

# *Flight Into Danger*

*By  
E. K. Barber*

*Chapter One*  
And selected excerpts

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# FLIGHT INTO DANGER

By

**E. K. Barber**

*“When once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been and there you will always long to return.”* Leonardo da Vinci

*Takeoffs are optional. Landings are mandatory.* Captain Skyler Madison stared at the small sticker someone had placed near the altimeter.

“Bill, will you check the hydraulic pressure?” she looked over the gauges and instruments. Something didn’t feel right. She was sitting in the cockpit of a Boeing 767 and when her instincts told her to keep her personal radar keen and focused, she never questioned them. Her eyes traveled over everything. She’d been in the cockpit of a plane since her father took her up in his Cessna 182 when she was a child. He always said to fly five minutes ahead of your plane.

“Everything looks okay, Skye. All instruments and readings are normal.” Her copilot, Bill McGee, felt nothing, saw nothing, but sat on the alert. He never questioned her instincts either.

“Take it off auto-pilot, I’m going to fly it myself for a few minutes.” Maybe with her hands on the yoke she could identify the source of her intuitive concern. She felt the control transfer to her and couldn’t contain the smile that spread across her face. This was her kind of flying. Not just sitting watching instruments, but having the aircraft in her hands. She did a little maneuvering. The plane seemed to be responding well. But there was something...something. Suddenly the yoke bucked. Her smile was immediately replaced by a serious note of command. “Bill, take your side. Let me fly, but stand by in case I need extra muscle.” Bill put his hands on the yoke in front of him. Skye was the captain and had the fundamental responsibility for flying the plane, but he would stand ready. She worked the rudders and moved the yoke from side to side, backward and forward. Everything was within normal parameters. Everything but her gut. “It feels like the hydraulics.”

Bill frowned, but said nothing. There were absolutely no indicators pointing to any problem with the hydraulic system. If she were right, they would need to take this bird down straight and fast. There would be some maneuverability if the hydraulics went out, but not much. It was nearly impossible to make a soft landing without them.

Skye reached up for the intercom and toggled the switch, keeping one hand steady on the yoke.

“Yes, Captain?” asked Connie, her head flight attendant.

“Heads up. I’m going to ask the passengers to buckle in.”

“Yes, Captain.” Connie never questioned her. On the ground, they were good friends, but when Skye was in the cockpit, she was in complete control and worthy of quick, efficient, unquestioning responses from her flight team. “I’ll prepare the rest of the crew.”

Skye waited a few moments, then flipped the switch to the cabin. “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is your captain speaking. I’m going to ask you to retake your seats and secure your seat belts.” Her tones were honey coated and calm, a voice that always inspired both confidence and intense curiosity among the passengers. “We’re approximately 45 minutes from Dulles and there are a few clouds between us and the airport. We may experience some turbulence, so please stay seated and buckled in for the duration of our flight. If you need to get up for any reason, just hit your call button to signal for a flight attendant and someone will be glad to assist you.” She repeated her message in perfect Spanish, then clicked off and settled in. They had received the weather reports earlier and they were indeed approaching some heavy clouds. She should be able to fly around them, but she wanted her passengers safe and in their seats just in case...in case what she felt in her gut was trouble.

For the next five minutes, her plane flew true and blue. The tiny, random vibrations were still there, she was sure of it, but nothing too cranky. She had the sensitive hands of a surgeon and could feel some undifferentiated reluctance from her big bird to do her bidding. Sensing the nearly undetectable resistance in her fingers and hands, she never relaxed, never lowered her concentration.

Suddenly, the yoke jumped sporadically, then began to fight her violently. The plane lurched. Skye’s grip had been tight on the yoke, or its vicious jerk to the left might have broken some fingers, maybe even an arm. Bill helped her from his side. It was like an invisible hand had grabbed control of her craft and decided to take it down. She reacted immediately and with tremendous strength and needed all of it to keep the plane steady.

Bill looked over at her, the radio to the control tower already in his hand, waiting for her explicit order. He didn’t have to wait long. Skye knew every step of the protocol and was as decisive as a commanding general.

“I’m declaring an air emergency. Contact the tower and request immediate landing instructions. We’re coming in...direct and crippled.” Her voice was calm, her demeanor perfectly controlled.

Bill communicated with the tower, then talked with Connie on the intercom. “The captain has just declared an air emergency. Landing protocol, level 2.” That meant a possible hard landing, but not crash protocol...yet.

Bill talked with the Dulles Air Route Traffic Control to obtain instructions as well as routine wind and weather reports, then looked over at Skye. She was battling the plane, but seemed to be winning.

“Thunderstorms up ahead. Solid between us and the airport.”

“How’s the weather at National or BWI?”

“Worse. National has fog, BWI is deteriorating.”

“Okay, then Dulles it is. I think there may be one cable left. I can still negotiate a little, but the strain on it’s got to be immense.”

She saw a lightning bolt and dark clouds ahead of them. “I think I can fly a little to the left, maybe climb 1500 feet.”

She no sooner finished her statement when the final cable broke and she was holding a virtually dead yoke. Some manual control was always possible, but it was like maneuvering a bus without power steering, in three feet of thick mud with only a few inch radius in the steering wheel. Skye’s arms and back began to ache from the effort to keep the plane steady and she would need to exert even more strength to move it in any direction. Bill was working with her, but she needed him for communication and working the instruments. She decided to use what control they had remaining to keep the aircraft at altitude.

