

GAIL
DAYTON

HIDE-AND-
SHEIKH



Desire

Gail Dayton

Hide-And-Sheikh

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Security specialist Ellen Sheffield had done the impossible - beaten elusive Sheikh Rashid "Rudi" Qarif at his own hide-and-seek game and brought him home. But was she his captor...or captive? She'd expected a spoiled playboy. Instead, she was guarding an enigma - a proud, fascinating male with secretive eyes and a daring smile. Whisked off to Rudi's hideaway, Ellen prepared to resist seduction. But Rudi ignored her stunning beauty...and laid siege to her tender heart. Caught between confusion and burning desire, Ellen didn't know the rules to this new game - but she yearned for Rudi to win....

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“Where Are We?”

“My place.”

“You said it was a business meeting.” Ellen glared at Rudi. She was beautiful when she was angry.

“It is. In town, in the morning.” He offered Ellen his hand. “Coming?”

Rudi held his breath as she looked from his face to his hand and back again, waiting for her to decide. Would she take his hand?

When her fingers slid across his palm and her hand closed around his, the touch jolted him. Every molecule in his body wanted her. Not just for sex. He wanted more.

He wanted to see admiration in her eyes. He wanted to hear her laugh. He wanted to wake up with her in the morning after a night of hot, mindless, slow, sultry sex and have her smile at him.

“Well?” Ellen’s voice broke into his musing. “Are we going to get off this airplane?”

Rudi grinned. He loved her sass.

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Silhouette Desire, where every month you can count on finding six passionate, powerful and provocative romances.

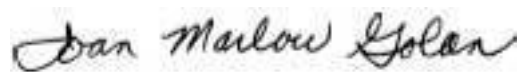
The fabulous Dixie Browning brings us November’s MAN OF THE MONTH, Rocky and the Senator’s Daughter, in which a heroine on the verge of scandal arouses the protective and sensual instincts of a man who knew her as a teenager. Then Leanne Banks launches her exciting Desire miniseries, THE ROYAL DUMONTS, with Royal Dad, the timeless story of a prince who falls in love with his son’s American tutor.

The Bachelorette, Kate Little’s lively contribution to our 20 AMBER COURT miniseries, features a wealthy businessman who buys a date with a “plain Jane” at a charity auction. The intriguing miniseries SECRETS! continues with Sinclair’s Surprise Baby, Barbara McCauley’s tale of a rugged bachelor with amnesia who’s stunned to learn he’s the father of a love child.

In Luke’s Promise by Eileen Wilks, we meet the second TALL, DARK & ELIGIBLE brother, a gorgeous rancher who tries to respect his wife-of-convenience’s virtue, while she looks to him for lessons in lovemaking! And, finally, in Gail Dayton’s delightful Hide-and-Sheikh, a lovely security specialist and a sexy sheikh play a game in which both lose their hearts...and win a future together.

So treat yourself to all six of these not-to-be-missed stories. You deserve the pleasure!

Enjoy,



Joan Marlow Golan Senior
Editor, Silhouette Desire

Hide-And-Sheikh

Gail Dayton



www.millsandboon.co.uk

GAIL DAYTON

has been playing make-believe all her life but didn't start writing the make-believe down until she was about nine years old, because it took her that long to learn how to write coherent sentences. She married her college sweetheart shortly after graduation and moved to a small Central Texas town where they lived happily for twenty years. Now transplanted to an even smaller town in the Texas Panhandle, Gail lives with her Prince Charming, their youngest son and Spot the Dalmatian, where they are still working on the "ever after" part. The "happily" they have down.

After a checkered career with intervals spent as a mommy, the entire editorial staff of more than one small-town newspaper, a junior college history instructor and legal assistant in a rural prosecutor's office, she finally got to quit her day job in favor of writing love stories. When she's not writing or reading other people's love stories, she sings alto in her church choir and teaches basic sewing as an incentive to finish her own sewing projects, which would otherwise languish. Gail would love to hear from readers. Write her at P.O. Box 176, Clarendon, Texas 79226.

To those wonderful women from Waco,
the best friends a writer could have.

Thanks for all your support. I wouldn't be here
without you. To Myles, for worrying about me when
I don't write, and for twenty-five wonderful years.

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One

She'd found her target. He lounged near the makeshift bar, his perfect teeth glinting as he smiled at some dark-haired bimchette. In the warehouse-cum-nightclub in New York's garment district, lights flashed, strobe-quick and bright, or slower, in garish colors that painted the party goers in even more ghastly shades than they'd painted themselves. Except for that man, her night's mission. The Sheikh of Araby.

Or rather, the Sheikh of Qarif, to give him his true name. As she maneuvered her way toward him, Ellen watched the lights turn his handsome face pink, then sickly green, then dappled blue, but his perfection continued unblemished. He knew it, too.

He threw back that chiseled profile in a laugh that had to be calculated to show off his best features: dark sultry eyes, straight white teeth, high, carved cheekbones. His picture hadn't done him justice.

Oh, it had amply illustrated his movie-star features, but it hadn't said a word about the sexuality that oozed like honey from his every pore. Ellen kept the wry twist from her faint smile at the sight of the little girl bees buzzing around him. She couldn't let him see past the mask she wore to her real purpose. He might be the best-looking, sexiest man she'd seen in the past dozen years, but he was still her target.

And, as mama always said, beauty is skin deep, but ugly goes clear to the bone. Somebody's mama had said it, even if Ellen's never had. She'd known spoiled, rich playboys. One of them she'd known very well.

Davis Lowe had been born with a golden spoon in his mouth and upgraded to platinum at his first opportunity. He'd swept her off her middle-class feet with his charm and his money and brought her into his world, where she'd met his spoiled playboy friends. Because of Davis, she'd learned these rich men were all the same.

Whether they were from New York or New Delhi, they all expected the world to bow and scrape and cater to their every whim. At least this one offered a nice view.

Finally he reacted to Ellen's laser-beam stare. He looked up and met her gaze. Ellen held it a long moment, allowed a hint of a smile to brush her lips, then she turned away and began to count seconds.

One... She found a place at the sawhorse-and-planking bar, and ordered a gin and tonic. Seven, eight, nine... Would she have to look at him again? The pretty ones were often tougher to get to. Ellen tossed her hair back over her shoulder. Long, straight, dark blond hair with golden highlights, it was one of her best weapons.

"Hello."

