

CHAPTER 1

“Love is perhaps the only glimpse we are permitted of eternity.” ~ Helen Hayes ~

Alexander Springfield waited outside the gates of the International Terminal at Dulles Airport. He knew Captain Skyler Madison would soon be shooting through the doors leading from the security checkpoint area and into her new career, her new life, and the arms of her future husband. Husband. God, he liked the sound of that. They were going to be married and he wanted her to set the date by the end of the evening. She'd been skittish for the last few weeks, committed to the idea, but not without doubts. It made him edgy that she had the whole Atlantic to fly over with all that time to think. On the other hand, even though she might not admit it, tonight she'd be feeling sentimental because this was her last flight for International Airlines.

Glancing up at the board, he saw that Skye was due to land in a few minutes. Her departure from International was going to be bittersweet. She was the youngest pilot ever to sit in the left seat of an aircraft for a major airline and one of only a handful of women. It was something she was proud of and had worked hard to achieve. Becoming captain was all about skill, experience, talent, training, and the total number of hours logged in the air.

Skye had it all and even though she was young, she was far from inexperienced. Her father, an avid private pilot, had her in the cockpit from the time she could toddle to the plane, and she soloed cross-country before she went on her first date. It was a passion that helped her cope with her parent's tragic death when she was fifteen. Flying was the only thing that could fill the wrenching void, so she racked up an incredible number of hours throughout her teenage years. In addition to her flight experience, she held a degree in Aeronautical Engineering from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, one of the finest aviation schools in the country. She could not only fly a jet, she could take one apart and put it back together.

Carter and Bill, two of her best friends and diehard party animals, had everyone at his townhouse waiting to celebrate her new career. Within the next few weeks she would be piloting a Gulfstream for Skyward Corporation, his newly formed consolidated company. Her dream machine. Hopefully that would put her in a soft and happy state of mind. He would pull out the calendar and make a few suggestions.

If her sentimentality didn't work, then the amount of champagne the guys had ordered might. He was an attorney and knew about diminished capacity, but what the hell. Whatever worked. Maybe he could talk her into eloping. Smiling, he let that thought develop. By this time tomorrow night she could be his wife. Quick, spontaneous, hot. Just like their courtship. The woman lived for high speed and risk. It could work.

Alex looked out the window and up into the deep blue sky. A perfect day for flying. His mind conjured up a picture of his beautiful fiancée as she would look coming through that door. She was tall, slender, and an absolute knockout in her tailored captain's uniform. She'd be wearing her professional look since she was just getting out of the cockpit of the Boeing 767. With her captain's hat pulled down over her forehead and her regal, confident way of walking, she always created quite a stir as she strode through the terminal. She never seemed to notice the appreciative stares, but Alex was once assigned to shadow her, so he saw the impact of her captivating charisma while following in her wake. He smiled. He'd been immediately caught up in that incredibly intense wake. He'd lost his heart the minute he saw her. And now she was his.

Alex impatiently looked at his watch again. On the seat beside him was a bouquet of her favorite white gardenias and in his pocket was a small jewelry box from Tiffany's. Since Skye had accepted his proposal a few weeks earlier, he was determined to put a ring on her finger...to tie it up and make it official. It was his plan to have her wearing it when they arrived home.

He looked out the window again and decided to change the slide in his mind to Skye as he'd last seen her. She wasn't an early riser, hated waking up in fact, so she'd still been in bed when he'd left for the office two days before. She'd been warm and naked, her beautiful, well-muscled shoulders

exposed, those hands tucked under her cheek as she lay on her good side. Because she'd been recovering from an injury to her ribs, she still favored that side.

Both he and her doctor thought she was pushing it by flying so soon, but she was determined. Alex was anxious for her to complete this last flight so she could concentrate on full recovery while outfitting the new corporate Gulfstream to her specifications. A flash of concern fingered through the pleasant feeling. Would she be fatigued and in any pain from her long flight? Her chest still bore the scars of her brush with death.

Frowning, tensing, Alex shook that part of the picture out of his mind. This was his daydream and he wasn't going to revisit his anxiety over her injuries and recovery. Instead he concentrated on her lovely face surrounded by long, wheat colored curly hair in complete disarray from a night of making love. He couldn't get enough of her most nights and that night he'd known she would be away from him for a few days. He'd spent the time drinking her in so he would have a reserve for the dry spell.