“Okay, forget that. We can’t go over it, she won’t let me climb. And we certainly don’t want to give up altitude to go under it. Get on the intercom. Apologize to our passengers, but we’re going to have to go through it.”

They flew straight into the dark, swirling clouds. Skye’s attention was focused on the altimeter and altitude indicator. Bill had one hand on the yoke assisting her while using his other to talk to the tower.

“We’re cleared for runway two-seven left. We’re 28 minutes out,” he reported.

She was already feeling the strain in her back and legs. Could she hold on another 28 minutes? Well, she thought, it was better than an hour. Skye rolled her shoulders, shifted position to give her more leverage and settled in for the duration.

“Jettison the fuel,” she ordered, following standard emergency procedure.

Bill released all the remaining fuel in their tanks; save the small amount they still needed to get to Dulles. They now were at the point of no return. They had no other airport options.

“At least it can’t get any worse,” said Skye through clenched teeth, sweating with the effort to keep the plane steady. Lightning flashed all around them

lighting up the cockpit and bathing them in an eerie blue light. The plane bounced wildly in the unstable air. The thunder was deafening, making communication difficult. Suddenly, a gigantic bolt of lightning streaked across the sky and hit the fuselage. Sparks shot out of several of the instruments. Thunder rocked through the cockpit as smoke started to collect in the air, reducing their visibility and stinging their eyes and throats.

“Extinguisher on ready,” Skye shouted, coughing. “Priority.”

Bill reached over and took the extinguisher, leaving Skye to wrestle with the yoke alone. The added stress tore at her already fatigued arms. When there were no flames, Skye nodded in satisfaction. “Good. No fire. Stand down. Clear the air, then hands back on the yoke.” When the air was once again clear enough to see her instruments, she glanced over at the transponder. “Good grief, Bill.”

He saw it too. No radios. No transponder signal. She could land the plane with no radios. That was no problem. She already had her clearance and designated runway. The airport knew about her emergency and they would be ready. She glanced at Bill. The problem was they were flying into Washington D.C. airspace. Any plane coming in without radio contact, regardless of status, whether passenger plane or small general aviation aircraft, would be fired upon and brought down by military jets. No exceptions.

“Time?” asked Skye, assessing, thinking.

“21 minutes.”

“Plenty of time for the military to scramble their aircraft and shoot,” she said. “We have to contact the tower, keep constant communication.” Another violent bolt of lightning lit up the sky, but didn’t come near the fuselage. The unstable air created terrific turbulence adding to the pull in the yoke. Skye’s muscles screamed in protest and waves of agony rocketed up her back, but she drowned the pain in determination and continued to work the tactical alternatives.

“Data link?”

Bill looked over at the direct link to the airline company. “Red light. It’s down, too.”

“Get your cell phone.”

“Why?” he asked while reaching back into his jacket pocket for the phone.

“I want to call Nicola’s and order two pizzas. I’m hungry and I know they deliver anywhere, in 30 minutes...guaranteed.”

“Jeez, Skye. This is going on the flight data recorder.”

“I know...just more incentive to get this bird down safely. I wouldn’t want CNN to run those words in an endless loop as my last, greatest gift to their viewing public.”

“The phone won’t work out here.”

“I know, but it should at about 12-15 minutes from the airport. I figure they won’t shoot us down before that.” Bill gave her an satirical look and did as she commanded.

They were losing altitude fast. The stall warning beeper sounded. Skye and Bill put their combined muscle into tilting the nose up as far as the dead controls would let them. The beeper stopped, then started again. They both ignored it. That was the least of their problems for the moment. There was always some tolerance built into the warning mechanisms any way. They hoped there would be enough. Right now they had to get in touch with the tower.

“The good news is that as we lose altitude, we clear some of this really rough turbulence,” said Skye through gritted teeth. The air was more stable as they came out of the heavy clouds and the flight smoothed out.

“Do you know the number of the tower?” asked Bill, turning on the phone.

“I do.” She gave it to him and he punched it in. Her shoulders joined the chorus of agony adding to the intensity of her discomfort, but she zoned it out.

“I wouldn’t have known the number,” said Bill, impressed but not surprised at his captain’s depth of knowledge.

“That’s why I’m in the left seat.” She glanced over at him with a smirk. He had a great deal to learn from her. He nodded and winked.

At 18 minutes out, she was breathing heavily and completely focused on the altimeter and the mileage indicator.

“Start trying the tower,” Skye commanded. Bill acknowledged and punched the call button. The plane fought her efforts to manage the rate of their descent. She only had the slightest bit of direct control and she was finessing it all she could.

“Nothing yet,” Bill said, listening to the phone and reading the instruments simultaneously. “8000 feet. You’re coming in fine.”

Skye checked the instruments. 16 minutes.

“Try again,” she gasped when they were at 6000 feet. Her throat was dry, her breathing labored with the effort it took to hold onto their altitude.

Bill punched the call button on the cell phone at the same time the plane was rocked by another huge shock of turbulence. The phone shot out of Bill’s sweaty hands and landed under the oxygen tank. Leaning over he tried to reach it, but couldn’t.

“Skye, I have to leave my seat,” he said disgusted with himself. The phone better not be broken. No time left to locate another one. The passengers were probably all armed with cell phones, but there wasn’t enough time to secure one and get back to the cockpit.