Bingo. He was hooked. Fourteen seconds. Not her best time, but not her worst, either. If "the look" didn't get them, the hair usually did.

Ellen turned and gave her sheikh a once-over. That high-beam smile of his could prove near lethal at close range. She raised a cool eyebrow. The effect was somewhat destroyed by the fact that they had to lean close and shout full volume to be heard over the pounding music.

"Hello?" she said. "That's all you can come up with? What kind of line is that?"

He shrugged. "It is no line. I said hello. If you want a line, I am sure many other men here would be happy to provide one."

His English was impeccable, overlaid with a faint hint of the foreign, and a fainter hint of a... Southern drawl? He wore a short-sleeved raw silk navy shirt unbuttoned over a plain white T-shirt. A T-shirt that must have been bought a size too small, given the way it strained over the man's lean but well-muscled torso. Khaki slacks finished the ensemble. Not what one would expect from the scion

of a royal family, but it looked good on him. Darn good. Did she have the right man? Ellen studied his face again, comparing it to the memorized photo in her head. This was her target. No mistake.

She lifted a shoulder in a casual shrug. Cool and calculated would serve her better with this one. He would be used to women falling over themselves to please him.

“I don’t need a line.” She accepted the drink from the bartender and took a sip, schooling her expression against the taste. Fruity concoctions with paper umbrellas, the kind she preferred, didn’t blend with the sophisticated image she wanted to project tonight.

He grinned and pushed his hand back through his thick sable hair. “That is just as well,” he said, “because I do not have any idea what to say next. Whatever I say will sound like a pick-up line.”

Ellen found herself charmed by his apparent openness and told herself it was an act. It had to be. Nobody with “prince” in front of his name could be this transparent.

“Have you any suggestions?” He propped an elbow on the bar and leaned. The wattage in his smile seemed to go up.

“My name is Ellen.” She put her hand out to shake. She had to keep him on a string until she knew she could reel him in.

“Names. Good.” He took her hand and squeezed gently. “Call me Rudy.”

Rudy? Ellen ran through the list of names they’d given her, half a dozen or more, all belonging to the target. Of the few she could actually remember, Rashid was one, and it didn’t sound anything like Rudy. Neither did any of the others.

“Rudi, with an i,” he said. “I prefer the way it looks written that way.”

She shook the hand still holding hers. “How do you do, Rudi-with-an-i. It’s nice to meet you.”

Whatever he wanted to call himself made no difference to her. But it did surprise her a bit. Why not use his real name? Unless he was more security conscious than he appeared. Ellen stopped herself from searching the room for bodyguards. She knew where his bodyguards were. She’d sent them there herself.

“So.” He glanced down at their still-clasped hands, and the brilliance of his smile suddenly took on a heat that Ellen felt clear down to her toes, which curled in their strappy sandals. “Now that we have the formalities over, why don’t we...”

His words trailed off as he bent over her hand and pressed a kiss to its back, a kiss that sizzled across her skin straight to the libido she’d thought long ago starved to death.

Why don’t we what? Curiosity resurrected her dormant desire. Nothing else had for years.

“Dance,” Rudi said.

“Dance?” That’s all he wanted to do?

Feeling numb and yet feeling every nerve ending spark and sizzle, Ellen let him lead her by the hand—the same hand he’d kissed—onto the dance floor. Rudi tugged, spinning her skillfully into his arms. Never mind that the band clashed and wailed and thumped out raging heavy metal rock that made the flashing lights shudder with vibration. Rudi held her close and danced what Ellen could only describe as some kind of cross between a tango, a foxtrot and sex with clothes on.

Or maybe the sex part was just in her head.

This dance, seen objectively, wasn’t much different from the hundreds of others Ellen had danced. Rudi’s hands rested lightly at her waist, her hands on his shoulders. They moved back and forth to the music in the limited space allowed on the crowded dance floor. But with every brush of Rudi’s hips against hers, the heat turned a notch higher.

Ellen’s hands curved over Rudi’s shoulders, shaping themselves to his lean musculature. He was sleek and strong, beautiful like one of those horses they raised in his part of the world.

He laughed, a very male sound, his eyes flashing pleasure at her, and Ellen realized her hands had slipped. Now they rested on the broad slope of his chest. With another laugh, Rudi whipped off the unbuttoned shirt he wore to let the T-shirt beneath show off his physique. Ellen didn’t have to fake her approval. She liked the way he looked. Entirely too much.

He snapped out one end of the shirt, reached out and caught the other end so that it passed behind Ellen. Then he used it to draw her in closer, until they touched hip to hip. Holding her only with the shirt pulled snug around her waist, Rudi swayed, his eyes twinkling.

“Join me,” he shouted over the crashing music. “Do you not know how to rumba?”

She pushed at him, her fingers curling into his chest. “This doesn’t sound like a rumba to me.”

Rudi deepened the swing of his hips, his thighs getting friendly with their sensual nudging against hers. “The beat is in your blood. Feel it inside you.”

Was it getting hotter in here? Or was he just making her crazy?

He leaned in, until his lips brushed her ear. “Feel it, and let it out.”

Rudi did something with his hands, and the shirt around her jumped several inches higher, drawing her slowly in, bringing her breasts toward that white-clad chest.

Confusion struck her. This was a new dilemma. She needed to tempt him, keep him close until the final moment. But she’d never before been tempted herself. She wanted to touch him, to let her breasts settle against that solid chest, and that would be entirely unethical. She wasn’t supposed to like her targets.

The music paused to allow the gasping musicians time to catch their collective breath. In the startling, deafening silence, Ellen broke away, tugging the navy shirt from his hands. She stared at him, panting almost as hard as the band. Why? She hadn’t done anything strenuous.

Rudi’s smile faltered a second, then returned. “Let me buy you a drink.” The white of his T-shirt contrasted with his deep tan. He was gorgeous and nice. A deadly combination.

Ellen had to get this done and get out quickly, before she got in over her head. It was for his own good. And for hers. They’d both be better off if she just got it over with now.

“I have a better idea.” Still holding his shirt, Ellen caught Rudi’s hand and led him from the dance floor.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” She threw him one of her patented mysterious smiles, her hair swinging around her shoulders.

Rudi followed her out of the warehouse, bemused by his luck. Ellen was the most beautiful woman he’d seen in his entire life, and he’d seen a lot of beautiful women. But they never came on to him like this. Not to Rudi.

