths -- even though he knew it wasn't his fault. If he'd been with them, his mind reasoned, he'd have died too and then, he reminded himself, no one would have saved the princess. The thought of her made his sadness recede a little. She was beautiful. Smart. Courageous. He felt like he had a bond to her but could only explain it as something forged when people were thrown together, overcoming insurmountable odds because they relied on one another.

Suddenly more tired than he'd realized, he drew a deep breath and relaxed into the depth of the couch. Without Obi Wan, his future was uncertain; he had no idea where things would lead him now, but now he was a man and would have to make a man's decisions. He had argued with his uncle that he was ready to leave home, to start his own life and see and experience more than the farm or a backwater planet like Tatooine had to offer. The last vestiges of the boy tried desperately to cling to the familiarity of a life that no longer did, or could exist; the man gently released that futile hold, understanding that whatever life brought now, he would have to make his own choices as well as live with his mistakes.

He supposed he could ask Han if he would be needing an extra hand aboard the Falcon. The smuggler and the Wookiee were tough, survivors in a world that made no promises and gave little room for error. But underneath their hard exteriors, Luke had learned that they weren't so bad. They were not backshooters nor were they thieves. Sure, they had hauled spice and other illegal contraband. But they seemed to have their limits on what they would or wouldn't contract for--slaves being at the top of the list. Luke could get along with them. In fact, he rather liked them quite a bit. He had no misconceptions that their lives were easy or without danger but he supposed he could do a lot worse. At least with them, he would learn how to survive, would see many places and they could certainly teach him about flying something other than his old T-16. When they reached Yavin Four, perhaps he would talk to Han and Chewbacca about the possibility of going with them. He shrugged mentally; at least he'd probably never have to go back to Tatooine.

Beside the game table, the little R2 droid made a soft, sad noise. Luke hadn't even noticed him until then. He looked at the barrel shaped, metallic figure and a small smile quirked faintly in one corner of his mouth. " Yes, Artoo. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" came a voice, ragged with exhaustion, yet so full of caring that Luke felt his throat constrict from the sadness in his soul.

Gathering his composure, he looked up at the princess as she crossed the room. He started to rise but she asked him not to. His heart skipped a beat as she sat beside him; he couldn't help but marvel at her. She seemed unaware of her own discomfort, her only concern being his welfare. Held captive by her presence, he hadn't heard as she spoke again.

" Luke?" She placed one hand on his upper arm to draw his attention and he flinched. "I didn't mean to startle you. I'm sorry if I'm intruding."

" Oh, no," he half stammered. "It's okay." He took a deep breath, let it out evenly. "I was just sitting here...thinking."

" About Obi Wan." Leia knew what must be going through his mind. She knew too, that his life, like hers, had been forever changed by the events that had

brought him to this moment. Strange, she thought, how connected to him she felt.

Luke glanced at the deck. " I really shouldn't have yelled at everyone."

"On the contrary," Leia countered solemnly, apologetically, "you had every right to." Memories of Alderaan, of the ordeal she'd been through, filled her thoughts and heart. The tears that threatened were not allowed to come to fruition. " Nothing comes without a price."

Luke gazed off at nothing in particular. " No," he said sadly, absently. "I guess not."

" I don't know that your friend," Leia contemplated aloud, "would understand that in terms other than credits."

" Don't mind Han."

" I don't intend to," Leia responded wryly.

Luke smiled and gave a slight shake of his head. "He's just not a believer in causes."

" As he so eagerly makes a point of saying."

Luke couldn't help but defend the Corellian. True, Solo was sarcastic, egotistical and brash. But he did have a certain humor and bravado that Luke found easy to like. And he was clearly a brilliant pilot...even if he did brag on his skills. Above all, Luke knew he could trust Han. " He's really not so bad."

The princess stifled a smile. "I can't say I exactly share your optimism."

Luke fondled the light saber again. " Ben said you should never judge things by appearances alone. I believe him." He turned his blue eyes to her. "If Han was just a callous pirate or mercenary," he pointed out, " he really would've left us on the Death Star. But he didn't."

Dropping her gaze to her hands, Leia agreed. " No. He didn't." She paused briefly before saying, " I have to admit, he is a good pilot ... if a bit maniacal."

" No argument there," Luke laughed with her. He couldn't help noticing how her brown eyes lit with a little sparkle. What were her eyes, her face like, he wondered, when she smiled fully, openly? When she was truly happy instead of so tired or sad?

Her voice suddenly broke into his musing. " How long had you known General Kenobi?"

" Not long really." Over the next few minutes, he told her about the circumstances under which his entire life had taken a turn. " It all seems like it was just this morning..."

