



DANIELLE STEEL

Accidental Heroes

A Novel

Dear Friends,

Accidental Heroes was an exciting and challenging book to write because the action and interactions happen on so many levels. It is inspired by, and reminiscent of, some of the challenges of traveling today, and at the same time it is reassuring, because it reminds us of how many agencies are involved to safeguard us when we travel. Mishaps can happen anywhere (you can slip in the bathtub at home too, or trip over your dog when you take him for a walk). But from the time we enter the security lines at any airport—which seem so annoying as we take off our shoes, get slowed down as we wrestle other passengers for plastic bins to put our belongings in—we forget that those security measures are there for our safety (not just to annoy us), and that they do protect us from untoward things happening. And beyond that, there is airport security watching what goes on in the entire airport, Homeland Security and all the federal agencies, and highly trained people under that umbrella who are actually like guardian angels, unseen by us, watching over us even before we take off, during our flights, and until we leave the airport when we reach our destination. It really is reassuring.

And in the case of something unexpected happening, or even suspected, it is fascinating to know how many agencies and skilled people are involved to solve the mystery and the problem before something happens. That's good to remember too.

I was fascinated by the different personalities involved, with the characters in the book. The very, very capable senior Homeland Security agent, at JFK Airport, whose confidence has been shaken by a recent incident, so he has to get it right this time. The psychiatrist who helps evaluate situations. The young female agent with multiple degrees but little experience.

The young TSA agent, a single mother, who follows her instincts and is smart enough and brave enough to do so. Passengers, police, federal agents, the fantastic female ex–Air Force pilot, the crew, and passengers on the plane.

I also wanted to honor the fact that we never know how we will react to unusual situations. The meekest among us can turn out to have the courage of a lion, and in the toughest of times, we draw on resources we didn't even know we had. Many of us turn out to be accidental heroes when we least expect it. I hope you'll enjoy the people you meet in this book, and the events that unfold as a network of people do their jobs with remarkable skill. Have a great time reading!

*Love,
Danielle Steel*

DANIELLE
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Accidental Heroes is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

By Danielle Steel

About the Author

Chapter One

Bernice Adams woke up, as she usually did, just before the alarm went off, so she didn't wake her six-year-old son, Toby. Some maternal instinct pulled her out of her dreams before the buzzer sounded. She smiled as she looked at him sleeping next to her in the queen-sized bed that had been a lucky find in a secondhand furniture store. She'd bought a new mattress for it that they had tried out together, and Toby said it felt like a cloud. It was a stretch for their budget, but she decided it was worth it. Toby needed to get to school rested so he could pay attention and do well. She wanted him to have every advantage she could give him.

She had managed to furnish the small one-bedroom apartment with hand-me-down furniture and what she found on the sidewalk on Tuesday nights, when people left out big furniture items they didn't want, for garbage pickup the next morning. It was always a treasure hunt. She had found her night tables that way, a blue dresser, and the kitchen table they ate on every day. The Formica was chipped around the edges, but the bright red looked cheerful in their tiny kitchen, barely big enough for her to cook in. She had painted the walls and some of the furnishings herself, and found the living room rug at Goodwill. All put together, it looked homey and cozy, and she had framed the Spider-Man posters Toby loved for their bedroom, and there was one of Batman and Robin over their bed.

Bernice was a single mother. Toby's father had taken off when she got pregnant at nineteen. She'd been working as a waitress by day, and going to City College of New York by night. She hadn't seen him since, although she'd heard that he was married now and had three other children. She

wanted no contact with him. He'd been a smooth talker, she'd fallen for him, and the pregnancy was an accident. He had disappeared as fast as he could. She'd had Toby when she was twenty, and had managed parenthood on her own ever since.

Bernice was a survivor. More than that, she wanted to make something of herself, and set an example for her son, to show him that he didn't have to be limited by the world he was born into, and with an education, he could have a good job and a good life one day. It was what she aspired to herself.