Only Rashid ibn Saqr ibn Faruq al Mukhtar Qarif could get women at the snap of his fingers. And then it was the money and the power that attracted them, not the man.

Money and power were as much of an illusion as Rashid. Or maybe Rudi was the illusion. Sometimes he wasn’t sure which of his personas was the real one. But he did know that the money and the power belonged to his father, not to him.

Down the street outside the warehouse, Ellen hailed a taxi. The streetlight gleamed along her slender, mile-high legs as she got in. Rudi stared, half-hypnotized, until Ellen leaned out the open car door.

“Are you coming?” she asked, a smile curving her luscious pink lips. A smile that promised nothing and everything at the same time, that dared him to find out what secrets hid behind it.

He shouldn’t. He had doubtless terrified and infuriated his family enough, vanishing as he had. The bombs back in Qarif were real. The terrorists were real. But the terrorists were still in Qarif, trying to transform the country into a miniature Afghanistan. This woman could not possibly be a terrorist. Just look at her.

Rudi followed his own suggestion as she waited without a hint of impatience for him to make up his mind. She was a blond goddess, a Valkyrie escaped from Wagner’s opera. Her straight dark gold hair spilled over her shoulders like yesterday’s sunlight, streaked with the brighter shine of tomorrow’s dawn. Long thick lashes shaded eyes whose color he couldn’t decipher in the uncertain

light. A high forehead, straight narrow nose, prominent cheekbones and full mouth completed her classically beautiful face.

But it was not the beauty of her face or her sleek athlete's body beneath the simple black dress that drew him. Perhaps it was the hint of mischief in her eyes, or the mystery in her smile, the feeling that she played some secret game and he did not know the rules. She challenged him, dared him to play. Rudi had never been able to pass up a dare.

He stepped off the curb and got in the cab. Satisfaction flickered across Ellen's face a brief second before she hid it behind that smile. Rudi did not object. She had won only one hand. He intended to win the game.

"So, Rudi." Ellen leaned back in the corner of the cab opposite him. "What do you do?"

"I dig holes." At least, he wanted to. His family did their level best to keep him in a nice, clean office where he couldn't play in the dirt.

Ellen's eyebrow arched. "Really."

Would she back off now, thinking him no more than a ditchdigger?

"Holes, as in the Lincoln Tunnel?" she asked. "Or holes as in—" She waved at a construction site vanishing behind them, where bulldozers would have clawed deep into the earth to set the foundation before the steel frame started up.

"Holes as in wells. For water, oil—whatever is hiding down there."

Ellen's expression changed, as if she were impressed in spite of herself. At least, Rudi hoped that was what it meant.

"You dig oil wells?" She stretched a long, elegant arm along the back of the seat.

Rudi started to agree, then changed his mind. Tell her the truth, see how that impressed her. If it did. "Actually, I prefer drilling for water. A person cannot drink oil."

"You can't run a car on water."

"Not now." Rudi grinned. "Give the scientists some time. If they ever finish their fusion reactor research, we could be pulling up to the garden hose to fill our cars with fuel."

She watched him with that enigmatic smile on her face, saying nothing. Rudi did not know if that meant she wanted to know more or was bored to tears. But he did not handle silence well.

"Of course, you can make more money drilling oil wells, but..." Rudi shrugged. "The people who need water generally need it more."

Ellen's smile changed, became warmer and yet sad at the same time. This smile still hid secrets, but it seemed more genuine. "You're a nice man, Rudi," she said. "I like you."

Stunned, Rudi didn't realize the cab had stopped until Ellen got out. Scrambling to follow her beckoning gesture, he found himself on the sidewalk in front of an upscale hotel. Ellen linked her arm through his and strolled past the doorman into the gilt-and-marble lobby.

She led him past the desk, past the plush brocade chairs, past the opening to the dimly lit bar, to the elevators between the potted palms where she pushed the up button. Rudi's second thoughts kicked in.

Not that he objected to the idea of going up to Ellen's room and "getting to know her better." But he did not know her. She probably was no terrorist. Then again, she might be. Or she might be a thief, with a partner upstairs waiting to cosh him over the head and steal everything he had in his pockets, which by now was not much, since he had been away from the family coffers for more than a week.

Or she might be the best thing he had ever happened across in his life.

He was used to women throwing themselves at him, wanting to be seen with him for his name, or his money, or because they liked the way he looked. Their motivations had always been transparent to him, and he'd usually been willing to give them what they wanted—a little pleasure for the moment, a little thrill, a little pampering. They were easy. So easy that lately he hadn't bothered.

But this woman was different. She intrigued him. She challenged him by holding her secrets so close. She was all mystery and potential and wide-open possibility.

In which case, he did not want to ruin it by rushing into sex with her. He wanted to know more, know everything about her, how she thought, what made her laugh and cry. That took time. If he went upstairs with her now, Rudi very much feared he wouldn't get that time.

"Ellen, why do we not go into the bar? Have a drink. Talk." He tipped his head toward the dark, cavelike entrance.

Something that might have been surprise flashed in her eyes before it vanished behind that sexy, enigmatic smile. Rudi began to hate that smile.

"Why?" She slid her hand up his arm to his shoulder and trailed her fingers down his chest.

"I wish to talk to you." He caught the hand resting on his chest and kissed her fingertips. Then he touched the corner of her mouth.

Her smile slipped, just a little.

"I want to find the woman behind that smile," he said. "If we go upstairs, I do not think that we will do very much talking."

"Probably not," Ellen conceded with a tip of her head. "But what if there's nothing to find?"

"I cannot believe that. Not with the devil peeking from deep within your eyes."

An expression that was almost alarm flickered in those hazel-green eyes. Then her smile went hot and sultry, and Rudi's entire body stood at attention.

"Talking isn't the way to meet that devil." Ellen took both his hands in hers and backed onto the elevator, drawing him with her. "We can talk later."

"Promise?"

The elevator door slid shut. Ellen brushed against Rudi as she reached past him to press a floor button, and he shuddered at the light touch. His hand settled at her waist.

"I promise," she said.

Rudi had to think a minute to recall what she was promising.

"If you still want to talk, we can talk all you want. Later."

The floor lurched slightly as the elevator stopped and the door rumbled open. Holding his hand, Ellen led him into the hallway. About halfway down, she paused in front of a room.