“I’ll hold it. Be careful. Go.” Skye shifted knowing she would have the entire weight of the plane in her hands as soon as he left his seat.

Bill got up and lurched over to the tank. The plane tilted slightly to the right and the phone skittered across the cockpit floor. As Bill went after it, a fully armed Air Force F-15 attack jet appeared to the left of the cockpit window. Then another one to the right.

“Bill, we’ve got company. I imagine they’re trying to hail us. I think they’ll give us a few minutes to respond.” Bill heard the note of urgency in her voice and steadied himself. “Get that phone now!”

He snagged the phone just as it was sliding away from him and took a few bruises with the effort. He struggled to maintain his balance and managed to get back to his seat. The phone looked okay. They’d caught a break. Not much of one, but it could make the difference. He punched call again. Then again. He looked at the F15 outside his window and noticed it was backing away, but only a few hundred feet. It was preparing to fire.

He punched the call button one more time. “It’s ringing,” he was shouting now. There was so much noise in the cockpit he hoped he could be heard.

“Hello? Hello? This is International Airlines, Flight 127 from London. I repeat. This is IA Flight 127 from London. Hand this phone to the air traffic control supervisor. Now!” Bill listened for a few seconds.

“They want all the codes, Skye.” He put the phone to her ear.

“This is Captain Skyler Madison, IA Flight 127 from London. We’re 11 minutes out and have an altitude of 5000 feet.” Skye gave the air traffic control supervisor all the number and name codes in the pre-authorized sequence. It had to be perfect. Then the tower would know they were not under duress or in a hijack situation. After Skye, Bill identified himself and recited all the copilot codes. He kept his eyes on the fighter jets the whole time. Nothing happened. They were still there, menacing, deadly. Bill held his breath. Come on. Come on.

Finally, at 8 minutes out, the fighters wagged their wings and disappeared into the clouds. Bill blew out a breath. One problem solved. Not that they were out of the woods. He looked at the instruments. Not by a long shot. He placed the phone between his chin and shoulder and relieved Skye by putting all of his strength into their combined efforts on the aircraft’s steering mechanisms.

Skye was still monitoring all the instruments and assessing all the sounds in the cockpit. She could hear the stress on the skin of the plane, even through the din of warning bells, thunder, and her own roaring heartbeat. They were in the wrong attitude. It was something she felt more than observed. Something she knew.

“Throttle back, Bill. We have to slow down.” Again Bill did precisely what she commanded, no questions, just quick action. “

“Just a bit. Yes, that’s it.” She could hear his unasked question in her head. “Too much structural stress. I can hear the right wing groaning. There. That’s better.”

“Turn to a heading of two-seven-zero and begin your descent to 2600,” said Bill, still talking with the tower.

“I wish it were that easy,” muttered Skye. But she managed to get more out of her arm and back muscles and her precious, valiant bird responded to her touch.

“Tower says clear to land on two-seven. Emergency vehicles standing by.” Bill looked over at his captain, who spared a glance at him. “Good luck.” Bill quickly grabbed the phone and placed it in his seat pocket. They were on their own.

Skye was going to have to do this completely by visual approach. No gyros, no glide slope, no localizer. The old fashioned way. Eyes only, by hand, feel, intuition, and instinct. Captain Skyler Madison was made for this moment. It was precisely the kind of flying she loved. She was one with the airplane. The runway and the REIL lights loomed on the horizon. Skye couldn’t control the devilish grin that spread over her face. She was ready to bring the plane into its corridor and let gravity have its way with her.

“Lower the landing gear,” she ordered.

“They’re hydraulic.”

“Yes, but there’s a backup on a separate line. If that line is still intact, we’ll have wheels.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“We slide farther and make sparks. Didn’t you ever watch Airplane?”

“Several times.”

“Then you know that either way, we’re on the ground. You’re going to have to move the throttles and control the speed. I’ll take the rudders and the yoke.” Skye shifted slightly, positioning her feet and arms to make maximum use of leverage.

“Green light on the landing gear. If we can believe the light, we have rubber.”

They had done everything they could. It was now just a matter of using their combined strength to keep the plane in its glide path while losing all the remaining altitude.

They were both silent as the plane descended. Skye had worked with Bill for over three years, and he was one of the best copilots she knew. He would be a

captain soon, she thought, and she would miss the opportunity to fly with him. They didn't always fly together, but when they did, it was like dancing with a familiar partner. She led, he followed. Smoothly, automatically, and with a great deal of trust and mutual respect.

When they were 100 yards from the end of the runway and just under 50 feet above it, they felt the last bit of control fall away. The wings lost their lift and the plane fell like a stone. Fortunately the wheels were down and locked and they took the stress of the abrupt fall. Both Bill and Skye were jarred, but they didn't let go of the yoke. Skye worked with the emergency brakes and worked the controls with all of her remaining strength. They rode the plane to the far end of the runway where it came to a slow, screeching stop. What drama. A perfect Hollywood moment.

Skye blew out a breath and slowly released her grip. Her fingers were nearly fixed in a permanent fist. She painfully straightened them out, then flexed until she could move them without sparks of pain running up her wrists. Neither she nor Bill spoke. They didn't need to. They could hear the emergency vehicles pulling up, but they gave themselves a minute to savor the moment. Skye reached up and turned off all the switches, then the engines.