She'd been raised in foster homes after her parents died when she was in her early teens. Some of the homes were awful, and some of them were okay, but she was determined that nothing like it would ever happen to her boy. Bernice's only relative, her brother, Clive, had been in and out of prison for a dozen years since he turned eighteen, for credit card fraud, grand theft auto, and drug dealing, all the means of making a living he had learned on the streets. She hadn't seen him since she was sixteen and he was twenty, fresh out of prison on parole. She didn't want to see him again, and he knew nothing about his nephew. Clive wasn't an evil man, and he'd been nice to her, to the best of his ability. He just didn't know how to get out of the trap he had grown up in. She wanted her life and her son's to be different.

The building they lived in was clean, and lived in by respectable families, on 125th Street. It had been built in the 1930s and must have been beautiful then. What had once been spacious, handsome apartments had been broken into small ones for low rents. Now it was shabby, and the people who had lived there, and could, had moved downtown. Other buildings near her had been renovated, and parts of her neighborhood were slowly becoming gentrified. She'd been fortunate to find an apartment she could afford on her salary. She managed to get by and take care of her son.

After graduating from City College, she had worked for TSA security at JFK International Airport for the past five years, checking passengers as they came through the lines, observing them keenly, directing them to the body-scan machines, and doing pat-downs when instructed to do so. She was also enrolled in law school online. In Bernice's mind, the secret to everything was education and hard work, and no one was going to cheat her of that. She reminded Toby of it every day, whenever she could.

She hated to leave his small, warm body, curled up against her back as she got out of bed and headed to the shower to get ready for work. When she left at four o'clock, she would leave him with her neighbor, who would take him to school with her own children. Bernice worked a 5:30 A.M. to 1:30 P.M. shift, which gave her just enough time to pick Toby up at school herself, and be with him for the rest of the day. She taught him the extra lessons he didn't have at school yet, and then did her own homework for law school after she made dinner and put him to bed. She tried to be asleep by nine-thirty or ten, since she had to get up at three-thirty to get ready for work. She ate breakfast on the train to save time. She didn't go out with friends and hadn't been to a movie in years. Her whole life was her son, her job, and her studies so that one day they'd have more than that, and he would have a real future. They talked about it a lot, even though he was only six. She talked to him like an adult and told him she was going to be a lawyer and work in a law firm downtown when she graduated. That was her dream. And dreams became realities if you worked hard enough to achieve them. She said it to Toby almost like a mantra.

She showered, had a cup of coffee, and put on her uniform. Bernice was African American. She was a pretty woman and wore her hair in neat braids tied at the nape of her neck. She had a slim figure and watched her weight, and looked nice in the TSA uniform. Several men she worked with had asked her on dates, many of them married, and she always turned them down. She'd gone out briefly with one of her single male colleagues right after she started working for TSA. It hadn't turned out well, and she hadn't made that mistake again. She hadn't had a serious date in years, or even a casual one in the last two. There would be plenty of time for that, she told herself, when she had a better job after law school. She didn't love working for TSA, but it paid the rent and bought their food, and gave her the time she needed to study for her law classes. Her schedule was good for her.

When she was dressed, she rolled Toby, still asleep, into his Spider-Man sleeping bag, carried him to the neighbor's, and knocked. She didn't ring the bell, so she wouldn't wake the other children. They didn't have to be in school until eight o'clock. Toby woke up in his mother's arms just before the door opened.

“Why do we have to get up so early?” he complained, burrowing against her and closing his eyes again. It was still dark outside and would be for several hours.

“Because I have to go to work and do my job,” she said, kissing his forehead, “and you have to go to school so that one day you can have a good job too, like a doctor or a lawyer,” she added, programming him early.

“I want to be a policeman,” he grumbled as the door opened, and their neighbor took him in her arms and smiled at Bernice. She knew what a good mother she was and admired her for it. Toby was almost back to sleep as Bernice handed him off. He had a few more hours to doze before he had to get up, have breakfast, and get dressed for school.

“Have a nice day,” their neighbor whispered and gently closed the door. She took Toby in every morning for free, as a favor to Toby’s mother. On weekend nights, Bernice often babysat her two children in exchange, and let them sleep on her couch or in the bed with Toby, and slept on the couch herself, if their mother had a big date. They did what they could to help each other, two women alone with their children. The neighbor had a son and a daughter close to Toby’s age, and the three children were best friends, which worked well too.

