

ARTIFICIAL HORIZON

By

Raynor Woods



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Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.
12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507
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www.sbpra.com

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For Sandra and Ferris who flew away too soon.

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CHAPTER ONE

Jenny crossed the terrazzo tiled floor of her elegant lounge to shut out the intrusive rays of the harsh Middle Eastern noonday sun. Closing the heavy wooden shutters of the balcony window, she was gripped by a sudden, overwhelming sense of fear that brought a feeling of choking and nausea to her throat. For the first time in her twenty-five years, she felt that the people and events in her life were spinning, independently, out of her control. Her legs, now trembling, began to buckle under her modest weight, causing her to shake uncontrollably. Falling in the nearest chair, she tried hard to regain her self-control, however, it was beyond her. Great heaving sobs broke through the last vestiges of her composure. Finally, she succumbed to the complete misery that was mounting within her, and wept unceasingly for what seemed like hours. In reality, only half an hour had passed.

The release of all of the pent-up emotion proved to be cathartic for her, and she gradually became aware of the extreme pressure she was under. As she began to recover and review the shocking situation she found herself in, the sound of an aircraft heading towards the airport for landing caught her attention. Almost ritualistically, she went to the balcony and looked to the skies. On occasion, Greg would give a slight tilt of the aircraft wing in salute to her as he flew over their apartment building. Today, she knew that was not going to happen. Now, everything had changed, the old days had gone, and only the unmitigated strain of waiting for news from the hospital filled her mind.

Crossing the room again, Jenny caught sight of her reflection in the mirrored-back of the ornate cocktail cabinet and noted the need to repair the damage done by her recent outburst of tears. Soon she would have to face people and look composed. Peering closer at her reflection, she wondered whether her external appearance was reflecting the intense inner-turmoil that was gripping her. The stark reflection witnessed that little of her *visible* composure had been lost, only a strained pallor and a slight puffiness was evident. Her looks were not the kind that immediately stood out in a crowd. She had natural good looks that tended gently towards sensuality. Not possessing the necessary skills with makeup, she rarely emphasized her beauty to the maximum. Indeed, it had only been when she came to the Middle-East that she had learned how to apply even the most basic of cosmetics.

Forgetting about her appearance, she began methodically to sift through her thoughts. *How could I have got myself in this impossible mess? How did I ruin my marriage to Greg when I was so much in love with him? Life was so wonderful and exciting in that first year we were together.* Closing her eyes, her thoughts returned to the start of their first idyllic year before all the doubts and suspicions had begun. Greg had been a first officer then, on the brink of achieving his command. After a whirlwind courtship, taking place over a two-month period on Greg's night-stops in London, he proposed to Jenny and persuaded her to come and live with him in the Middle East.

Greg flew for Kharja Airways, a wealthy Middle Eastern airline that was staffed mostly by Western ex-patriot crew members. He was one of the few pilots who had actually joined the airline from the Middle East. Greg's father, Sami Youssef, was an Arab from the nearby state of Koudara, while his mother, Victoria, was British. Greg was (in the culture and the law of Kharjan society) an Arab, and this gave him a positive advantage when career opportunities arose. He was always given the same consideration afforded to the few other Kharjan pilots, so whenever a promotion was available, Greg was a prime candidate. Thus, as soon as he had completed the necessary Airline Transport Pilots License requirements, he was put forward for

his command training. As most of the captains in the fleet were married, it was at this juncture that Greg decided his career would be better served if he too was married, and so he began his search for a suitable wife. In selecting a prospective wife, Greg had used the same kind of calculating rationale that he applied to every major decision in his thirty years of life. He wanted someone who was eminently presentable without being ostentatious and who would fit in the Euro/Arab culture in which he lived.

When he met Jenny, a young, good-looking nurse in London, he determined she was an ideal candidate. She was undoubtedly attractive but, probably through a lack of confidence, he'd observed, tended to underplay her assets. She wore little makeup and dressed rather modestly, disguising the seductive curves that lay beneath the baggy clothes she tended to wear. The fact that she was a North Country girl only added to her suitability, as his own adored mother came from the Yorkshire Dales. Greg felt confident that he would be able to gently mould her to his requirements as she was, clearly, infatuated with him.