She looked up at him, the sweet sadness back in her smile. Her hand settled soft on his chest again, and she stretched the mere inch necessary to touch her lips to his cheek in a warm, tender kiss that melted all Rudi's internal organs together.

She glanced away to slide the keycard in the lock. It flashed green and she turned the handle, then looked back up at him.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, "but it's for your own good."

Alarm flashed through him. Was she a terrorist after all?

Then the door was open and Omar, his valet-cum-bodyguard, was hauling him into the room. Frank, the rent-a-bodyguard from the service his family used in New York, stood behind Omar, with a third burly guard beyond.

"Thanks, Miss Sheffield," Frank was saying. "I knew if anybody could find him, you could."

Ellen's smile was gone, replaced by a businesslike scowl. "I wouldn't have had to, if you bozos hadn't lost him in the first place."

"You are a bodyguard?" Rudi goggled at her.

"I'm a security consultant. Frank and George are bodyguards." She indicated the two locals. "See if you can keep up with him now."

And she was gone, the door slamming shut behind her.

The woman of his dreams had come on to him just to track him down for his family and return him to the dubious safety of his bodyguards.

Rudi started to laugh. He had to—she had outwitted him so cleverly. She had won this round.

But the game was not over yet.

And she had promised him they could talk later, if he wished. Rudi definitely wished to talk much more with Miss Ellen Sheffield.

Two

Ellen Sheffield was the best at what she did.

At least, she used to be, before she met that too-handsome-for-her-own-good son of a sheikh. His movie-star face kept popping into her head, complete with that obnoxious grin. The one that made him look even more handsome. No matter how hard she tried to dismiss him as a lightweight, tell herself the grin was goofy and the man uninteresting, his voice would whisper in her mind's ear, A person cannot drink oil. And she'd wonder if he still wanted to talk.

Because, however many times she told herself she didn't want to see him, she couldn't forget that he had actually wanted to delay going upstairs at the hotel. He'd invited her into the bar. He'd seen past the mask to the person behind her polished facade, the first man to bother looking in years. Maybe ever.

When she was little, she'd been merely "the Sheffield boys' sister." Then she'd grown breasts, and her brothers' friends had done nothing but stare at them. Until her brothers beat them up.

None of the boys in high school had dared ask her out, and with a policeman for a brother, none of the men in the academy had, either. So she'd had no preparation for Davis's practiced seduction when she'd met him at a book signing just after she'd finished her course.

Ellen sighed. Davis had been such an overwhelming experience that she'd agreed to marry him before she realized what kind of man he was. Before she realized what kind of woman he wanted. He wanted a decorative, expensive toy to show off to his friends, not a person. Ellen's opinions, desires, thoughts and wishes had all been dismissed as unimportant. Her career was immaterial. Davis expected her to drop everything and dance to his tune.

When she'd broken the engagement, his "friends" had moved in, all of them wanting the same thing: a beautiful woman to show off. She'd learned then how to use her appearance as a tool, a weapon against them. That skill had benefited her career, both in the police department and since. Vic Campanello, her partner on the job and her current boss, called her his secret weapon. Which was why she'd been tapped to find Prince Rudi the Gorgeous.

She didn't want to think about him, didn't want him popping into her head. He might have noticed the devil in her eyes, but he couldn't care anymore. Not now, not after she'd put him back into his gilded cage.

Ellen got out of the cab and slammed the door. Then she overtipped the driver because she felt guilty for taking out her guilt on his cab. She had not betrayed Rudi, or Rashid, or whatever the man wanted to call himself. She had probably saved his life. He had no business wandering around New York on his own, not with terrorists stalking Qarif's ruling family, of which Rudi was most definitely a member.

The terrorists had been a problem in Qarif for most of Rudi's life, but lately things had changed, according to Campanello. The old leader had been captured, and the new, more militant leader had vowed vengeance for the captivity, even though he was probably the one who'd tipped the authorities off.

Rudi might be used to the terrorist threat, but that didn't mean there was no danger. Ellen's job was to protect him from that danger, and she had absolutely no reason to feel guilty for doing her job.

Summer flowers bloomed in beds lining the paths, but they might as well have been weeds for all the attention Ellen paid them as she headed into Central Park. She checked her watch and picked up her pace. If she didn't hurry, she'd be late for her meeting.

Swainson Security had been hired to provide security for a music video to be shot in Central Park sometime in the next month, and she was supposed to meet with the producer, the director, the group's manager and whoever else thought they needed a finger in the pie, to check out locations.

She much preferred this kind of work to tracking down spoiled dilettantes. Though she had to admit that finding Rudi had been a challenge. She did enjoy a good challenge.

Campanello had told her this morning he had a new assignment for her, one that would begin immediately after this meeting. Maybe it would offer something tough enough to keep her mind off Qarif's prince. The fact that the boss wouldn't tell her what the new job was, however, made her suspect that it might have something to do with said prince.

Ellen ground her teeth, then curled her lips up in what she hoped resembled a smile more than a snarl as the band's manager turned to greet her. Time to go to work.

Rudi stared at the piece of paper in front of him on the polished table without actually seeing it or anything it said. It was Wednesday. Hump Day, as they had called it when he was in college in Texas, and probably everywhere else in the United States. If he could make it past Wednesday, it was a downhill slide to the weekend. Only, the weekend would be no better, trapped as he was by his bodyguards and big brother Ibrahim.

Rudi felt Ibrahim's glower and ignored it. He pulled his hand inside the sleeve of his djellaba and discreetly scratched his thigh. Ibrahim had insisted on traditional dress for the negotiations today, to remind the other parties just who they dealt with. Rudi stuck his hand back out and took yet another sip of water. Maybe he could escape to the rest room for a few minutes, if he drank enough water.

He had no idea why he had to be at this forsaken meeting anyway. It was not as if he could contribute anything but another body. Ibrahim's wife or one of his children now in New York could contribute as much. Rudi would happily trade places with Kalila and escort the children to museums and even opera, while she sat in on her husband's meetings. They were about finance and numbers, dollars and marks and yen and things he knew nothing about. Did not want to know about.

Give him a piece of ground, a "Christmas tree" rig and a couple of roughnecks to handle the steel, and he could bring in the well. He could even tell you if the piece of ground might produce anything, whether water, oil or gas. But high finance could kill him. If Rudi got any more bored, his heart just might forget to beat, fall asleep just like the rest of him. Although if he actually dozed off, Ibrahim would be the one to kill him.