Alex could feel the desire run through his body. Maybe he should move to the next slide. No. He relaxed and enjoyed the feelings the replay treated him to. She was a tireless lover. Her physical conditioning, her passion, her love all fueled her. Okay, he thought as he shifted in his seat. Time to move on. He could feel his pulse accelerating and his lower body dancing to its beat. The people around him may not be able to read his mind, but they would soon be able to read his body if he continued this hot, steamy mental slide show.

Checking his watch again he was surprised to see little time had passed. The minutes were now crawling by. He looked around at the other people waiting for passengers. His eyes traveled over the faces, many of them smiling in anticipation of seeing someone special come into view. His eyes stopped and rested on an attractive, older woman with her nose in a book. He looked in amusement at the cover. It had a man and a woman in a full body embrace, both of them with a look of rapture on their faces. Shifting again, his eyes traveled up and he smiled broadly when he saw whose nose it was buried in the book. Staring and grinning, he waited for her to look up.

Amanda Mitchell was an agile, alert, beautiful woman of 70. She was absolutely hooked on romance novels ever since her retirement and brought one with her to the airport to read while waiting for her grandson. She was getting to the really good part, where the hero and the heroine finally discover they couldn't live without each other. It was the pay-off for reading thirty-five pages of wonderfully tense dialog. Come on. Come on. Just snatch her and plant one on her, boy. Or in this case, because this series was a bit racier, plant one *in* her, boy. When they finally embraced in a passionate kiss and he carried her to his bed, she sighed. Now that was satisfying. Not that she didn't get satisfaction at home, but when she dove into one of these especially hot novels, well...she might be 70, but all her parts were completely functional and could be turned on full.

Closing the book and checking her watch, she saw she had successfully passed the half-hour wait. Her eyes roamed to the cover of the book, onto the fabulous face of the hero. He had a look about him that could melt glass. She always thought heroes in the romance genre were just a bit over the top. Too tall, too dark, too handsome. She blew out a puff of air.

Amanda did remember one man, though...a lawyer she met on a flight from London a few months back. He had beautiful blue eyes and a wonderful, hypnotic voice. Actually it was her little secret, but whenever she read a romance novel now, it was his face she saw. They had a very pleasant evening and slept together after only a few hours acquaintance...fully clothed of course and strapped into first class seats of a Boeing 767. The dreams she had that night...my goodness. Hot and steamy. And it had nothing to do with hormone deficiency or hot flashes. She'd blush right now if she were the blushing kind. She remembered that he played football for the University of Wisconsin and could see that he was still fit and obviously successful. She was a trained observer and he was an eye-ful.

Adding up the clues, she knew he was completely smitten with the female pilot of the craft...actually the captain. Amanda had often wondered what happened to that little affair. The captain had come back to use the lavatory that night while dreamboat was sleeping. She just stood looking at him with such tenderness and affection on her face that it made Amanda's romantic heart soar like the metal bird she was in. The captain was tall and trim and striking in her uniform, but it

was the look on her face that made her so compelling. In that unguarded moment, her face reflected her timeless love for the sleeping man.

Needless to say, the man the captain stood drinking in with her eyes was dazzling...his handsome face was caught in the soft illumination of the plane's night lighting. He'd taken off his jacket and tie, and rolled up the sleeves to reveal beautifully muscled arms. They were folded over his broad chest and the steady, deep breathing of slumber made them move slightly up and down. God, what a picture he made. The pilot's eyes softened as she lingered and indulged herself in the best show in the air.

The lawyer and the pilot. Now that was a title for a romance novel. She sighed again, looked up and stared into the smiling blue eyes of her daydream. At first she thought she had conjured him up from her mind. Then she thought she might be hallucinating, but her mind wasn't *that* feeble. When she focused on his smiling lips and look of recognition, she realized it *was* the lawyer. She smiled back, absolutely delighted.

"Hello Seat 6A...are the flowers for your pilot?" she asked gaily. He was more casual than the last time she saw him when he had been dressed in business attire. Today, he was wearing jeans and a light cotton v-neck sweater, giving her just a peek at the strong neck and shoulders lying beneath the bulky fabric. He looked absolutely edible.