It was a beautiful May morning as Bernice left the building, and she thought of the church day camp she had enrolled Toby in for the summer. There would be lots of things for him to do there. She had saved enough money to pay for it by skipping lunch for five months. The money was in her bank account now, and they had already accepted him.

Bernice rushed to catch the first train she took to work every day, and arrived at the airport right on time. She put her purse in her locker, and reported for duty at JFK airport on the dot at 5:30 A.M. She didn’t love her job, but it was a good means to an end, and she reminded herself daily that it wouldn’t be forever. Once she graduated from law school, she’d have better opportunities and could look for a job in a law firm, even as a paralegal until she passed the bar.

But for now, her daily work life was rife with petty jealousies, unpleasant supervisors, and angry passengers who didn’t want to take their shoes off and complained when Bernice had to go through their bags, looking for

computers or liquids, or because of something they'd seen on the X-ray, like a can of dog food, or a suspicious object, which in most cases turned out to be nothing when they checked. They were trained to look for weapons, materials that could be combined to create explosives, or whatever seemed suspicious on the X-ray screen.

Her current supervisor, Denise Washington, was particularly disagreeable, and it was obvious that she disliked Bernice and everything she stood for. Bernice was too clean-cut and too straight-arrow, and had made the mistake of casually saying one day that she was going through law school online. Denise had been scornful and angry toward her ever since. She hated girls like Bernice, who talked about their bright future as though it were something they could just pluck off a tree. Denise knew better. She had been passed over for promotions for years and she didn't even care why anymore. In her mind, she was always getting screwed over by some ambitious young woman like Bernice, desperate to get ahead, whatever it took. She was fed up with women like her, had singled Bernice out years before, and treated her with contempt. Bernice had thought of complaining to Denise's superior but knew it wouldn't do any good, and she was sure it would make things worse. Denise was an angry, bitter woman. She talked about Bernice behind her back, just loud enough for her to hear. She hated her job, and had never done anything to try to change it. She took out her resentment and frustrations on the people she supervised. Bernice was used to the snide remarks and overt insults, and Denise's obvious disapproval of her. She was jealous of Bernice, although she could have done the same things herself if she had any interest.

Bernice took her assigned spot in the security area, while Denise glared at her, as usual. Bernice turned her attention to the early passengers heading for their flights, putting their belongings into plastic bins to pass them through the X-ray machine, and then going through the metal detectors and full-body scan in stockings or bare feet.

She saw the first flight crew roll through in uniform minutes after she got there, and noticed that, judging by the stripes on her uniform, a woman in the group was the pilot, which made Bernice smile. She liked to see that.

She thought she got a glimpse of a famous movie star, Susan Farrow, but she might have been mistaken. The woman was older than Bernice would

have expected, with oversized dark glasses, which made her hard to recognize. She was pleasant to everyone, and was dressed simply in blue jeans and a sweater. She wasn't glamorous, but seemed like a nice person, as Bernice watched her. It was one of the things she liked about her job. You never knew who you would see or what to expect on any given day. It was a pleasant distraction and made putting up with her nasty supervisor easier to bear.

Helen Smith woke up at four-thirty, to give herself time to shower and dress, have coffee, and be fully awake by the time she and the others left the midtown hotel where the flight crews of their airline stayed in New York. There was no traffic at that hour so they could leave the hotel at five-thirty in the van that came to get them, and be at the airport at six-thirty. And there would be little for Helen to attend to once they got there. The airline planned the routes for them and checked the weather. All she and the rest of the flight crew had to do was make sure that everything was mechanically in order once they were on the plane before they took off.

Helen had had a distinguished career as a pilot, and after years as an Air Force fighter pilot, she had been flying for the airline for two years. They had been the hardest years of her life.

She had a text when she woke up informing her of an equipment change, the second one relating to this flight back to San Francisco. The day before, she had been notified that she'd be flying an Airbus A380 they had on the ground in New York after a flight from London, because it needed to get to San Francisco for a flight to Tokyo. The largest Airbus, the A380 didn't normally fly between San Francisco and New York. But she was checked out for it, and was looking forward to flying it.