Jenny remembered her arrival into Kharja, as it was a hot, sticky night that made breathing difficult. She was relieved when the car pulled up outside Greg's modest apartment and she could step inside to the welcome coolness of the air-conditioner unit, whirring fiendishly beneath the window. The apartment was modern and adequately furnished, although somewhat spartanly bereft of decoration. Jenny observed, approvingly, that Greg's house was kept immaculately clean and relished the thoughts of making a cosy home here for them both.

"I hope you are going to like it here, darling," said Greg considerately. "I know that I'm not offering you the most comfortable life in the world, and it is going to take you a while to adapt to the Arab culture and customs. But soon I will have my command, and then we can afford a much bigger apartment, or perhaps a villa, and then we can really start to live."

Jenny thought that this was a rather strange statement from Greg since, as far as she was concerned, she had already started to live. Indeed, she had been captivated by Greg's Mediterranean good-looks from the moment she had first laid eyes on him. Although only of average height, around five feet, nine inches, his appearance was stunning. His physique tended towards the athletic without any sign of stockiness. His dark hair curled roguishly round his ears and neck, complementing his lightly tanned skin. However, for Jenny, it was his eyes that most captivated her. They were of a piercing azure blue which seemed to look straight into her heart. All in all, he was one of the most handsome men she had ever met. His considerable charm equaled his good looks. Jenny was completely won over. "Greg, darling, please don't be concerned about me. This apartment is really very nice, you don't have to apologize about it, and I will love getting to know all about the Arab people. You know that being with you is the most important thing in my life. In fact," she risked the old cliché, "I would be happy to live in a tent with you." Greg seemed unimpressed by her answer and told her that a tent was the last place that he intended to live, with or without her.

Falling deeper into reverie, Jenny recalled the day that Greg was scheduled for his final check before his command training was complete. Waiting at home, with the morning dragging on endlessly, she prayed fervently that all would go well for him. When he arrived home that afternoon at around four o'clock, she did not have to ask him if he had made it, as his ear-to-ear grin told her that he would, from now on, be referred to as "*captain*" Greg Youssef in command of Boeing 707s. Jenny had never seen Greg so happy.

The evening of the following weekend, whilst celebrating Greg's gaining of Command on the 707s, was the beginning of their problems, Jenny reflected. Greg had invited John Gallagher, the training captain who had cleared him on his final check, and his wife, Peggy, to join them at the Kharja Hilton. Whilst back at base, Greg had gone to the office of the chief pilot, Hussein Al Fayeze, and in a much more formal manner, requested whether he and his wife Sherrifa would

honour the evening with their presence. Hussein had enquired who else would be attending, and after establishing it would be only senior crew members and their wives, happily agreed to join the party. Rank and protocol were always observed amongst the senior air crew at home base, and Greg congratulated himself on being able to get the elite senior crew to attend his celebration, as it boded well for his future prospects.

On the day of the celebration, Greg had been at the airport completing paperwork. Returning home, he joined Jenny for a light snack, followed by a short siesta to revive them from the heat and the strain of the day. Awakening, Greg turned lazily to Jenny, "Darling, tonight is going to be very important for me. I've been lucky in getting most of the senior air crew to come out with us this evening, and I want you to really impress them, especially Hussein and Sherrifa. It looks as if Hussein has taken a liking to me, and I want you to make a huge effort to charm Sherrifa. In the Middle East it is important that you give those in high office, and their families, due respect, and it will be deemed an insult if you put yourself before her in any way."

"Don't worry, darling," replied Jenny playfully, "I'm used to bowing and scraping to people. I had to contend with the hospital doctors and consultants when they did their ward rounds, and they thought they were nothing short of being gods."