"Hi 6B." He was pleased to see her. The night he rode in the passenger section of his future wife's aircraft was special to him and Amanda was a part of that. They got a little tipsy on some fine Scotch and shared war stories. She was a retired Washington D.C. private investigator. The tales of some of her cases were captivating and so was she.

"How good to see you." She took his offered hand. "And from the look of you, I bet there's something more for your pilot in your pocket." She gave him a little wink.

He laughed with pure pleasure. "You're spooky, Amanda."

"Not spooky, my dear. Years and years of investigative work has given me the sight. Let's see." Amanda tapped her chin and smiled broadly. She began ticking off her observations. "Even though you're trying to project casual nonchalance, your body is a bit tense...a positive tension but on the edge. Anticipatory. You have white gardenias—her favorite as I recall. Your captain flies the London corridor and it's probably her plane coming in. Of course, there is also the fact that the heat you two put out the last time I saw you nearly caused the fuselage to melt and is probably still roaring in your fireplace. Also there's a slight bulge in your pocket, too slight to be...well." She looked down at her romance novel. "To be the obvious affirmation of your manly desire."

"You must have been really good at your job before you retired."

"That I was, young man."

Pulling the box out of his pocket, he handed it to her.

"I can also see why you were dying to show it off," she said as she opened the box and saw a brilliant princess cut diamond set in what looked like tiny wings. "Oh Alex, I'm nearly 70. You have to prepare someone with an antique heart before you spring this kind of thing on her." She fanned herself vigorously.

"Her sister helped me with the design...do you think she'll like it?"

"It's perfect...a dream. She'll love it. Elegant, strong, one of a kind. Just like her. As my grandson would say, you're going to blow her away."

She reluctantly closed the box and handed it back. "Does she know?"

"About the ring, no. About her status as my future wife, yes."

"That's so wonderful." And romantic, her inner voice whispered. So perfectly, beautifully romantic. "A great deal must have happened since I saw you last."

She had no idea, he thought. "Waiting for someone special?" he asked, taking the ring and changing the subject.

"Sure am." Her eyes twinkled. "As handsome as you, I would say. Not quite as tall, but smart as a whip."

"He's a lucky man."

"Actually, he's only fifteen. My grandson is coming home from an advanced-study program at Oxford University."

“Wow. I’m impressed. Must take after his grandma.”

“I’d like to think so. Anyway, fill me in on your romance while we wait, huh?”

He gave her a version that was heavily edited, but she was more than satisfied. His eyes kept traveling to the sign near the door. Even though the plane should have been on the ground ten minutes before, it was still listed in transit.

Why hadn’t she landed? He wouldn’t have given it a second thought if he weren’t so eager to see Skye. It was amazing to him how much he missed her. Four months ago, he didn’t even know she existed. Now it seemed he’d been waiting for her his whole life. When they met, there was an immediate, powerful, undeniable attraction. Skye’s problems with making a commitment were daunting and it had taken a relentless campaign before she agreed to make their relationship permanent. But there had been no denying the perfection of the chemistry or its combustible quality. He needed every bit of the heat to melt the steel she had constructed around her heart and now he was determined to get the ring on her finger before she changed her mind.

When he looked at his watch again, she laughed. “The passing of time is relative, isn’t it? I’ll try not to take offense with your obsession for moving time along.”

“I just want to get this ring on her finger before she comes to her senses,” said Alex.

“I’m surprised that after all these months with you she has any senses left,” Amanda laughed.

They smiled at each other and Alex was about to respond when they both felt the chill. Their smiles froze, then faded. There was an unease edging through the space around them and it rippled through them at the same moment. Tension edged with fear.

Had Alex not been so engaged in conversation with Amanda, he would have seen the uniformed officials from International Airlines enter the waiting area a few minutes earlier. Now both Amanda and Alex turned to look at them. Alex’s instincts made him suddenly alert. Immediately attentive. Amanda’s intuition wasn’t far behind. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

The officials were whispering with a few of the security guards and were about to make an important announcement. An announcement that was the nightmare of every airline official in the industry...and every friend, family member, and associate waiting for an anticipated landing. The gathered assortment of people stopped talking, turned, and stared at the grim-faced pair.

“Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Paula Frost and this is Charles Bushman. We would appreciate it if you’re waiting for passengers and crew from Flight 127, to please come with us. We would like to talk with you about the status of the flight.”