During the night, they had discovered a mechanical problem on the A380, and couldn't use it for the San Francisco flight after all. They had almost three hundred passengers booked for the flight, and had decided to use a new, smaller Airbus A321 for the 8 A.M. to San Francisco, and a Boeing 757 they had available for the overflow, which would take off at 8:20, so the passengers would be happy, could stick to their schedules, and

no one would get bumped due to the change of equipment. It meant they needed a second crew for the 757, Helen had been assigned the A321, which was a plane she liked to fly. It was small and easy to maneuver, and the crews liked the aircraft too. The text message she received said that she would be flying with the San Francisco crew returning to home base as planned. The only change was of the copilot, to Jason Andrews, whom she didn't know.

They informed her that Captain Connor Gray would be flying deadhead, which meant he would be flying as a courtesy passenger. He would be traveling in the cockpit with her since the flight was full and every passenger seat was sold. The text said only that he had been deactivated and retired due to a medical incident on the ground after his flight to New York two days before. The formalities of his retirement would happen in the coming days. But he was no longer cleared to fly, and after the incident wouldn't be again. The airline and FAA were strict about grave medical issues. She'd heard of him, as one of the airline's senior pilots, but they had never met. He was close to retirement age, though maybe not quite there yet, and whatever had occurred must have been serious for them to deactivate and retire him summarily halfway through a trip. She thought about it, and hoped to make his return to home base as pleasant as possible under the circumstances.

Flying with an unfamiliar copilot was standard fare for any commercial pilot, since the crews were varied and interchangeable. It made no difference to her. Some were easy to get along with, others were less pleasant, but all were skilled pilots on the first-rate airline she worked for. She flew the plane she was given to fly, just like in the military. And after years of training and experience, she could fly anything they handed her with her eyes closed. She loved her job. Flying was in her blood. Her father had been an Air Force pilot and retired as a full colonel.

Helen had been a fighter pilot for the Air Force in Iraq for several years. She and her husband had both served there, and they had decided that she would leave the Air Force and return to civilian life before his last tour ended. They both had offers from commercial airlines and, for the sake of their children, thought it was time to muster out.

It had been a big adjustment for her. She had grown up in the military, and everything about civilian life was unfamiliar to her. It was difficult at first with her husband still in the Air Force. He had been killed four months after she left, eight weeks before he was due to fly home.

She wasn't bitter about what had happened to him. He'd been shot down and taken prisoner, and he and all of his crew were killed in an incident that had received press and cries of outrage from around the world. He had been decorated posthumously by the president, and the medal he'd been given was on their mantelpiece in Petaluma where she and her children lived, less than an hour outside San Francisco, in a small, slightly dilapidated house. She had been in shock over her husband's death at first, and it had an unreal quality to it. They both knew the risks, but she never expected it to happen to him, and she had no idea how to manage civilian life without him. She had thought about reenlisting after he died, and going back to the only life she knew in the Air Force, but it wouldn't be fair to the children. They had wanted them to experience life outside the military, but not without their father. That had never been the plan. Her own father had done everything he could to help her, and stayed with the kids when she was away. A year and a half later, she was still adjusting to civilian life without Jack. It hadn't been easy for her or the kids. It was much harder than she expected, and infinitely more so as a widow.

She was forty-two years old, and the Air Force and military life were second nature to her. There was some resistance to her being a female pilot with the airline, but others had broken that barrier before her, and most of the men she flew with respected her for her flying record, particularly those who knew of her tours of duty in Iraq. Flying Airbuses between San Francisco and New York, or internationally, was a piece of cake. She had five days off coming to her when she got back to San Francisco, and had promised to take all three of her children camping. They were just a regular family now, or tried to be, with two sons in middle school and a seven-year-old daughter, even though their father had been a war hero and their mother had been a fighter pilot.

Helen hadn't made many friends in the community yet. She had little in common with the other mothers she'd met at school, and she kept to herself or spent her time off with her children. She had to be mother and father to

them now, which was double the work with two boys in Little League, and a daughter in Girl Scouts and taking hip-hop dance lessons after school. Helen questioned her decision often, about leaving the military. There were times when she missed it desperately. It had been like leaving the womb. Everything about civilian life had been a shock at first.