She nodded in simple, complete understanding. " What will you do now?"

Luke shrugged and looked askance. " I guess training to be a Jedi is out of the question now."

" And attending the Imperial Flight Academy isn't an option either." Carefully, Leia leaned forward, palms resting on the curve of the seat cushion. Glancing sideways at Luke, she said, " You could still train to be a pilot anyway."

He looked at her, eyes wide in anticipation, reading the direction of what she offered. " You mean join the rebellion?" He didn't wait for a response. " But I don't really know much about flying fighters--"

" You didn't know anything about rescuing princesses either."

The previous feeling that had weighted Luke's heart lifted. " I'll bet Han could teach me some stuff. If I asked--"

Princess Leia looked dubious. " I wonder if that's safe."

They laughed a little and finally, Luke grew quiet, introspective. After a moment he said, " I hope I won't disappoint you."

His earnest conviction was a bright light in what had been very dark days indeed. Reaching out, Leia touched one side of his face and smiled openly. " You won't." She fingered a tangle of her disarrayed hair. "Oh, Captain Solo said there was an extra cabin I could use..."

"I'll show you where it is. I hope it'll be okay for you. It's probably nothing like what you're used to." As an afterthought he remembered his manners and added, " Your Highness."

"Don't worry," she assured as he led her toward the passageway. "After spending time in a detention cell, I'm sure I'll be very comfortable." Stepping through the hatch she said, "It's going to take a few days to get to the base." She paused in the hatchway. "I'd like it if you would call me Leia. "

He nodded, surprised at her request. "Leia," he breathed in infatuation before following her.

## Chapter Three

" You should never judge things by appearances alone."

Heart pounding, Leia awoke to the sound of her own voice as she stifled a scream. Bringing her hands to her face, she drew a series of deep, but shakey breaths in an effort to calm herself. It helped, if only marginally. Head aching, she squeezed her eyes shut. The memory of Alderaan, blasted into oblivion, repeated again and again like a continuous loop on a holo-vid. Unbidden, the tears she had held at bay ever since that awful moment, welled up, spilled over and tracked a course along both cheeks and pooled at the corners of her mouth. Quickly, she steeled herself -- just as she had done in the cold confinement of the detention cell -- and dashed her tears away with the back of one hand. Now, as then, Leia would not allow the reality of the nightmare she'd witnessed and endured to defeat her. As was her nature, her training, the Alderaanian princess and senator would utilize everything to her advantage, including memories, to fuel her strength of purpose. Should others lose sight of it, lose faith in it, she would not. Whatever the sacrifice --and such would no doubt be heavy -- Palpatine and his empire would fall. And when it did, when the celebration of victory became a lulling tide, Leia would allow herself time to grieve.

A shiver coursed through her and she drew the thermal blanket up to her shoulders. Resting her forehead in the palm of one hand she wished the throbbing, incessant headache would disappear. It set her nerves on edge and made her stomach nauseous. With a sigh, she swept the hair away from her face. Sleep was obviously beyond her at the moment and as she looked at the chronometer built into the wall beside the bunk, a muttered groan escaped her and her shoulders slumped. 0200 hours. And any hope of going back to sleep was nearly impossible. Again she shivered and decided to venture to the galley. Perhaps if she could fix something hot to drink she could relax.

Dressed in a borrowed, black T-shirt that reached to her knees, she kept the blanket about her and swung her legs over the side of the bunk. Instantly regretting the movement, slow as it had been, Leia bit back a cry against the sharp muscle cramps that tormented her entire body. Forcing herself to breathe steadily, she willed herself to relax as pain-filled moments gradually passed. Finally, she carefully eased herself off the bunk...but only by very slow degrees. Her legs trembled as she stood, threatening to give way. Each halting step forward was followed by another. Every bone, every muscle, every nerve ending rebelled with the action, no matter how careful or slow she made it. Just getting to the hatchway seemed a miracle. A few moments more and she was in the dimly lit passageway. She braced herself with one hand on the curved, padded bulkhead; the journey to the lounge area seemed endless as she could only proceed in small, tenuous steps, stopping twice to regain her balance.

At last she reached her destination. For a brief moment, she almost wished someone else would have been there: conversation would take her mind off her own situation. She thought about Luke and recalled the lost tone of his voice, the distant expression in his clear, light-blue eyes as he'd told her his history. Not surprisingly, her heart went out to him once more. And once more, her own aches and pains were insignificant. Although Luke's home hadn't been obliterated in the fashion hers had, he had nonetheless lost his entire world and Leia completely understood his feelings. In a strange way, she was as glad for his company as she was sympathetic for his circumstances. He was easy to talk to and by far was the only person onboard with whom she felt she could relate. Honest, compassionate and innocent, he was thoroughly likable. And unquestionably trustworthy. Unlike Captain Solo. Leia grimaced, a reaction that had nothing to do with her physical discomfort.