Alex could see the anxiety around the eyes and mouth of Frost and Bushman. He knew what was coming and so did the people around them. They had seen this kind of thing acted out several times on television. It was the first step in the devastation of families and friends. The preliminary announcement leading to the horrific collective grief of a plane crash.

Both Alex and Amanda shot out of their chairs as the people began to press forward.

“Did the plane crash?” asked a hysterical woman standing next to the counter. “My husband was aboard that flight! Oh my God! Oh my God!”

She started screaming his name, which set off a cacophony of sound, emotion, and panic. Frost and Bushman tried to reassure the horrified crowd of men, women, and children...all bonded now by a common fear.

“Please, please, remain calm. We will share with you all the information we have on this flight. Come with us while we wait for more data. Ladies and gentlemen, we can’t deal with all your questions here. Everything in the sky is in excellent hands. Captain Madison is one of our most experienced pilots and she has a first rate crew. We’re simply listing this flight as overdue at this time. Please follow us.”

Several more officials from the airline obviously placed in charge of crowd control and keeping the people relatively calm, joined them. They worked as a team to gather the terrified people into a private room in the terminal.

Amanda turned her stricken eyes to Alex but he had vanished. She looked around. The white gardenias were sitting forgotten on the chair. Right next to the romance novel...symbols of what now seemed so remote and extraneous. Her grandson’s name came out as a whisper...then as a prayer. “Fisher...oh God...”

Alex refused to let in the panic that was attacking him from all sides. He knew as well as everyone else sitting there what this protocol meant. The plane was not overdue, it was missing. Conclusion: there was a high probability it was down. In the ocean. His brain wanted to scream crash, but he ruthlessly tuned out the ugly, treacherous voice.

He had to move. Move. Now. It was the only way he could control the terror that was threatening to fold in on him. He didn't know what happened, but he did know how he could start getting answers and it was not from the trained spokesperson at the airlines. Nothing from official sources. Flipping open his cell phone, he called the townhouse. When his housekeeper Cynthia answered he could hear sounds of the party in the background.

"Springfield residence. Make that Springfield and Madison residence," she said gaily. Alex swallowed hard. His breathing was coming in shallow gasps and a sharp pain was beginning to work its way up his chest.

"Cynthia," he started.

"Mr. Springfield! Everything is set here. If I can just keep Hazel out of the kitchen and Jason and Al out of the candy dish, I think we have it all under control. Just a minute, I can't hear you, everyone is shouting at me. They want to know if you're on your way home. Let me get to another phone. Here Jason, talk to Uncle Alex while I get to the extension in the library. I'll tell you when to hang up."

"Hi Uncle Alex," said 10-year-old Jason. He and his brother Al were down from New York for a visit. "Aunt Hazel is teaching me card tricks. Mrs. Cleveland said Aunt Hazel has to stay fifty feet away from the kitchen and she has to deal from the top of the deck only." Hazel was Skye's great aunt. She and Cynthia had become fast friends and allies, but Hazel's disastrous forays into cooking were legendary, and whenever possible they found other things for the 80-year-old former Las Vegas dealer to do. "Do you have Aunt Skye with you? She promised to buy me a Scotland Yard T-shirt. I wanna be a cop...just like Dad and she...she said she could get me one. Is she there? Can I talk to her?"

Alex was nearly brought to his knees with the poignancy of this child's eager desire to talk with Skye.

"Hang up, Jason," said Cynthia breathlessly as she came back on the line.

"Okay, Mrs. Cleveland. Tell Aunt Skye I have kisses to trade." The phone line went quieter as he hung up his extension. They always did what Mrs. Cleveland said. She was the keeper of the cookies.

"Whew!" said Cynthia. "It's been hard to contain those boys. It's a good thing you didn't take them with you."

"Cynthia." He couldn't get it out clearly on the first try, so he cleared his pulsating throat and took a deeper breath. "Cynthia."

She heard it in his voice and the vibration of it moved straight from him to her. Through her.

"What is it? Did Captain Madison overdo it? I knew she should have taken a few more weeks to convalesce. Is she ill?"

"No...no. I don't know." The enormity of what he had to tell her thudded through him, making him hesitate...as if stalling would make the reality dissolve and blow away.

"What?" Her confused voice was now edged with fear. "Mr. Springfield? What is it? Alex?"

He couldn't just let her stand there tortured by his silence so he forced the words past his constricted throat. "Cynthia, listen to me. Skye's plane has been listed as overdue."