Greg chuckled and added, "That's the spirit, sweetheart, but don't forget that Sherrifa comes from a very influential family and is used to getting everything she wants. You will have to be very diplomatic, my love." Within seconds he had fallen asleep again, seeming satisfied that Jenny would adequately defer to Sherrifa's status.

Checking the time, Jenny noted that they had slept for about two hours, leaving her only a couple of hours to prepare herself for the evening. Jumping into the shower, she gathered her thoughts. She wanted to make an impression on their important guests, so she needed to make one of her infrequent visits to the hairdressers. Phoning ahead to check that she could get an appointment right away, Jenny sped off into the congested Kharjan traffic.

"Hello, Madam Youssef," fawned Leila, her hairdresser, speaking in stilted English, "do you have an engagement zis evening zat you wish to look beautiful for?"

"Yes," replied Jenny, wondering if she would ever get used to being addressed as "madam." At twenty-two, she barely felt like a "Mrs." never mind a "madam." *Still*, she reasoned, *it is the custom here to have ones status as a married woman acknowledged, and I had better get used to it.* "As a matter of fact, Leila, Captain Youssef and I are holding a dinner party tonight to celebrate him getting his command, and he has invited some of his bosses, so I want to look really special tonight."

Leila clucked and fussed over Jenny. She unfastened her long, golden brown hair from the hastily twisted French pleat that Jenny had skrawked up earlier, telling her not to worry, that she would make her look like a princess. Leila was glad that tonight Jenny allowed her a free rein with her hair, as Jenny usually told her to put it up and out of the way. *Well, tonight*, Leila determined mentally, *Jenny will have her hair down in a much more becoming style.*

Leila was true to her word and Jenny did look stunning after her ministrations, as her hair, coiffed into swirling waves and curls, fell enticingly round her slender shoulders. "Now Madam Youssef, please come and look in the boutique downstairs. I have a new dress in from Paris that will look beautiful on you." Leila gushed encouragingly, "You must look really special for all those important guests!"

I suppose I could do with a new cocktail dress, thought Jenny. *All I have is my little black number and that is severely dated.* "All right then, show me what you have, and if I can afford it, I will consider taking it."

“Oh, Madam Youssef, it weel be a special price for you,” Leila replied in an almost wounded voice. *Yes thought Jenny wryly, it will probably be twice the normal price for me because I’m a foreigner.*

Leila unlocked a cupboard downstairs and showed Jenny a very elegantly coutured white, cotton jersey dress. Trying it on, Jenny was amazed at how well it suited her. The softly clinging bodice enhanced her slim figure, the design was suitably modest for Middle Eastern requirements, covering her arms, décolletage and shoulders. However, the back was scooped mischievously low, down to the centre of her back, where it gathered in again to fall in soft pleats to mid-calf length echoing the ’70s fashion of the moment. She twirled around and noted how the soft fabric danced seductively around her hips. “This is a really lovely dress, Leila, but do you think that it will be all right, I mean, that no one will find it offensive? I don’t want to do anything that will jeopardize the evening.”

Looking steadily at Jenny, Leila told her that if the dress were not acceptable for the Middle East, she would not have gone to the expense of ordering and buying it herself. “Anyway,” she continued, “I thenk that you are worrying too much. You know that the airline people are very Western in their ways because they travel very much, so who are you going to offend?”

Jenny conceded, “Yes, I think that you are right, and besides I have seen Arab women wearing quite daring outfits for the evening. How much is it?”

Surprisingly, Leila asked a reasonable price for the dress and told her that it would be a pleasure for her to think of Jenny wearing it that evening. “Just one more thing,” smiled Leila, “you will allow me to put on your maquillage.”

Jenny laughingly agreed, “You have done everything else, you might as well do my makeup.” Leila’s deft fingers worked busily for about fifteen minutes. “Look at yourself now, Madam Youssef. What do you think?”