"Welcome to D.C.," she said finally.

Bill glanced at the clock. "Hey, we're a few minutes early."

"That's the bonus of coming in with an air emergency." She looked at him and grinned. He grinned back. Alive and well and on terra firma. What a rush!

Skye got out of her seat and stretched some of the stiffness out of her muscles. The landing was as physically demanding as it was mentally challenging. "That was a hell of a ride, Bill."

Bill got up too and smiled at his captain. She was a master of the understatement. "Nicely done. 250 souls safe, not to mention a very grateful crew." He held out his hand and she took it, gingerly. They both winced, shook out the cramps, then laughed.

Skye smoothed out the wrinkles in her skirt. Bill helped her on with her jacket and she grabbed her hat. It wouldn't do to look disheveled, even though she fought a 450,000-pound behemoth for nearly an hour. She slid a battered old compass out of the side pocket of her seat and led the way to the cockpit door. Before she went out, she patted her hair and put on her captain's hat. She tilted it a bit off regulation, deciding she needed a roguish look for this occasion, and stepped out onto a wide, metal platform. It was attached to the International Airlines Simulation Unit. It was the most sophisticated model currently being used in the industry; so realistic that time spent in the IASU was added to a pilot's total logged airtime.

Skye looked down from the simulation unit's platform and grinned. All the people assembled in the large hangar applauded wildly. She heard the whistles of the mechanics and the hoots from the computer geeks. Her fellow pilots had been watching on the monitors and against all odds, they had bet on one of their own. They were applauding the loudest. She looked at all of their faces for a few seconds, then took an imperial bow.

Skyler Madison, legendary pilot and youngest person to rise to captain's rank had done it one more time. Woman against machine and simulated computer-generated scenarios...and woman had won. She'd brought the bird safely back to its nest.

Skye had faced everything the engineers, technicians, corporate strategists, and computer programmers could think of and once again she landed the plane in a simulator so authentic, it was considered the equivalent of actual cockpit time. She'd never lost one. Her record was still perfect.

She then stepped aside, and with a flourish of one throbbing arm, she presented for review to the assembled masses, her copilot. Bill stepped out and took his bow. He took Skye's hand and like two stars in a major Broadway production, they bowed together. Then Bill moved to the side and joined the applause for his captain.

"Damn, what a sight," said Stan, one of the senior pilots. Skye was absolutely stunning. Tall, nearly six feet, and slender, with beautifully expressive chocolate-colored eyes, she looked more like a model than a skilled commercial pilot. While in the cockpit, she wore her thick wheat-colored hair severely pulled back into an elaborate twist at the nape of her neck. She thought it made her look competent and professional. To the appreciative eyes that gazed at her now, it made her look like a picture of the ancient goddess of love. Not even the trim uniform and hat did much to conceal the magnificent face and body. For many, it magnified the appeal. Her gorgeous features, accessorized with that cocky grin and confident angle of the head, dazzled the eye and would star in more than one hot and heavy dream that night.

She walked gracefully down the steps into the waiting crowd of onlookers. There would be an immediate debriefing on what they saw and experienced with Skye and Bill as the headliners. The usual assessment team from corporate headquarters would facilitate the meeting.

Skye dialed a seven-digit number followed by a four-digit code, then another seven-digit number. She waited patiently as the phone clicked and whirred and clicked some more.

"Yes?"

"I'm at the airport."

“Are you coming in?”

“How’s the traffic?”

“Not too bad from where I’m sitting. A bit of congestion to the left.” She, of course, knew precisely where that would be and could gauge accordingly.

“I’ll be there soon.”

“See you then.”

It was a secure line, still, no names, no location, no information. “Soon” would be about forty-five minutes since the congestion could be easily avoided by coming in through the back of the building. She loved this covert stuff. It gave her the little hit of adrenalin she would need to stay alert for her commute into the city. That and the fact that she’d scored some really superior goods.

*Intrigued? Want a few more excerpts?  
Here is Alex....*

Jim looked at the man sitting across the desk from him. If Skye was his pride and joy, then Alexander Springfield was his prototype of a special agent. He was the best and Jim needed the best on this one. He was a tall man, over 6’4” with a finely muscled, well-toned body. He had penetrating light blue eyes and dark brown, curly hair, worn long, but well cut. He came from a family of cops, so he was into firearms early and gained marksman status within days of arrival at the training facilities in Colorado.

Alex had an MBA from the University of Chicago and a law degree from the University of Wisconsin, where he played fullback and was an All-American his junior and senior year. Before he joined Jim’s elite team at Justice, he was a highly successful corporate attorney and businessman. He was a multi-millionaire before he was 30, making most of his money in real estate investments. This made him ideal for assignments requiring travel or access into the upper echelons of the financial world. Like Skye, his professional career was excellent cover for his clandestine operations.

Alex was also a superb undercover operator. He had done some deep cover covert work for Jim over the years. He was bold, brilliant, and daring. A personal tragedy had turned the young man from engaging in business to pursuing justice, and now, years later, he was as passionate about bringing down the lawbreakers as he had been about building an empire. Jim mentored him along the way and thought he might be well suited to administration. But like Skye, Alex favored hands-on fieldwork.