She had found that the only time she was comfortable in her own skin, and felt like she knew what she was doing, was when she was flying. The rest of the time, she felt like a fish out of water. She hadn't learned to be a civilian yet, but she was trying. She was living day by day. What had happened to Jack had taught her that you couldn't count on the future, or on anything. Life was a game of chance. She had nothing and no one to believe in now, except herself. And there were times when she felt like she wasn't enough for her kids—the boys especially needed their father, and all she could do now was her best, which wasn't always enough.

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Nancy Williams lay awake long before the alarm went off, trying to force herself to stay in bed until five. She had gone to sleep knowing what she was going to do the minute she woke up. It had only dawned on her the day before that she might be pregnant. After twelve years of infertility treatments and eight attempts at IVF, she and her husband had finally given up and had filed papers to adopt a little girl in China. She was two years old, and they were going to Beijing soon to pick her up. They could hardly wait.

And suddenly, the day before, on the flight from San Francisco, it had occurred to her that she might be pregnant, without hormone shots or harvesting her eggs this time. It seemed too good to be true. She had gone to a drugstore near the hotel that night to pick up a test kit. It was sitting on the bathroom sink, waiting for her to use it. She was afraid to be disappointed again. At thirty-eight she had been down this path too many times, and crushing disappointment had become a way of life.

At five A.M. she couldn't stand it anymore. Wide awake, she threw back the covers, headed to the bathroom, and told herself she didn't care. Soon they would have an adopted daughter, so it didn't matter. Except it did. If

humanly possible, they still wanted a baby of their own. She hadn't even told her husband her suspicions, not wanting to get his hopes up. He was a pilot for the same airline, had flown to Miami the day before, and was coming back to San Francisco that day too.

She used the test and left it on the sink to work its magic, hopped into the shower, let the hot water run down her face, and got out of the shower faster than she would have otherwise. She had to know, one more time, and when she looked, she let out a scream and held the test in her shaking hand. Two pink lines. She was pregnant, without assistance. It had just happened. All their earlier attempts had been futile. And what were they going to do now about the little girl in China? A thousand thoughts ran through her mind as she sat down on the floor, feeling dizzy, still holding the test kit. She was pregnant at last! Their dream had finally come true.

—

Joel McCarthy was just getting out of the shower when his cellphone rang. He was rushing, and had overslept by a few minutes. He recognized the number immediately, and his face broke into a broad smile. He was a tall, dark-haired, handsome man, had done some modeling in his youth, and loved his job as a flight attendant.

“What are you doing up at this hour?” he asked his partner, Kevin. “It’s two in the morning for you.” Kevin was at the apartment in San Francisco.

“I can’t sleep. All I can think about is Friday.”

“I know. Me too.” Both men smiled and there was a moment of silence between them. Joel was thirty-four, and his partner was forty, and a doctor. They had met on one of Joel’s flights two years ago and had been together ever since. They were getting married in two days, with a small circle of friends around them, and Kevin’s parents, who were coming up from Los Angeles. Joel hadn’t told his ultraconservative parents in Utah, nor his five brothers and sisters, even his one brother who was gay and had never told their parents either. None of them had ever been willing to face the reality of Joel’s life, and expecting them to celebrate his marriage to a man would be too much for them. Kevin would be his family now. Joel loved his own family, but they were unable to accept him. He had spent years in therapy

dealing with it, and he was finally at ease in his own life. Marrying Kevin was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to him.

“My parents arrived tonight,” Kevin told him, sounding euphoric. “My mother is even more excited than we are.” Both Kevin’s parents had welcomed Joel into their family, and his sister and her husband were just as warm. They were the family Joel had always dreamed of.

They were going to Tahiti on their honeymoon. Kevin was a successful plastic surgeon, and had asked Joel to consider giving up his job, but Joel didn’t want to be dependent on him and was going to continue flying, at least for a while, maybe until they adopted a child or found a surrogate for their own. Joel was already living in Kevin’s apartment, and they were going to start looking for a house to buy when they got back from Tahiti. And they had just gotten a dog. Joel loved all the evidence of domestic life.