He had sworn off thinking about her. This resolution had lasted about as long as every other resolution he had ever made. Maybe an entire hour. He needed something to do that would keep him awake, so he began to plot his revenge on Ellen Sheffield. Most of the plots involved isolated tents in the desert, paved with thick, soft carpets and plenty of pillows, and thin, gauzy, semitransparent clothing. Better yet, no clothing at all.

Not that the plots would ever come to fruition. It had been ten days since Ellen had turned him back over to the loving, suffocating arms of his family like a runaway schoolboy, and he still had no hint how to find her. Her company "did not give out personal information," as he had been told several times over by the annoying, perky-voiced receptionist. His dream girl might have been just that—a dream—for all he was able to learn about her. He had held her in his arms, only to have her vanish like a mirage in the sands.

"What is your opinion, Prince Rashid?"

One of the suits around the table asked him a question, and Rudi had no idea what he was supposed to have an opinion about. Even if he had heard the discussion, he would not have understood it. He moved his leg out of reach of Ibrahim's potential kick under the table.

"I am in complete agreement with my brother," he said, which was true. Ibrahim knew about this kind of thing. Rudi wished he would take care of it and stop making him sit through this agony.

Finally, after another eternity of congratulations and chitchat and backslapping, the deal apparently made, the meeting ended. Rudi headed for the elevators, only to be halted by his brother calling him back.

"Rashid, are you not joining us for lunch?" Ibrahim looked surprised, maybe even wounded by Rudi's apparent defection. "To celebrate the success of our negotiations. Come."

Allah forbend. Rudi stifled his shudder. He could not take another hour of high finance, not another minute. He had been to lunch with these men before. He knew what they talked about.

"Forgive me, brother. It has been a long morning, and I feel a bit under the weather."

"Are you ill?" Genuine concern colored Ibrahim's voice.

Rudi was grateful once more that he was merely the seventh son of his father, and not the ninth and youngest. If young Hasim stubbed a toe, the flags in Qarif went to half-mast. Ibrahim would have panicked.

"Merely tired." Rudi said. "I will catch a cab back to the hotel."

"You will take the car. And Omar."

"Very well. I will take the car." Rudi did not mention that Omar was back at the hotel with a severe case of traveler's trouble, and had only consented to stay in bed because of Ibrahim's own bodyguards. This could be his chance to make a break for it.

Maybe they would send Ellen after him again.

Rudi was whistling by the time he reached the garage.

He slouched in the back seat of the bulletproof, bombproof, escapeproof car, and plotted his escape. Without Omar, or any of the rent-a-bodies, it ought to be relatively easy. He had received a phone call from Buckingham, saying that everything was ready and just waiting for him. He could get the driver to drop him at the hotel, catch a cab to the heliport and take a helicopter to the airport. He could be gone without anyone knowing it. Perhaps they would send Ellen after him again. Perhaps he would allow her to find him.

But not in Buckingham. No one knew about Buckingham, and that was the way he wanted it.

Then he sat up straight, his attention captured by a woman in the park as the car inched along in the near-noon traffic. It was Ellen. It had to be. No other woman could possibly possess that precise combination of sun-kissed hair and million-dollar legs.

She was talking with an odd collection of mostly men. Or rather Ellen stood near them while they talked. She did not seem to be paying much attention, looking at her surroundings, until one of the men put his arm around her. Ellen moved away from his arm, but listened to what he had to say, nodding now and again.

The car moved a few feet ahead, leaving Ellen and the rest of the group walking slowly the other way. Rudi turned to watch, swearing when his view was blocked by a horse and rider.

In that instant, a plan sprang full-grown into his head. He had always wanted to sweep a woman off her feet and carry her away on horseback, like his great-grandfathers had surely once done. He was even dressed for it, in his desert robes.

"Stop." Rudi didn't wait for the driver to comply. The car was barely moving as he opened the door. "I will be back in five minutes, perhaps ten."

He caught up with the horseback rider in a few quick steps, wondering if he ought to rethink his plan. This horse seemed to have little in common with the fiery animals in his father's stables. He caught the beast's rein, startling a little shriek from its rider, a slightly plump, barely pubescent girl with braces and red frizz under a white helmet.

"Hello, might I borrow your horse?" Rudi borrowed Ibrahim's Oxford accent. It seemed to play better dressed as he was. "I wish to surprise my fiancée." The lie rolled easily from his lips. "By sweeping her away in the manner of my ancestors."

The girl gulped and giggled. Rudi captured her hand. "Surely someone of your sensibility would be willing to assist in my romantic endeavors." His ploy seemed to be working on the horse's rider.

"I've only got an hour to ride," she said.

"I only need the barest minute." Rudi glanced over his shoulder. Ellen and her party were retreating deeper into the park. In a moment they would be out of sight. "Please. My heart will be devastated if you do not allow me the use of your steed for a paltry space of time." Maybe those English literature classes he had suffered through had done better work than he had thought.

“My heart is in your hands.” Rudi pressed a kiss to the child’s hand, and she giggled again, looking past him at a cluster of other riders who had pulled up to stare gape-mouthed at the scene he was making.

She sighed. “Okay. But just a minute.” She slid awkwardly from the horse’s back.

“Allah bless you for your generosity.” Rudi kissed her cheek, knowing it would impress the girl’s audience, then swung into the saddle.

The horse recognized a knowledgeable hand on the reins and took exception. It preferred being in charge. But after a brief, stern scolding, Rudi reminded the animal of its manners, and it did as he demanded.

Payback would be sweet indeed.

Ellen walked back toward the fountain with all the video people, only half listening to their chatter of angles and dollies and dance steps as she mentally placed barricades and personnel across park paths and lawns. So hard did she concentrate on blocking out all the extraneous noise that she didn’t hear the hoof-beats until they were almost on top of her.

The sudden thunder brought her whirling around to see a horse bearing down on her, on its back a man in the billowing white robes of a desert nomad.

“Crazy son of a—” The producer had no time to finish his oath before diving aside.

Too surprised to move, Ellen watched the man lean toward her, saw his arm stretch out. Before she could react, he’d snatched her from her feet and hauled her up onto the horse in front of him. Her mind was so muddled, she could only think what an impressive feat he’d just accomplished.

Voices rose about them, shouting. “Call 9-1-1!”

“He’s crazy! Somebody stop him.”

“He’s kidnapping her!”