Jenny stared at her reflection with amazement. Without significantly altering her appearance, Leila had subtly enhanced Jenny’s clear hazel eyes so that they looked wider and more appealing. Her usually unmade-up lips had now been emphasized with lip pencil and a glossy lip gel, making them appear softer and sensuously full. Her clear skin had simply been highlighted with a touch of foundation and blusher, and her pert, slightly upturned nose had been given a dusting of matt powder to stop the shine. “Oh,” exclaimed Jenny modestly, “is that really me? You have worked wonders Leila.”

Leila beamed, happy that she was the one who transformed Jenny. Beauty is very important for women in the Middle East, and Leila was constantly amazed at how little effort Western women put in to their everyday appearance. Leila liked Jenny, and was happy to show her how to make the most of herself. She thought Jenny was very naive and sweet and, more importantly, she treated her very well, like a friend, not like some of the stuck-up wives of executives who behaved as if she were their servant. She waved Jenny on her way and genuinely wished her a successful evening.

Getting into her car, Jenny glanced at her watch, and began calculating: *nearly quarter till eight and we need to be at the Hilton by eight thirty. It will take me only a minute to slip on my dress and some perfume and that will leave us just enough time to get to the hotel on time if the traffic is not too bad.*

“Hi, Greg, I’m home,” shouted Jenny, running for the bedroom.

“I’m just finishing in the bathroom. I’ll only be five minutes, are you nearly ready, Jen?” replied Greg hurriedly.

“Five minutes for me too, love,” Jenny rejoined. Greg finished showering and walked into the bedroom where Jenny was putting the final touches to her appearance.

“Wow,” said Greg in amazement, as he looked at Jenny, “You look terrific. Is that a new dress?”

“Yes, do you like it?” asked Jenny hesitantly.

“Like it? I love it. You have never looked so beautiful. I only hope that you won’t outshine Sherrifa.”

“If you think that this is inappropriate, I can put my black dress on instead,” Jenny volunteered somewhat reluctantly.

“No,” countered Greg, “I think your dress is fine.” Greg imagined the envious looks of the other men when they saw Jenny looking so young and beautiful. Most of the crew had been married for many years, and their wives had taken on that resigned, somewhat bored look of women who have a comfortable life but who are left too long on their own. *As for Sherrifa*, thought Greg, *her ego is so large that she will not even perceive Jenny to be any competition for her at all.*

They reached the hotel with only seconds to spare. John and Peggy Gallagher arrived almost behind them, accompanied by Geoff and Clare Lambert. Geoff was also a training captain who had been instrumental in Greg’s command training. Greg greeted them warmly, drawing heavily on his mother’s British influence. “Welcome, welcome, old chaps, do come and meet Jenny, my wife. She is one of your fellow countrymen or should I say women?”

“Perhaps you should say country ‘people,’ ” quipped Jenny jokingly. “I am pleased to meet you all. Shall we sit down and have a drink?” Jenny noted that both Peggy and Clare were obviously firm friends and both were significantly older than her. Often she found herself in this position, since she was a newcomer to the community and by far the youngest captain’s wife in the airline. However, her experience as a nurse lent her an air of maturity that belied her twenty-two years. Jenny initiated various interesting topics of conversation with the two women that were of mutual interest (generally concerning health) to help the evening along. Of course, the evening could not properly begin until the guests of honour and their entourage arrived. Everyone knew Captain Hussein Al Fayeze and Sherrifa would not arrive until, at least, an hour after the designated time. This was more or less an unwritten rule for important personages in the Middle East.

True to form, Hussein and Sherrifa arrived slightly more than an hour later than the others, accompanied by the executive flying crew. The entourage included Hussein’s deputy, Captain Chuck Bonner, who was an extremely experienced American pilot who had begun his career at the latter end of the Second World War. Chuck was now semi-retired from flying, but his easygoing manner made him a popular Second in Command, and Hussein relied heavily upon him in the day-to-day running of the airline. Following Chuck and his rather unsophisticated wife, Betty, was Captain Nikos Stianou, the 707 fleet captain, with his charming French wife Monique. Jumping smartly to his feet, Greg greeted Hussein and Sherrifa profusely in Arabic and ushered Hussein to the head of the table, seating Sherrifa at his right. When the formal greetings had been made in Arabic, the conversation resumed in English, and Jenny was duly introduced to the rest of the party as dinner was ordered.