“I’ve got to go, I’m going to be late,” Joel told him when he saw the time. “I love you. I’ll see you tonight. I’ll have dinner ready when you get home.”

“My parents want to take us out,” Kevin told him quickly.

“Go back to bed and get some sleep, or you’ll be exhausted on Friday,” Joel said, smiling. All either of them could think of was their wedding. They’d had fun planning it for months.

“Have a safe flight,” Kevin said before he hung up. He always said that, which touched Joel. He’d never been on a flight that had a problem, but Kevin was nervous about him flying, and was a fearful flier himself.

Joel was smiling as he put on his steward’s uniform, thinking about Kevin and how lucky he felt to be marrying him. And he was in a great mood when he got in the van with the crew. There were muted greetings of good morning, as everyone kept to themselves at that hour. Joel didn’t know them all, though he had seen most of them on the flight two days before.

“They’ve switched us to an A321 and added a 757 to make up the difference,” the captain, Helen Smith, said in a matter-of-fact tone, which caused some comment in the group about the equipment change and breaking it into two flights. Most of them were sorry not to be flying the A380, which they all liked, although they would have had more passengers to deal with on the bigger plane, and the A321 would be easier for the flight

attendants. “They’re using a New-York-based crew for the 757,” Captain Smith added, as they waited for the copilot to come out of the hotel. She glanced at her watch. He was late.

Joel and Nancy chatted quietly while they waited. Nancy was elated after what she’d discovered, but tried not to show it. She didn’t want to share the news with anyone until she told her husband. And Joel had been excited all week. This was his last scheduled flight before the wedding.

There were two very senior female flight attendants in the van, who’d been assigned to first class on the trip out. And Joel assumed they would be again. One of them, Jennifer, was the chief purser. They were competent and experienced at tending to demanding first-class passengers, but made it obvious that they didn’t enjoy it. Nancy had commented on it to Joel on the flight to New York. She could never see the point of staying in the job once you felt that way, and a number of their older colleagues were visibly tired and bitter. They’d done it for too long, and the vagaries of the passengers they dealt with annoyed them. There was an edge to how they spoke to people and an attitude you could sense the moment you saw them. Nancy hated working with women like that. They fulfilled the passengers’ requests, but only to the degree they had to. And she hoped she wouldn’t be working with either of them today. They were conferring quietly about their trips to Hong Kong and Beijing the following month, while the two younger members of the crew, Bobbie and Annette, had been assigned to coach before and probably would be again. Annette was whispering to Bobbie about a date she’d had the night before, and they both laughed as Helen looked at her watch again with a stern expression.

She glanced over then and noticed the older pilot in the van, and realized it was Connor Gray, the newly retired pilot due to fly home with them. She waited until he looked her way, and then smiled at him. He nodded in response with a somber expression. He had recognized her too, and knew her military history. Helen thought Captain Gray looked subdued and somewhat pale, and whatever his medical issue had been after the flight out, Helen got the feeling that he was depressed about it, which wouldn’t have been surprising with an immediate forced retirement after the incident.

He said nothing to the rest of the crew, nor to her. And then, finally, the copilot they’d been waiting for jumped into the van with no apology for the

delay. He was strikingly handsome with blond movie-star looks, and acted as though he were playing a part. He introduced himself as Jason Andrews and immediately complained about the equipment change, and said he'd been looking forward to flying the A380 since he had recently qualified for it. And then he looked at Helen with a sarcastic expression as the van took off for the airport. "Girls' flight today?" he commented as Connor Gray glared at him with blatant disapproval for his lack of respect for Captain Smith.

As the van threaded its way between several trucks, Jason Andrews made it clear that he thought female pilots were second-rate at best. The rest of the crew members were shocked into silence. Helen said nothing and didn't care. She had met many men like him in the Air Force, who disliked female pilots, and it didn't faze her at all. He was obviously a smart aleck, full of himself, and was wearing his uniform hat at a rakish angle. When they got out at JFK he made a comment about how "hot" Bobbie was. Bobbie heard him say it and told him she was married as they collected their bags out of the van, and he looked at her with a roguish smile.

"And the problem is?" he countered to Bobbie, and then focused on Nancy, who was a tall, attractive blonde with a good figure. He seemed to think that all women were easy prey for him, and his for the picking.