The horse’s stride shortened abruptly, then it whirled and galloped back the way it had come. Ellen clung to the man to keep from flying off during the sharp turn, noticing despite herself the lean, almost familiar strength of his body. Who was this nutcase? She was afraid she already knew.

She batted the windblown robes out of her way and looked up into the face that had been haunting her dreams. Rudi.

If the cops arrested him, it could create an international incident. It could get her fired.

“It’s okay,” she shouted past his shoulder at the video crew. “I know him. He’s a friend.”

Her words apparently reached them, because the frantic shouting and rushing slowed. The horse didn’t.

Its rocking gait bumped her against Rudi in a matching rhythm, a rhythm that came too easily to mind in connection with this man. No wonder the body beneath the robes had felt so familiar. Hard as she tried, she hadn’t been able to forget the feel of him under her hands. The muscular thighs that had teased her in that blood-boiling dance now flexed and shifted beneath her, guiding a thousand-plus pounds of horseflesh, pushing their way back into her memory.

“Am I truly?” He grinned at her, his teeth flashing white in the afternoon sun as the horse thundered on across the park.

“Are you truly what?” Ellen pried her brain away from the legs beneath her backside and ordered it to get busy with thinking.

“Your friend. You said I was a friend.”

“I—” Think. She wanted to bang her head against something to see if she could knock a little sense loose, but the nearest something was Rudi’s chest, and she knew beyond any doubt that would only make things worse. “I didn’t want you arrested.”

“Ah.” His Day-Glo smile dimmed a fraction.

The horse came to a skittering halt at a signal from Rudi that Ellen missed. He dismounted and tossed the reins to a waiting child before lifting Ellen from the horse’s back. But instead of setting her on her feet, he carried her in his arms to a car at the curb. The driver opened the door, and Rudi put

her inside, much the same way Ellen had once inserted prisoners into her patrol car. Before following her inside, Rudi called to the girl with the horse.

“Blessings upon you, child.” He tossed her a coin that glinted gold as it spun over and over in a high arc. Ellen saw the girl miss the catch and bend to pick it up before Rudi got into the car and signaled to the driver.

“What was that you threw?” Ellen asked.

“A ten-fiat piece.”

“It looked like gold.”

“It is.” Rudi stretched his arms along the seat and the door, looking completely at ease in his exotic garb. He seemed a different person somehow. Strange, foreign, exciting.

“Gold.” She had to get a grip on this situation. She had to get a grip on herself.

He made an affirming hum. “I wanted to reward her for the loan of the horse.”

“With a ten-fiat gold piece.”

He mmm-ed again in agreement.

“How much is that in real money?”

Rudi laughed. “Some people would say that the fiat is real money, since it is actually gold and not your paper greenbacks.”

“How much?” Ellen didn’t know why she persisted, only that she wanted to know. Maybe her brain was trying to get warmed up.

“Depending on a number of factors, between thirty and fifty dollars, American.”

Resentment swelled inside her. Did he think he could impress her by throwing his money around like that? Or did he think to buy her, the way he’d bought the use of the horse?

“What do you want?” Ellen didn’t care if her attitude sounded in her voice.

“A bit of your time.” Rudi’s voice seemed calculated to soothe, and so rubbed her resentment raw. “You did promise me we could talk, remember?”

She did, and resented even more being put in the wrong. “If you wanted to talk to me, all you had to do was call the office and say so.”

“I did. You have not been taking my calls.”

He was right again. Another mark against him.

“So talk.” She slouched in the seat, tugging at the hem of her dress. It drew his eyes to her legs where they emerged from the short skirt, and his gaze heated the atmosphere.

“I want more than a few stolen minutes in the back of a car,” Rudi said.

I just bet you do. Ellen shot him a sideways glance and met his gaze looking back. He knew how guilty she felt, the rat, and was playing it for all he was worth. She wanted to kiss that smirk—no. No, she wanted to wipe that smirk off his face. Wipe. She didn’t dare think of Rudi and kissing in the same thought.

“I have received a call concerning some business I must take care of out of the city this afternoon. I want you to come with me.” Rudi watched her like a cat near an active mouse hole.

Ellen was already shaking her head. “No, I’m sorry. It’s impossible.”

“Why?” Rudi slid a finger across the curve of her bare shoulder.

She shoved his hand away as she repressed her shuddering reaction. “I have responsibilities. A job. And you have other bodyguards.” Her eyes narrowed. “Speaking of which, where are they?”

“Omar is sick, the others are with Ibrahim. The driver is driving.”

“That’s no good. You should have at least one other guard with you at all times.”

Rudi’s smile glistened in the car’s dim light. “You are with me.”

“I’m not your bodyguard.”

“Why not? Come with me. I have cleared it with your company. I have cleared it with my family. All is prepared.” He paused and gave her a little-boy-pleading-for-a-treat look. “That is, if you agree.”

“What if I don’t?” Ellen fought against the temptation. If she wanted something this much, it had to be bad for her. But what if this was the new job Campanello wanted her on?

“I will have the driver drop you wherever you want to go.” The teasing grin was back. “Preferably after lunch. Grant me at least that much.”

She eyed him, all her suspicion sensors on alert. “What about you? If I don’t go, who will you take on your trip?”

“Myself.”

Scowling, Ellen decided not to argue with him. He was just contrary enough to do what he threatened. If she didn’t go, he’d go alone, and that was absolutely out of the question. “I want to call my office, make sure this is okay with my boss.”

Rudi’s expression didn’t change, didn’t even flicker as he gave a nonchalant shrug. Either he really had cleared it with everyone, or he was a consummate actor. “Of course. Whatever you think you need to do.” He handed her a cell phone from somewhere inside those voluminous robes.

“Thanks. I have my own.” Ellen pulled her phone from the bag she’d somehow hung on to when Rudi snatched her up on the horse. She had to think a minute to remember the office number. How could this man interfere so with her thought process?

“Swainson Security.” The phone was answered on the first ring.

“Hey, Marco. Is Campanello in?”

“Oh, hey, Ms. Sheffield. No, he’s out meeting with those guys about that string concert in October.”

“String?” Ellen racked her brain trying to recall any violinists the company had contracted with. “Do you mean Sting?”

“Maybe that’s what he said. I just know it was some old guy. But he did tell me to tell you those sheikhs wanted you to head up the detail for—uh—” The rustle of paper shuffling came through the phone. “For one of them. I can’t find the paper with the guy’s name on it. It was here just a minute ago.” Marco sounded stressed.