After a warm greeting, Jim led Alex to the less formal sitting area where he and Skye sat earlier. They discussed sports scores, some local political scandals, and personal information over drinks before getting down to business. Jim always prided himself on the rapport he built with his agents and realized it was something that took time and effort. Finally, after the two were relaxed, he brought up the reason for the meeting.

“I have a special project for you.”

Alex merely nodded and smiled an engaging grin.

“Make it a good one. After the last assignment, you owe me. Big time.” Alex had been sent into a large accounting firm to investigate a case of insider trading. All those debits and credits gave him a headache. He considered it very boring work. He wanted to feel his gun in the small of his back and go after some really bad guys. Not accountants, who are about as dangerous as a box of puppies.

Jim laughed. “Consider that last job a holding pattern. How do drugs, danger, and possible mayhem suit you?”

“Just fine.” Alex grinned, a glint in his steely blue eyes. “Throw in a beautiful woman and I’m yours to command.”

Jim grinned back. Some days, he really loved his job.

“This one beautiful enough for you?” Jim tossed a picture of a stunning blonde on the table in front of Alex. She had long curly hair the color of sand with coffee-colored eyes and a broad, full mouth.

Alex’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. “Please tell me you want me to follow her, seduce her, and recruit her to our side.”

Jim laughed. “Follow her, yes. Seduce her, and I’ll have you marked for torture and death. And she’s already on our side. Your job is to confirm that. Here is her dossier.” Alex took it, scanned it, and memorized it. He was impressed and it took a great deal to make that kind of impression on him. “I didn’t know International Airlines had a female captain. Did you set this up?”

“No, she earned it all on her own.” Jim smiled. “And I know for a fact Skyler doesn’t like chauvinists who assume someone in the left seat of the cockpit has to be male.”

“Hey, Jim. My mom’s a cop, remember? I grew up in a house where the women were armed, for God’s sake. I rarely make that mistake.” He gazed down at the picture, already half in love. “It’s just that this woman looks more like a model than a pilot. And she certainly doesn’t look like an experienced field agent.”

“Exactly. That’s the idea behind covert operations.”

“When was she recruited?”

“Actually, I believe she was a teenager when she ran her first mission.”

“Excuse me?”

“Her parents were Angelina and Perry Madison.”

“Oh,” he said seriously. He remembered the headlines and horrific pictures of the tragedy. “Go on.”

## *They meet...*

Alex knocked on the door of her suite, smiling at the feel of nervous energy surging through the muscles in his inner thighs. Maybe she was naked in there. No. Best get that thought out of his mind, or he might scare her when she opened the door.

When she did, it was in a cloud of wonderful, exotic scent. She was wearing a wide, inviting smile and a simple long, black dress. Not naked, but this look was strangely even more alluring. The dress completely covered her and gave her an air of sophistication and seduction that neither her uniform nor her casual look the night before had prepared him for. He stepped inside the suite and closed the door behind him, never taking his eyes off the fascinating dimple that formed just to the right of her smile.

Alex realized he was staring like a besotted schoolboy and was just about to say how spectacular she looked when she turned... revealing nothing but a long, graceful exposed back. He couldn't get his breath. The smell of her, the site of that naked back, the images of her in his arms. His brain seized. Nothing was working...well almost nothing. He could feel a surge of lust pushing blood from his brain down below his belt.

“Could you zip me up, please. I'm running a bit late.” Skye knew exactly what she was doing. She'd deliberately selected the exclusive perfume she had formulated just for her in Paris. Her dress was form fitting and the form that it fit was just perfect for its sleek straight lines. She'd zippered herself into it several times before tonight, but thought it would be just fine to get a little help, now that someone so capable was at her door. The timing was perfect. It was a impulsive decision, but when she saw the hungry look in his eye turn absolutely ravenous, she knew her impulse had been right on target.

So there, Bill, she thought as she presented her back to Alex. I can be spontaneous sometimes. When she felt his warm, steady fingers work their way slowly up her back, she thought it was more like spontaneous combustion.

By the time he reached the top of her dress, they were both so sufficiently turned on that had she not been on assignment that evening, and had he not known she was on assignment that evening, they would have been tearing at each

other and rolling on the floor before she had a chance to turn around. Alex could feel her tremble with pleasure and nearly lost his tenuous hold on reality.

“Thanks,” was all she could manage to say when she could take a breath. She peeked at him over her shoulder. He looked wonderful...debonair, dashing, and handsome. He was made to wear a tuxedo and this one fit him like a second skin. Obviously hand tailored and expensive. And he kept staring at her with those beautiful blue eyes. It was disconcerting.

Alex smiled and knew that as long as he lived, he would never, ever, forget the smell of her tonight. He put his hand to her cheek.

“Is there any way...any way whatsoever, that I can talk you out of going to this party tonight?”

“Why? Aren’t you feeling well?” she asked with mock concern. “Was the late night last night too much for you?” Amusement made her eyes sparkle.

She stood there, tempting and completely irresistible. He really should respect the time she spent getting ready and keep his distance...exercise some restraint. Christ. What the hell. He grabbed her around the waist, took her in his arms and kissed the carefully applied lipstick right off her mouth. There was no way she was going to get away from him tonight. Seduction was a game he knew how to play. He fully intended to turn up the heat and activate all the burners. He knew they had to go to this party, but he wanted to give her something to think about all evening. His mouth became more demanding and his hands gave the kiss more punch by roaming all over her back and up her sides to the swell of her breasts.