"If you're looking for Luke," a voice behind her said, "he's up in the cockpit."

Taken completely by surprise, Leia gasped and whirled round, the blanket about her shoulders falling to the deck plates; the fast movement proved too much for muscles. Tendons made weak from torture and fatigue, she lost her balance.

Galvanized by a reaction he had not anticipated, Han Solo shot forward with lightening-fast reflexes. His hands, large and capable, caught her by the upper arms, preventing her from falling. But still she faltered, only gaining control after she clutched his waist.

Leia tensed at his touch and he attempted, in his way, to put her fears aside. "Hey, now," he remarked lightly, "If I'd known you were going to fall for me like this---" She struggled to free herself; he loosened his grip but did not let go. "You need to lighten up, sweetheart. Nothing's ever as bad as it could be." He felt her tremble and the paleness of her skin, the tiny beads of sweat that gleamed on her brow, under her eyes and on her chin didn't escape him.

She tried to ignore the sympathy in his voice and turned to collect the blanket lying behind her. The awkwardness and pain of her movement must have shown more than she'd known. Her legs wobbled and suddenly two strong, capable hands gently steadied her again.

"Guess the Imps didn't give you any slack, huh?"

She said nothing, only tried to compose herself.

"No," his words rumbled in complete sincerity, answering his own question. "I guess they didn't." His nearness and surprising compassion were too much for her. "Please let go of me. I can manage for myself." She said the words more tersely than she had really intended, suddenly wanting to be away from his tender gaze and protective hold. His hazel eyes, flecked with gold, green and

chestnut seemed to look straight into her soul, zeroing in on and understanding far too much. She tried to pull free of his firm but gentle grasp. "Leave me alone, Captain," she asked again. "I'm quite capable of taking care of myself."

Even in the dimmed light, he could see the set of the princess' jaw, an all too clear indication that not even her strong willingness to ignore such discomfort was succeeding. He had a pretty good idea of the treatment she'd received in the detention cell; one had only to look at her to know it. She might be as irritating as hell, but she was no quitter, no lightweight when it came to standing up for her convictions. This lady was definitely a force to be reckoned with, a rare combination of inner strength and spirit that would never surrender, never lose hope. The thought occurred to him that if the rebels had any chance of actually waging a full scale war against the present regime, they would succeed because of her.

Still struck and taken completely off guard by the look on his face, the tone in his voice, Leia sensed something different in the Corellian pilot. She was instantly reminded of Luke's words: "Ben said you should never judge things by appearances alone." There was more to this man. Something beyond smug egotism and hyped-up bravado lay hidden, no, she corrected, buried, beneath his hard exterior. Measure for measure, his strength of will and his tenacious spirit matched her own. She was reminded of his words, that without him they would never have made good their escape.

Indeed, he could have easily left them all on the Death Star to die. He could very well have just surrendered she and the droids over to Tarkin and received a healthy sum of credits for "loyalty served to the Empire". But, he hadn't and so, as infuriating as he was, Captain Han Solo, Corellian smuggler, was also worthy of respect. For all his swaggering overconfidence, acid sarcasm, and seemingly uncaring attitude, this was not only a confident and wily individual, he was a man with a conscience. Even if he did hide it. She wondered how and why he had become a smuggler. Something about him told her it was out of necessity. He was a mystery to her, one that would not be easily forgotten.

For a fleeting, nervous moment each held the other's gaze. Hers revealed curiosity, his respect. It was disconcerting, confusing and the connection broke -- much to the relief of both -- as Luke suddenly stepped into the compartment.

The awkwardness of the moment was embarrassing. In a fluid motion Han bent, hooked the blanket on his right index finger and then offered it to the princess. Gone was the moment of allowing a quieter, more introspective side of himself to be shown. Like a bolt of lightning, his sardonic brashness struck the surface. "Lose something, Your Highness?" His tone was purposefully brimming with ill mannered, suggestive overtones.

The slap that cracked hard on his face stung intensely...as he knew it would.

Luke rocked on the balls of his feet, an expression of satisfaction with the princess's action written on his features.

For her part, Leia snagged the blanket from the Corellian and turned on her heel, disappearing into the corridor.

Solo watched her, still nursing the smarting flesh on his face. " You were right, kid. A princess and a guy like me..." He shook his head and entered the corridor, striding deliberately toward the cockpit.

**end Chapter Three**

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