Ellen glanced at Rudi. She hated being pushed into things. But he was the client, and clients had the right to do a limited amount of pushing. “Tell Campanello I know about it, and I’m on the job.”

It had to be Rudi they wanted her with. Campanello had been bugging her about it ever since she’d found the man. Ellen didn’t do guard details anymore if she could help it, but it didn’t look as if she could help this one. Rudi had boxed her in.

“Got it, Ms. Sheffield.”

“I’m going to try to reach the boss on his cell phone, but if I can’t, tell him I’ll check in again as soon as I can. Everything’s under control. I’ve got Rudi with me.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him. Rudi.”

“Thanks.” Ellen flipped the phone shut and tucked it away.

“Marco—another hulking brute like Frank or George?” Rudi’s eyes twinkled at her. “Or someone more interesting?”

“Definitely more interesting.” Ellen chuckled. “He’s sixteen. A friend of one of Campanello’s kids. It’s his first summer job. He might be hulking someday, after he gains a hundred pounds. He’s a good kid. And he only answers the phones during lunch.”

“Ah.” Rudi leaned forward and gave the driver an address. Ellen didn’t hear it clearly. “Speaking of lunch, do you mind if we eat on the way? It will save some time.”

“Sure, why not? What’s a few crumbs on the upholstery?”

The driver let them off at an uptown building Ellen wasn’t familiar with. She got on the elevator with Rudi, forcing herself to go into bodyguard mode. She hadn’t done this kind of work in a while, but it had been even longer since she’d been in date mode. Besides, this wasn’t a date.

As they traveled upward, Rudi excused himself and stepped away to make a few calls. He was still talking when the elevator stopped at the top floor, and Ellen stepped out first, like a good bodyguard, into the small, glass-walled enclosure.

Correction. This wasn't the top floor. They were on the roof, in the lobby area of a heliport. Ellen had been in most of New York's heliports, but not this one. Rudi shut off his phone and strode to the desk, Ellen at his elbow.

"Your helicopter is waiting, Mr. Ibn Saqr," the clerk said, gesturing out the window.

There it was, a shiny white helicopter just settling to the pad as if conjured up by a genie's magic.

"Shall we?" Rudi bowed slightly, offering his arm.

Ellen ignored it, striding to the door. "Don't waste your gallantry on me," she said, pushing the door open.

The roar of helicopter blades vibrated through the little lobby until Rudi pulled the door shut again. Ellen let him. Let him have his say without shouting.

"Gallantry is never wasted on a beautiful woman," he said with a little bow.

Ellen rolled her eyes and shoved at the door again. She was sick of being beautiful, sick of people who could see nothing else. Agreeing to come on this trip was a mistake. She should have known Rudi would be just like all the other men she'd ever met. She stalked out the door and climbed into the helicopter. Just do the job. Ignore the charm. It wasn't for her, but for the mask she wore.

Three

Wind whipped Rudi's djellaba into a tangle as he hurried behind Ellen to the helicopter. He almost shivered in the sudden chill emanating from her. What had he said, what could he possibly have done to plunge her into this icy mood?

He had called her beautiful. What woman could object to that? She was beautiful. Stunningly so. She was also clever, responsible and determined. But beyond that, Rudi thought he had seen a vulnerability in her. A softness beneath the polished surface waiting for someone—the right man—to find it. He wanted to be that man.

The helicopter landed at the airport outside the city where he kept his private plane. Ellen balked as he led her across the tarmac to where the plane waited, engines thrumming.

"Just exactly how far is this place we're going?" she demanded.

"Not far. Wink of an eye and we will be there." He urged her onward, and reluctantly she came.

"Then why do we need to take a plane?"

"So we can get there in the wink of an eye. Without the plane it would be four winks and a snore, at least." Rudi tried teasing to pull her out of that icebox.

She humphed and climbed on board. The plane's opulent appointments irritated Rudi less than usual, because he hoped they might soothe Ellen's mood. Technically the plane belonged to the family, for ferrying various members here and there, but practically it belonged to Rudi. He was, for the most part, the only one who used it. Everyone else preferred to use the larger, even more luxurious model. Rudi liked this one, the smallest jet the company made, because he could fly it himself if he wanted.

The lunch basket was in place on the table, he noted as he paused to pull off his robes. He draped them over one of the seats and headed forward, wearing only the dark slacks and white dress shirt that were his usual attire beneath the djellaba.

"Samuel." Rudi clapped his hand on the pilot's shoulder. "Is everything ready?"

"All set. You're flying yourself?"

"I am." Rudi took the clipboard from the other man. "Take the day off. Take the week off, if you prefer."

Samuel laughed. "Maybe I'd better. You're skipping out again, aren't you?"

Rudi kept his expression bland. "I have a bodyguard with me."

Disbelieving, the pilot bent and looked into the passenger cabin. He straightened with a low whistle. "Some bodyguard. I wouldn't mind guarding that body any day."

"That body is guarding me, and from what I hear, she is very, very good at it."

"You'll have to tell me all about it when you get back."

Rudi gave the other man a look calculated to intimidate. It did not work as intended—nothing much intimidated Samuel—but at least he fell silent. "Did you get the flight plan filed for me?"

"Barely. You didn't give much notice." Samuel paused. "Santa Fe again?"

"That is what the flight plan says." Rudi bent over the instruments, beginning his preflight checklist.

"So how come every time you file a flight plan to Santa Fe, you never get there?"

Though his heart pounded with nerves, just as it had when Ellen called her office, Rudi refused to let it show. He trusted Sam with his life, but not with his privacy. No one knew where he was going, and it would stay that way. He had somehow made it past Ellen's phone call without catastrophe striking. He would survive this, too. "I get there. Sometimes."

"Not often."

"Often enough." Rudi straightened and turned to face Samuel. "It is no business of yours, is it?"

"It is if I get fired for not doing my job. You know I'm supposed to stay with the plane, even if you're flying. I belong in the right-hand seat."

“We have done this for years. No one has ever caught on, and no one will now. If they do, if they fire you, I will hire you.”

“You can’t afford me.” Samuel met Rudi’s gaze for a long challenging moment before he looked away. “But it’s your business. Just don’t get me caught up in it.”

“I am doing nothing illegal, nor is it immoral. I simply need room to breathe every now and again.”