Jenny was relieved Sherrifa was not at all reluctant to join in the conversation. In fact, Jenny was amazed and somewhat flattered that she had been singled out for most of her attention. Sherrifa gave Jenny quite an interrogation, wanting to know what her job was, where she was from and where she had met Greg. “Jenny, my chère, how is it that I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before?” enquired Sherrifa, her accent reflecting the expensive French education that she had received at the Sorbonne. Jenny longed to say that it was because, until tonight, she had been the wife of a lowly first officer and they would not have moved in the same circles.

However, she settled for politely saying that she had been married to Greg for only a few months and had not had the chance to meet many people in the airline.

“Well, chère, zat must change. I will make sure that you meet everyone in the airline,” rejoined Sherrifa in dulcet tones. “Eet is so nice to have someone so young and beautiful around. You will come with me to all ze coffee mornings, and you will come with your new husband to all ze parties.”

Jenny was taken aback at all this attention. Greg had prepared her to expect Sherrifa to be some kind of egotistical, over-spoiled woman, when, in fact, Jenny found her to be youthful, beautiful and utterly charming. Indeed, Sherrifa was closer to Jenny’s age than many of the other wives. She was fifteen years younger than Hussein and, at thirty-three, could easily pass for ten years younger. She was a striking beauty with long, thick, wavy, shoulder-length hair as black as jet. At five feet, four inches, she stood the same height as Jenny, but where Jenny’s figure was slender, Sherrifa’s was full and voluptuous. Her ample breasts were emphasized by her tiny waist, and her full hips completed her hourglass figure. Jenny could see Greg glancing approvingly in her direction during the evening, and she anticipated his pleasure when he learned that Sherrifa was going to take her under her wing.

The evening continued on a pleasant note, and after the dinner was finished, some of the party began to wander onto the dance floor to the strains of an Italian band whose lead singer was crooning romantically. As usual, it was the foreign crew who took the lead. John Gallagher escorted Clare Lambert onto the floor as his wife, Peggy, was deep in conversation with Nikos. Geoff leaned over to Jenny and asked if she would care to dance.

“I would be delighted,” replied Jenny, and they moved onto the dance floor.

“How are you finding it over here, Jenny?” enquired Geoff.

“Well,” Jenny replied cautiously, “it does have its drawbacks, such as the heat and the lack of freedom for women, but on the whole, I am very happy. Greg takes good care of me and makes sure that we get out a lot when he’s off duty.”

“That’s good to hear. A lot of the ex-patriot wives find it too stifling and find it hard to mix with the locals. Still, I suppose it’s different for you because you have the best of both worlds with old Greg being half English and half Arabic.”

“That’s true,” said Jenny matter-of-factly, “but you know that over here, Greg is considered to be completely Arabic because his father is an Arab.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that before. Not much hope for women’s lib over here then,” Geoff joked.

“Mmm,” replied Jenny, glancing back to the table where the rest of the party was sitting.

Sherrifa, Nikos and Monique seemed to be deep in conversation while most of the others were on the dance floor. Hussein had asked Betty to dance as none of the other wives were including her in their conversation. He felt sorry for Betty because she was overweight and had none of the social graces that were common to the other wives. She was a misfit and the others did not spare her feelings in letting her know it.

“Are you enjoying the evening, Betty?” asked Hussein, whose clipped English accent reflected his public school education at Uppingham.

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly say enjoyin’ but I am findin’ it interesting,” replied Betty in her deep Southern drawl. “I predict that sparks will begin to fly when those two good-lookin’ young-bloods start doing the rounds,” she said, indicating Greg and Jenny.

“I’m afraid that you are right, Betty,” sighed Hussein as he whisked her off into the midst of dancers who were crowding the dance floor.