Nancy ignored him and chatted quietly with Joel as they rolled their bags into the airport. The copilot had made no friends on the trip out. The two older flight attendants looked right through him, and Bobbie whispered to Annette that he was a jerk. He had managed to rub everyone the wrong way with his snide comments on the drive to the airport.

He made another remark Helen didn't like as they moved to the head of the security line and put their computers, cellphones, and minor belongings in the plastic bins and their rolling bags on the moving belt to be X-rayed.

"Welcome to the heart of Africa," Jason said under his breath just loud enough for the others to hear, and anyone standing nearby, as he glanced at the TSA agents around them, most of whom were African Americans.

"Watch that!" Captain Helen Smith said in a sharp tone that reminded them all of her military background. She was wide awake and quick to call him on it, although she'd been quiet in the van. "You're part of my crew now, Andrews, until we land at SFO. I can write you up for that remark, or

suspend you,” she said bluntly, as a particularly pretty young TSA agent watched the exchange, and had heard the comment. The copilot seemed like a jerk to her too. Bobbie’s assessment of him seemed apt.

“You must have heard me wrong, Captain,” he said with mock respect.

“I hope I did. Make sure I don’t hear you wrong again.” He didn’t respond, and followed the rest of the crew as they walked toward their gate. The two planes for the flights to San Francisco, leaving twenty minutes apart, were parked next to each other. The San Francisco crew members were joined by a full crew from New York who had been added for the 757. They were separated quickly, and went to their respective planes. On the A321, the flight attendants met with Jennifer, the chief purser, once they were on board, to get their cabin assignments, which, as Joel had guessed, were the same as the flight out. Helen, Jason, and the now retired Connor Gray headed for the cockpit to settle in. Jason gave Joel a contemptuous look as he walked past, but he didn’t say a word. He didn’t need to. His scorn for Joel was in his eyes.

Helen sat down in the captain’s seat and turned to talk to Connor Gray for a few minutes. She seemed to relax and warm up once she was in the cockpit. It was home to her. Nothing ever felt as good to her as flying a plane. She had all-American looks, with light brown hair, an intelligent face, and bright blue eyes that took in everything. And Connor looked more at ease and brightened while they talked. He explained to her in a low voice that he’d had a brief cerebral incident, a TIA. The doctors had said it might never happen again but it could. It lasted only a few seconds, during which he didn’t recognize his surroundings, but his career had ended on the spot. If it had happened while he was flying the plane, it could have been disastrous.

“I’m really sorry,” she said sympathetically and he thanked her. He had enormous respect for her not just professionally, but personally. Like most of the world, he had seen her husband murdered by his captors on TV. It had been horrifying, and something no one could forget. Connor didn’t refer to it, but told her it was an honor to fly with her on his final flight in uniform. She said the same about him and he could see that she was sincere. She seemed like a kind woman in addition to her reputation as a highly skilled pilot.

Jason took the copilot's seat while they were talking, and paid no attention to either of them. He checked some of the equipment and gauges, and then started texting. As she watched him, Helen had the feeling that she was flying with a giant spoiled brat for their flight home. He was young and cocky, and his arrogance annoyed her, although she didn't show it.

After chatting with Connor, she made her initial checks, called the tower about their flight plan, and was satisfied that everything was in order. She thought it was a good thing that they had accommodated the passengers with two flights, instead of leaving half of them stranded when the A380 couldn't fly. The second flight was boarding at the same time. Helen was pleased to have the A321. It was a recent model and enjoyable to fly. The 757 was an older plane, and not as comfortable for the passengers. And she'd been told by air traffic control that the weather looked good all the way across the country.

She looked at both men with a broad smile. She was in her element. "Well, gentlemen, it looks like we're going to have a nice, easy ride home." Connor nodded, and she could see the sadness in his eyes. Jason looked straight at her and held her gaze for a long moment as though challenging her, shrugged, and went back to texting. Helen started the engines then, made an announcement to the passengers that they'd be pushing back from the gate shortly, and assured them of a smooth flight to San Francisco and possibly an early arrival. She had a feeling it was going to be a very nice day. It was off to a good start.