“You got anything on under there?” he whispered, although he was afraid if she said no, he would completely lose his head.

“Who are you, the underwear police?” She smiled wickedly, planting quick little kisses on Alex’s lips. “I think I’ll just keep that little bit of intelligence to myself.” There. That should give him something to think about all evening, she thought. Between the two of them, they appeared to have a lot to think about all evening.

Skye started to pull away, but for every move she had, he had a counter move. He was a man with seduction on his mind, and decided to take inventory of her underwear situation as best he could through the thin fabric.

Just when he was sure she was sufficiently melted, he pulled back. She gave a small moan of disappointment and nearly begged for more. To hell with duty and justice and ...her eyes came open and refocused. What was she thinking? She had work to do. Bloody hell.

She pulled away from him slowly and reluctantly. Trying to get her equilibrium back. “You want some wine, or would you just like some ice for your pants? Both are over there by the bar. I have to go fix my make-up again.”

“Complaining?”

“Hell, no. Just grabbing an excuse to leave the room so I can compose myself in private.”

Laughing, he went over and poured himself a glass of wine while she went into the bedroom. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the lipstick off his own lips. He stared at the color and thought about how he might preserve the fabric. For sure, he wasn't going to have it laundered. God, he was getting sappy.

## *They fight...*

Skye leaned casually against the car, one leg propped up against the bumper. It was the kind of provocative pose one sees on calendars in car repair shops across the nation. She had no idea what a picture she made in the moonlight. She looked all business as she kept her eyes on the main house. “Damn it, where are those warrants? They could be shredding in there.”

“It's after 1:00 a.m., I would say there's a lot of bedding in there. Not shredding,” said Alex.

No reaction. And he thought that one was pretty good. Skye had on a midnight blue one-piece jumpsuit that fit her like second skin. Her gun was tucked into a holster at the small of her back.

“You get those jumpsuits specially made, or are they Government Issue?”

“You talking to me?” She turned to him as if she just noticed he was there and scowled. If she thought looking fierce was going to discourage him, she was totally mistaken. It only fueled his interest and the interest of his sensual nature.

“Trying to. Well?”

“Well what?”

“I just wanted to know if you get those specially tailored?” He loved pushing her buttons.

As a matter of fact, one of her dearest friends had them custom made, but she didn't think he needed to know that. “What are you now, my fashion consultant? What's your point?”

“I don't really have one except that you look absolutely ravishing in it.” He smiled a devastating smile meant to hit her heart. It did, but she wasn't going to let it in. Not a chance. No way. God, he said some unbelievably lovely things at the most unexpected times. She clamped ruthlessly down on the fluttery, traitorous feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“It’s just a goddamn jumpsuit.”

“Then it must be the body inside.” Now that would have worked on all the other ladies he had ever known.

“Like you’re ever going to see it again.” She made a little sarcastic noise in her throat and turned back to the house.

“Please. Don’t take away my reason for living.” He came a little closer when she pushed herself off the car and went over to the open window of the car.

She reached into the front seat of the car, deliberately letting the fabric stretch over her firm, round butt.

Skye heard him moan out loud and almost...almost...smiled. Damn it. She wasn’t going to let him get to her. She straightened out the expression on her face and it was perfectly impassive when she reached for a basket of fruit on the passenger side. Alex was treated to another eyeful before she straightened up and went back to leaning against the car. He took another step forward.

Skye had snagged an apple and was polishing it slowly, rubbing it along the outside of her jumpsuit against her abdomen.

“Lucky fruit,” he said as he watched her slowly move it to her lips.

“You should see what I can do with a banana.” She raised her eyebrows. This was good. She was getting playful. Her natural good humor was a formidable force...and his ally.

*He was nearly next to her now. “Oh, to be an apple. Maybe if something happens to me tonight and someone gets a lucky shot, I can come back as your apple.”*

When he saw her unconsciously stiffen, he could have kicked himself. Damn, he wanted the words back as soon as he said them.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. That was really the wrong thing to say,” he said in a gentle, sympathetic tone. He felt bad for hurting her, but the fact that she reacted like that gave him renewed hope. If she truly didn’t care what happened to him, then why did she go so rigid and still? He saw her shake it off and resume her casual air.

She bit into the apple and chewed. She really didn’t want to care, but she was hopelessly attracted to him. She wasn’t over her anger. After all, what he did to her was monumental. Still, when he talked about something happening to him, it chilled her to the bone. It should have strengthened her resolve to keep him at arms length, but somehow, it was melting it.

She took another bite and noticed he had stopped talking. She turned and caught him staring at her.

“What?”

He just continued to stare. What she was doing to him. Leaning there. In that over-the-top sexy jumpsuit; biting into an apple like a modern day Eve. Well if he was going to fall out of the Garden of Eden, by God, he was going to enjoy his last moments. He started to reach for her.

“What?” she said watching him like a cat. “You want a bite of my apple?”

“No, actually I want a bite of your neck.”

“Go to hell!”

“Been there, it wasn’t so hot.”

“And you think that was a clever comeback?” asked Skye.

“Sorry, it comes from hanging with two preadolescent boys,” responded Alex.

“Well, at least they have an excuse for acting like one.”

He reached over, snatched the apple, and threw it into the trees. Alex had a great deal of patience, but he had reached his limit.

“What the hell did you do that for?” asked Skye.