Jenny had been kept on her feet dancing for quite a while and was ready for a long, cool drink when Nikos approached her. “Ah, Jenny, I can see that you are tired, but when you have finished your drink, I insist that you spare a dance for me.”

“Oh, I’m not really tired, only rather warm. Let me swallow this drink, and I will be right with you.” Jenny found Nikos to be an excellent dancer. He had natural rhythm, and Jenny soon began swaying effortlessly with him. He was a handsome man of Greek extraction, about ten years older than Greg and gifted with the same easy charm her husband possessed. During the second slow dance with Nikos, Jenny became aware of his arm drawing her body closer to him, and she began to feel uncomfortable. Feeling her stiffen under his arm, he whispered to her, “Jenny, you sweet thing, don’t pull away from me. I don’t often get the chance to dance with someone as beautiful as you.”

Feeling compromised she told him, “Nikos, you have a lovely and charming wife. I don’t know how you can say that.”

“Lovely she may be,” returned Nikos, “but charming she is not.”

“I think you are being rather disloyal to say that about her,” Jenny shot back. Nikos laughed and held her even closer.

Back at the table, Jenny could still feel where Nikos’ hands had touched her, and he made little effort to hide the fact that he was giving her long, penetrating stares that both excited her and terrified her. She looked for Greg to give her reassurance, but he was escorting Sherrifa to the dance floor. Monique was also conveniently out of the way too, as she was dancing with Hussein. The only ones at the table were Chuck and Betty. Jenny launched in to conversation with Betty, who could see her predicament.

“Say, Jenny, do you know where the john is in this place?” drawled Betty unceremoniously.

“Oh yes, yes,” replied Jenny thankfully, “I will take you there myself.” She could feel Nikos’ eyes on her back as she left the room and was glad to escape to the relative sanctuary of the ladies’ powder room. Jenny sank gratefully into the plush chair that had been thoughtfully provided, exhaling loudly. Turning to Betty she said, “Thank you for bailing me out back there. I was feeling quite uncomfortable with Nikos looking at me like that. I suppose that he must have had a bit too much to drink.”

Betty countered, “No, I don’t think so, honey. He’s got an early flight in the mornin’, and I’ve never known him to drink within eight hours of a flight. When it comes to flyin’, he goes by the book. But unfortunately for you, dear, that’s the only time he does go by the book.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jenny.

“What I mean, honey, is that Nikos has got his eye set on you, and he ain’t gonna quit until he’s got you into the sack.”

“Oh, you can’t be serious,” said Jenny.

“I’m real serious. I have known that son of a gun for the best part of ten years, and I’ve never seen him fail to get who or what he wants. And he don’t care what method he uses either. Although, I gotta say that most of the ladies don’t need much persuasion, but something tells me that you are different.”

“You bet I’m different,” protested Jenny indignantly. “I have only been married a few months, and I’m really in love with Greg. I don’t want that egotistical so-and-so laying his hands on me.”

“Well if that’s the case, hon’, you are gonna need some help because Nikos will put every kind of pressure on you, including threatening to make things difficult for Greg in the airline,” said Betty seriously.

“Surely, he wouldn’t do anything to affect Greg’s career. It’s totally unethical,” responded Jenny rather indignantly.

Like I said, his personal flying is the only thing he goes by the book. Everything else is fair game to him. Listen, honey, I will do what I can to help y’all. I’ll explain things to Chuck and

see if he can arrange the roster so that Nikos is always flying when Greg is. At least that will cut down his opportunities for gettin' to ya."

"Thank you, Betty, I really appreciate that. But how does he get away with doing that kind of thing?"

Betty looked at Jenny and wondered how much she should tell her. She was so young and naïve, and she did not want to shatter her illusions about the kind of things that went on amongst a lot of the crew. "Look, honey," Betty replied gently, "Nikos is a first-class bastard, and he will use anything or anyone to get what he wants. What's more, he's got a lot of influence with Hussein and uses that to reinforce his position of power."

"I rather thought that Hussein was a very straight sort of chap who would not stand for any messing about," stated Jenny.