"She's late?" asked Cynthia, hopefully. Desperately.

"No. I get the impression it's far more serious than that. I want you to find Jim Stryker for me."

"Oh, God." Her voice was small and was starting to shake. "What's happening?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out."

Jim Stryker was Skye's godfather. He was also Alex and Skye's boss. Alex was indeed an extremely successful corporate attorney and businessman and Skye was a captain piloting for International Airlines, but in addition to their 'day jobs,' they were both highly trained special agents for the Intelligence Branch of the Justice Department. Now Alex needed Jim, not Skye's godfather and surrogate dad, but Jim Stryker, Director of Intelligence. Together they would cut through the red

tape and get to the inside information he needed. Information that would either put him into immediate action or plunge him into instant, absolute, bottomless despair.

“Alex? What is it? Cynthia is as white as a sheet.” Jim’s voice was brusque and concerned. “Did Skyler change her mind again? That girl is going to kill me. Let me talk with her.”

“Jim, she’s not...it’s not...,” Alex began, then shook himself into a straight line, calling up his training and forcing his mind to remain focused. “I’m still at the airport. Skye’s plane has been officially listed as overdue. They’re taking the families and friends to a special room now.”

It took only a few beats for Jim to reign in his shock and play his role. “This is serious. I’ll inform the people here and tell them to stay put until they hear from us. Then meet me at the entrance to the control tower. I’ll make a few phone calls on the way and gain entry.” His voice was steady although Alex’s trained ear could hear the anxiety in the outer edges of his tone.

“Hurry,” was all Alex could say before he punched off. He leaned against the wall and put his head back for a minute. He needed to get his heartbeat and breathing under control. Closing his eyes against the unrelenting tightness around them, the terminal faded and he saw images.

Skye, his mind whispered...Skye. He saw her. Skye smiling and laughing. Skye sleeping in his arms. Skye filled with fury kicking out and subduing an adversary. Skye over him, inflamed with passion. Skye as she might be right now...was right now... captain of her craft...her eyes alert and sharp, her hands steady and competent, her mind flying spontaneously to every possible alternative. Polished, professional, driven. No panic, steady, focused, determined.

The very best person to have in an emergency, he thought. His fearless fiancée and professional partner...as hard and multi-faceted as the diamond in his pocket. Alex’s heart pounded so painfully, he had to rub his chest. She had to be all right. She had to be alive. They’d come through too much for it to be over.

“Skye.” The sound came out softly through his lips. “Skye.” His need for her was a powerful and tangible force throbbing through him in rhythm with his heartbeat. His love. His life.

Then he felt it. A faint, unmistakable current of electricity. It flowed through him, giving him a jolt. Starting in his chest, capturing his heart, his soul, then pounding into his brain. It went from red-hot to a fabulous soothing warmth...touching him, blanketing him with a comforting undertone of incredible relief. It was Skye. He could feel her...then he heard her voice in his head.

“Alex. J’ai besoin de vous. Venir pair moi. J’taime. I need you. Come for me. I love you.”

His eyes flew open. It was her voice...not just a memory or echo. He was sure of it. Looking around he half expected to see her standing next to him. Containing the disappointment, he concentrated on the voice. He could still hear the sounds of the airport, the incessant intercom, the passengers calling their greetings, the people talking on their cell phones, the bustle...but beneath it, in a breath of air, in the silence beneath the sounds, he heard it again.

“J’ai besoin de vous. Venir pair moi. J’taime.”

Imagination? Not a chance. It was a voice. Her voice. A whisper in his head. A message just for him. Skye spoke five languages fluently but she usually saved her French for love...for him. When she used the melody and pulse of the language, the words didn’t matter. Their sound and sensuality always made his heart melt and his temperature flare. He felt the connection, heard her voice, felt her heart beating. Strong. Alive. In trouble. But alive.

His certainty completely overpowered the dread, controlled the shock, and made the terror manageable. It cleared his head and that was what he needed to get through this. To get to Skye.

Come for me. It was the call from the hunter to her guardian. He narrowed his eyes and pushed himself off the wall with renewed energy and resolve. He was going to find her. Alex Springfield, successful corporate attorney and real estate investor no longer looked like a millionaire or a lawyer, he looked like a soldier ready for battle. All Special Agent Springfield needed now was information and a plan.