Instead of answering her, he pulled her to him and kissed her. After her first rigid response, her arms went around his neck in apparent surrender. He should have sensed the attack coming, but he was too caught up by the feel of her soft, full lips, and her stiff, but wonderful body against his.

Skye’s foot instinctively came around the back of his leg and she pushed. At the same time she took his arm and twisted it behind his back as he went down. She flipped him, pinning him with her knee up against his lower spine and bending his arm further up his back. It all happened in the blink of an eye. Alex was down in the grass, smelling the sweet, dewy fragrance of it with the woman of his dreams on his back. It just didn’t get any better than this.

While uncomfortable, the position wasn’t painful. She was definitely holding back a bit. How sweet.

Alex wondered if he was just a little perverted, because he was really, really getting turned on by this. He was just about ready to tell her, when he had a better idea. He thought he would show her. He bent his knees and used his superior size and strength and her desire not to inflict real damage to his back, to reverse his position. She was still on top of him, but she was sitting on his lap and he had her fingers wrapped in his.

Skye’s jumpsuit was very thin and so was his. She felt the obvious pleasure his body had with this wrestling match.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, let go,” she growled. “You’re sick.”

“Just keep moving, will you? Only could you move more rapidly in an up and down motion.” He was laughing now and making little sexy movements with

his hips. He had his hands around her trim, firm waist. It magnified the obvious nature of his desire.

“Let me up, you asshole!” she snapped, more alarmed by her own body’s response than his movements.

“Hey, I didn’t start it.”

“You did too, you goddamn son of a bitch. You self-centered, lying, stinking sack of shit!” She tried to pull away now, but she only managed to lever them into a sitting position. She was still, very firmly planted on his obviously aroused lap. “What, all the blood from your brain drained into your...your...?”

“Do you have a problem saying penis?” Oh, he was enjoying himself now.

“No. Do you have a problem being one?”

“God, you’re sexy when you talk like that. It really turns me on.” They rolled over once more. Now he was the one on top and he had her arms pinned above her head. He decided that now might be a good time to give her a thought-provoking kiss. He touched her lips with his. When he didn’t get any resistance, he lowered himself over her and deepened the kiss. She let him in. Her hips moved up and down exciting him and fanning the flames of his desire. Her capitulation seemed imminent. She couldn’t fight him and her body. Wrong. The man just didn’t learn.

He nearly passed out as Skye’s knee came up ruthlessly between his legs. He immediately took a defensive posture and slowly rolled off of her. He went into a semi-fetal position. He couldn’t even breathe for a full thirty seconds. Couldn’t get any air in his lungs.

“Tell Mr. Penis, Mr. Knee says hello!” she growled and neatly rolled away from him.

He just lay there for a while on his back, trying to control his breathing. Suddenly, she went from triumphant to contrite. She wanted him off her, but not immobilized. They were expecting a warrant soon, for God’s sake.

She rolled over on her side and then sat up, looking at him trying to catch his breath.

“Uh, sorry. I didn’t mean to get so rough. It’s just that, well...” she started to giggle, “I do have a temper, I guess. And. Well. Are you okay?” She was laughing hard now. She crawled over to him, stood up and offered her hand. Still laughing. Alex scowled up at her. Women had no idea.

“Here, let me help you up.”

“I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to get up again,” he said through clenched teeth. But he took her firm hand and heaved himself up. He stood for a while with his hands on his knees. “Next time go for a head shot, will you?”

This struck her as very funny and she had another fit of the giggles. “That’s what I thought I was doing. At least I thought I was going for the brain center.” She was really enjoying herself now.

Even though his crotch was burning, the sound of her laughter was the medicine he needed. It put her one step closer to him whether she realized it or not.

He straightened up gingerly and watched as she looked at him with shining eyes.

“Come here,” said Alex, looking her up and down.

“Oh no. If you think I’m going to give you the opportunity to pull me down again, you’re an idiot.”

He stood there with the moon giving light to his beautiful face. His hair was mussed and was moving slightly in the breeze. He wore it long and it gave him the look of a highwayman. All she wanted to do was go over and kiss him, touch him, ravish him. There was definitely a part of her that liked the feel of him again as they rolled around on the ground. She was hot and sweaty and wet and she needed a few moments to corral those familiar feelings and put them away where they belonged.

He blew out a lungful of air and stretched his back.

“That was fun.”

“You started it,” she repeated weakly. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. I think I’ll live.” He wanted for all the world to rub the sore spots, but didn’t dare touch them, or she’d go off again. He liked her laughter. Found it to be music to his ears. But there was a limit.

He smiled at her and started for her again. “You’ll regret that when you want a baby and we find you knocked all the little guys out of competition. I know for a fact, I heard them screaming retreat. How are they supposed to swim to glory when you scare...”

She stared at him with such a thunderstruck look on her face; he stopped in mid sentence and laughed out loud.

“What are you talking about?” she said finally,

“Didn’t Hazel tell you about...you know,” he smiled playfully, “the birds and the bees? The egg and the sperm? It’s how babies are made.”

“Are you a lunatic?” She was too stunned to even back away when he reached for her. Too shocked to resist when he kissed her gently.

“You do want babies, don’t you?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she asked breathlessly. He could actually feel her shudder. “Why are you talking this way?”

“Because I’m in love with you. I have been since I saw you walking though the terminal of Dulles.” The words just popped out of him, like a cork from champagne. He hadn’t intended to be so blunt. But there it was. His cards were on the table.