"He is, Jenny, but that wife of his, Sherrifa, ain't. And she's got him over a barrel. Sherrifa's family is very influential in this country, and if she don't get things the way she wants them, she goes home and hollers to daddy. Then daddy goes to see Hussein and threatens him with everything under the sun for making his little girl unhappy. I swear that woman gets everything she wants, and what's more, Nikos is her best friend and ally. Years back, when Sherrifa first met Nikos, they went for each other in a big way. You could feel the fire between them from yards away. That little affair went on for a couple of years, but then Sherrifa cooled. She dumped Nikos for a while and then befriended him again when she realized that he was quite happy to be a middle-man in her little affairs. That little partnership is still going strong."

"What about Hussein?" said Jenny, somewhat shocked. "Does he know?"

"I expect he does know, but what can he do? Sherrifa knows that her father would not hear a bad word said about her, and she'd deny anything that Hussein said about her."

"Yes, I can see how that would work, but what about Monique? Why does she put up with her husband behaving in such a way?" queried Jenny.

"She puts up with it, honey, because the very elegant and sophisticated Monique has got nowhere else to go. When she met Nikos, she was engaged to a very eligible suitor in Paris, and her snobby family was delighted with the match. Then Nikos came along and couldn't keep his hands out of the cookie jar. He was determined to have her and stopped at nothing to keep Monique from marrying her French Count. To cut a sordid story short, he got her pregnant, and her family never forgave her. The French Count married her sister, and poor Monique woke up one day to find that she was married to a bastard who was happy to keep her around as an adornment, and that she had no one to turn to since her family had cut her off without a word or a cent."

"That's appalling," cried Jenny. "Can't she just leave him and start out on her own somewhere?"

"Well, it would be real difficult for her since she ain't got no money of her own and Nikos won't give her any. What's more, she was not raised to be anything other than being a society wife, and she's got her son to think of, you know. In any case, she is so stubborn that she does not want her folks to know what a big mistake she made in marrying Nikos, and I guess she has not forgiven them for cutting her off like that. Still, she gets her own back with Nikos. She does her social duty for him but that's it. The rest of the time she treats him with contempt."

"Well, I'm glad that someone does," said Jenny looking at her watch. "You know, we have been in here for fifteen minutes, Betty. I think we had better go back inside before it looks impolite."

"I guess you're right honey. Let's head on back. Just remember to watch out for that Nikos. If you need any more help, you can give me a call."

Returning to the party, Jenny noted Greg was obviously relieved to see her. “There you are, darling. Everyone was wondering where you were.”

“Oh, I just spilled some wine on my dress, and it took quite some time to remove it. Betty was kind enough to help me,” lied Jenny convincingly. Betty nodded to all as if to confirm the story.

The evening gradually began to wind down. It was almost eleven thirty and most of the pilots had early starts and wanted to grab some sleep before it got too late. Recognizing this need, Hussein gestured to Sherrifa that it was about time for them to go, giving opportunity for the others to leave without breaking protocol by leaving before them. Greg and Jenny stood up to bid their guests farewell. Sherrifa told them both how much she had enjoyed the evening and looked forward to seeing them again very soon. Turning to Jenny she insisted, “Jenny, chère, I weel call you tomorrow to arrange to have coffee or go shopping, that weel be so nice, ne ce pas?”

“That will be very nice,” replied Jenny. “I look forward to it.”

Sherrifa said her goodbyes to the other wives before she and Hussein made their exit. Nikos and Monique were the next to leave. Nikos was very friendly towards Greg and congratulated him again on getting his command. “Listen, Greg,” said Nikos encouragingly, “now that you have made captain, I’m sure we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other, and I want you to know that if you have any problems, you must come to me and I will help all I can.”

Greg thanked him, pleased that Nikos had apparently taken a liking to him. He had heard that Nikos could be very difficult with those he did not like.

Greg bade goodnight to Monique while Nikos took Jenny’s hand and whispered in her ear, “See how nice it can be for you and your husband when I am kept happy, sweetie?”