“Okay, okay. With these terrorists running around back in Qarif, you can’t blame a guy for worrying.”

Rudi winked. “That is why I am taking a bodyguard with me this time.”

Samuel winked back. “Sure it is. Right.” He drew the word out long with skepticism. He left the cockpit then, and Rudi followed.

“I will see you in a few days,” Rudi said quietly, as Samuel stepped off the plane.

“There’s a thunderstorm brewing beyond Harrisburg,” Samuel said. “Better keep an eye on it.”

“Thank you. I will.” Rudi hauled up the door and dogged it shut, then turned to see Ellen watching him.

“Isn’t he the pilot?”

“I am.” Rudi plucked an apple from the basket and bit into it. “Fully qualified with all the required certificates. I learned to fly during my military training several years ago. I flew this plane here from Qarif.”

Ellen eyed him as if she were having second thoughts about agreeing to the trip.

“Do you want me to call you a cab?” he asked. “I am going, whether you come or not. So do I go with a bodyguard or without one?”

She sighed and tugged at that wonderfully short skirt. “Go fly your plane. I’m not getting off.”

Rudi nodded briskly, careful not to allow any of his triumph to show. He was getting much too good at dissembling. Sometimes it disturbed him, how good he was at it. But not today.

He finished his flight check, radioed the tower and received takeoff clearance. Moments later he was in the air flying west. When he was out of the airport traffic pattern, he engaged the autopilot and stepped back into the small cabin.

“Who’s flying the plane?” Ellen looked startled to see him.

“Autopilot. Just long enough for me to get a sandwich and some coffee.” Rudi poured from the insulated carafe into his lidded cup. “There is a storm ahead I want to keep an eye on.”

“The one past Harrisburg.”

“Correct.” Rudi winked at her, wondering how much else she’d heard. “I cannot keep anything from you, can I?”

She didn’t answer.

He stirred sugar into his coffee and snapped the lid on the cup. “Come up to the cockpit if you like. The view is much better up there.”

He picked up a sandwich wrapped in plastic and headed back up front, hoping Ellen would take him up on his invitation. He wanted to talk to her. He would rather have let Samuel stay and do the flying, but he had never allowed anyone to go with him to Buckingham. Until now.

Ellen sat in the soft velour-covered seat staring out the window at fat, fluffy clouds floating past and wondered what in heaven’s holy name she was doing in this airplane. She’d been in private corporate jets before, but none so sybaritically luxurious as this one, with the ornate rugs laid over the utilitarian gray carpet and the intricate inlay on the wood-paneled half walls. Nor had she ever been in one alone.

Not that she was exactly alone now. Rudi, her client, the body she was supposed to be guarding rather than lusting after, was on the plane with her. He was just in a separate part of the plane, in the cockpit, flying it. A rich man’s self-indulgence, she told herself.

She picked through the lunch basket, mostly to see what was there. She'd been hungry earlier, but no more. Rudi upset her stomach. It couldn't be the combination of guilt, resentment and desire he stirred up in her. But if it was, it was still his fault.

Ellen unwrapped a sandwich and sniffed it. Chicken salad. Very fresh chicken salad. Maybe she could eat a bite or two. She poured a cup of coffee. The first sip set her back on her heels—it was strong enough to stand up and walk out of the cup on its own. But it was good. She added cream and sugar to tone it down a bit, and made up her mind.

Carrying coffee and sandwich, she walked to the cockpit, staggering only once in slight turbulence. Rudi glanced up and smiled when she entered.

“So you decided to come see the cockpit.” He gestured at the chair to his right. “Have a seat. Take a look around.”

Ellen slid carefully into the seat. She didn't want to touch anything she shouldn't. Her seat had a steering mechanism in front of it that appeared to be locked down. Good. She looked out the window and was mesmerized.

Trees blanketed the rippling ground below them, interspersed with squares and rectangles of bright green or mellow gold, depending, Ellen supposed, on the crops growing there. Blue river ribbons curled through the patchwork, while black roads slashed arrow straight, dotted with fast-moving traffic. And around her—above, below, left, right, before, behind—the sky opened its vast vistas.

She could see clear to tomorrow and back to yesterday. Clouds kept them company like fat, contented sheep. But ahead, a dark line on the horizon shadowed her pleasure in the scene, told her the clouds weren't always contented.

“Is that the storm?” She tipped her head toward it. “Yes. We will turn south in a few minutes and fly around it.” He looked at her. “I do not fly through thunderstorms just to prove how manly I am.”

Ellen laughed. “No. You just ride through Central Park on a borrowed horse and snatch women off their feet.”

“For fun.” A tiny smile tickled the corners of Rudi's lips. “Admit it. It was fun, was it not?”

She shook her head. She might admit it to herself, but never, ever to him. “You're absolutely outrageous.”

“I know.” He winked. “And you love it.”

Rather than dignify his nonsense with a response, Ellen ate her sandwich.

Before long, they were flying with the dark line of clouds off their right wing, but the storm grew faster than the little jet could fly. The clouds seemed to boil, racing and churning as the pewter-gray froth climbed higher and higher, blotting out the sun. These were angry clouds, throwing lightning back and forth like insults, reaching out to drag Ellen and Rudi into their quarrel.

“Buckle up.” Rudi pointed at the shoulder harness attached to Ellen's seat. He already had his fastened, she noticed as she pulled the straps around her and clicked them into place.

“We will get caught in the edges of this storm,” he said. “The front is bigger and badder than it looked in the forecast, but we should miss the worst of it.”

“Can't we fly above it, or something?” Her hands shook, and she locked them together in her lap. Ellen couldn't believe her nerves were so shot. She'd never had a problem with flying in her life. But then, she'd never been in a plane this small in the middle of a storm that big with her safety in someone else's hands. Her cousin the shrink said she had control issues.

“It is too high. A commercial jetliner would have trouble getting above this one.” Rudi shot her a quick smile. “Relax. I have never crashed one yet.”

“That's the word that bothers me,” she muttered.

“What word?”

“Yet.”

Rudi laughed, a big, full-throated sound of pure enjoyment. Then the plane plunged, caught by a sudden downdraft.

Ellen yelled, and Rudi stopped laughing as he wrestled for altitude. The aircraft bucked and jolted like something alive trying to escape a predator's jaws. Ellen squeezed her eyes shut and hung on to the chair's armrests for dear life. She wasn't afraid. But if the plane was going to crash, she didn't want to see it.

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