‘No, no, no, no,’ her mind screamed at her. While his words slammed into her and surrounded her, she forced back that little lick of pleasure working its way up her spine. She was ruthless to that budding feeling of joy, telling it to back off. You’ll not let this affect you. You’ll not respond. The voice whispered inside her. He said he loves you. He loves you. Loves you. You.

She continued to stare at him incredulously. Her eyes registered horror. He could feel her denial, could almost hear her rejection of his heart.

So, he just stared at her with his intense blue eyes exploding with passion, and just a hint of humor. He hadn’t meant to say it, but now she would have to deal with it. And from her expression, the only way to go from here was up.

Finally she couldn’t stand the tension anymore. She broke eye contact first and brushed the dirt from the front of her jumpsuit in quick, angry strokes.

“Oh for crying out loud. Aren’t you the romantic. Grab me, take me down, roll around in the dirt, babble about babies, then throw in a little love talk. How am I supposed to react to that?”

“I hadn’t meant to just blurt it out, but I left the candles and soft music in my other jacket.” He put his hand on her cheek. Just a light touch. Now wasn’t the time to press it, to pressure her. He would give her time to think. To assimilate. To accept.

“Look, this isn’t the time or place for this,” she said. But she didn’t shake his hand free.

“This is the perfect time and place for this.”

“We’re waiting for a goddamn warrant.”

“So?” asked Alex.

“So? So? We just can’t talk about...about feelings here, that’s all,” answered Skye.

“We are talking about it here,” said Alex, reasonably.

“Well, stop it.”

“Why, is this a ‘no love’ zone or something?”

“No. You really are a crazy man.” She was actually backing away from him.

“Maybe it’s your heart that’s the ‘no love’ zone.”

“Don’t even go there. Just back off.”

“No.”

“No?” She was incredulous. “No?”

“You may be able to control your feelings. Turn them on and off. But pardon me if I can’t.” Suddenly his eyes flashed fury. He lowered the hand that was on her cheek and started brushing off the dirt and grass from his own clothes. If he didn’t keep his hands busy, he was either going to embrace her unwilling body, or strangle her.

“God. Where is that damn warrant? We should be halfway through the wall by now,” she snapped as she looked down the road. She really needed to end this conversation. Headlights would be greatly appreciated now.

“Quit trying to change the subject.”

“Quit trying to change me.” There. That stopped him. He just stared at her for a moment.

“Christ. This has to be one of the strangest conversations ever uttered on this planet. Can we just rewind back to the apple?” he asked in a hopeful voice that was filled with an absurdly affable tone.

For some reason that struck Skye as funny as hell. A little snort of laughter escaped her.

“What was that?” His smile was warm and noncommittal. Friendly.

“Just letting some air out.”

“And you wonder why I love you? You’re the most incredible package. Come on.” He came closer, as if that little sound was an invitation. He was crowding into her personal space. “Come on.” He gently bumped up against her and planted a quick peck on her lips. Lips that were quivering with the effort not to smile. “Admit that you want me.” He didn’t embrace her but his hands rubbed up and down her arms. “A little.”

“Okay. Okay.” She sighed broadly. There were limits. Even to her iron will. She looked him straight in the eye. She never did shy away from either a fight or capitulation.

“Here’s the deal. I’ll work with you and in the spirit of tolerance and good will, I’ll do so without animosity. We can work out our differences amicably.”

“Okay...” he drew out the word. Even though she made it sound like a formal contract, he would take what he could get.

“I’ll admire your talent.”

“Talent. Check.”

“I’ll be duly impressed by your considerable mental acuity.” She smiled.

“Mental acuity. Is that like brains?”

“Yes, that’s like brains,” she snorted.

“Brains. Check.”

“I’ll continue to laugh at your absurd manner and your stupid jokes.”

“You’ll continue to be entertained by my urbane style and astounding wit. Check.”

“I’ll communicate with you in a cordial manner.” Her lips were twitching, winning the battle to smile at his absurd and urbane manner.

“Cordial. Check.”

She wished he would quit being so darn cute. “You really are cute.” It was out of her mouth before she could stop it. She really hadn’t intended to say that. But he took it up and put it in the agreement.

“Cute. Check.” He liked how her face and voice were softening. He knew she hadn’t meant to say cute. It was a wonderful feeling to have her just blurt out what she was thinking. It was so rare for her to spontaneously say what came into her head. She was so guarded. So controlled. Cute wasn’t really what he had in mind. But he would take it. He smiled. Cutely, he thought.

“Maybe even I’ll allow a bit of lust to creep in. You are, after all, one incredible, edible package.” It was the cute smile that finally did her in.

“Edible. Check.” He stared at her. His love was pouring out of his eyes and he lifted his eyebrows expectably. This was getting better and better.

He momentarily mesmerized her. She stared back at him. So close. So wonderful. So. What? Suddenly she stopped and got very quiet, very serious. He knew the moment she closed back up. He could see it in her face, her eyes, her posture.

“I just will never, ever allow myself to fall in love with you.” Her jaw set in a stubborn line. Her eyes went cold. He heard a trace of regret there, but it was ruthlessly erased by her determination and single-mindedness. “There. That’s the deal.”

*Will they ever get together?*

*Read Flight Into Danger and find out!*