Jenny cringed at the threatening tone of his words and at the derogatory way he called her “sweetie.” Not wishing to disrupt the evening in any way, Jenny smiled and replied, “It was so good of you and Monique to come, and I look forward to seeing you both again.”

“Count on it,” whispered Nikos as he left.

Chuck, Betty and the others followed them out, bidding their farewells to Greg and Jenny. Chuck smiled warmly at Jenny, “It’s been a very pleasant evening. Betty has really enjoyed herself. Now if you need anything, you just come on over and talk to Betty. She will be only too happy to help you.”

“I enjoyed Betty’s company, and I certainly will be contacting her,” replied Jenny sincerely, hoping that Betty would not forget what she had promised her earlier in the powder room. It looked as if Nikos was going to use Greg against her to get his way, and she felt defenseless.

When the guests had all departed, Greg and Jenny made their way home, holding a postmortem of the evening as they went. “Jenny, you were wonderful this evening,” praised Greg. “You got along marvelously with Sherrifa, and it was a master stroke to befriend Betty like that. I noticed the other wives didn’t bother with her very much.”

“Well, I actually liked her, Greg,” said Jenny seriously. “I know she does not fit the usual mould of a captain’s wife, being so outspoken and unsophisticated, but she was very pleasant with me.”

Jenny wondered whether it would be a good idea to tell Greg what Betty had told her about Nikos. Some inner instinct told her that it would not, so she approached the subject in a different way. “What did you think of Nikos?” queried Jenny.

“Nikos?” repeated Greg. “He’s an ace pilot, you know, but he can be a bit of a bastard with anyone he doesn’t like. But he was really pleasant with me, told me to come to him if I had any problems, and that’s quite an honour coming from him. I think I am going to get on well with him. I noticed he danced with you for a long time. How did you find him?”

Thinking of how to carefully phrase her words, Jenny replied, “As a matter of fact, darling, he was a tiny bit fresh with me. I think he must have had a bit too much to drink.”

Greg knew, as Betty did, that Nikos would not be drinking before his early morning flight and was rather thrown by Jenny’s criticism. “Darling,” he countered, “I’m sure that was all that it was, but you know that Nikos is a bit of a ladies’ man and likes to flirt with all the pretty women.”

Jenny was surprised at Greg’s slightly untruthful answer, but she gave him the benefit of the doubt — perhaps he really didn’t know that Nikos had an early morning flight. Not feeling happy to leave the situation as it was, she tried to convey her misgivings to Greg again. “Greg, I felt it was a bit more than just flirtation. He was a bit intimidating,” complained Jenny.

“Jenny, you are very naive about some things,” shot back Greg angrily, “and you are going to have to grow up a bit. This sort of thing is going to happen, and you are going to have to learn to deal with it on your own. Besides, the last thing I want to do is to alienate Nikos.”

Jenny felt as if she had been slapped across the face and was reeling from the implications of what Greg had just said to her. He had made it clear that she must not rock the boat for him and that Nikos should be kept happy. It hurt to think that Greg might realize what that would mean for her, so she chose to ignore it. Tears stung her eyes but she forced them back. She was unable to think of anything to say, so she sat in silence the rest of the way home. By the time they reached home, Greg had cooled off but Jenny was subdued.

“Jenny, please don’t think that I am a monster,” he said to try and placate her. “You know that I love you. I want the best for us, and the only way we will get it is if we play the game well. We have made a good start this evening, and I’m sure we will get invited to all the right parties and mix with the right people. Without that, I will not move much further up the ladder than I am now. I have every chance of joining the executive staff in a year or two if we play our cards right, so let’s not blow it now over a small issue that might turn out to be nothing.”

The way Greg put it made Jenny feel like she had rather jumped the gun and ended up conceding that he was probably right. However, she could not shake the lingering feeling that Greg’s ambitions came well before his love for her. *Still*, she reasoned, she would not *want to be married to a man who had no drive or ambition, and if she loved Greg she would have to love that part of him too.*

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