

## PRAISE FOR SHIRLEY GOULD

“Shirley not only brings Africa to life but immerses you in a world of both beauty and peril. A gripping story about justice, truth, and the cost of standing up for what you believe in.”

— USA TODAY’S BEST-SELLING AUTHOR  
SUSAN MAY WARREN

“Loved this book! Such a great, clean romantic novel and suspenseful too. I couldn’t put it down. I love the spiritual side of it too. Can’t wait till her next book comes out.”

— JEANNE TAKENAKA MBT AUTHOR,  
WINNER OF THE FRAISER AWARD

“Do you enjoy books that are set outside of the U.S. and getting to see a new part of the world through an author’s words? If you answered yes, then I have a book for you. *The Sahar of Zanzibar* by Shirley Gould takes readers to the island of Zanzibar off the coast of Tanzania.

Gould gives readers a taste of what both the missionary life and the vacationer’s life are like including the sights, struggles, and resorts. There were moments of suspense, but this novel leans heavier on the romance side of romantic suspense. It’s a unique location with a look at the beauty and struggles of life in Zanzibar.”

— SUZIE WALTNER, AUTHOR OF *MIDNIGHT  
BLUE*

“With the current world climate, I’m in no hurry to travel abroad. *The Sahar of Zanzibar* allowed me to experience adventure on an exotic island from the safety of my cozy chair.

This story is a delightful romantic suspense, an exciting tale of trusting our best-laid plans to the only One who can give us hope and a future. What’s not to love?”

— DONNA YARBOROUGH, *ASPIRING  
AUTHOR*

“This is a ‘must read’ if you like good, clean romance novels with a twist of suspense. The unusual setting also makes this a fun read! This is one of my favorite books to date and I have been a reader for 40+ years. The author did a great job of being descriptive without making me want to skip over the details as I do in some books. Fantastic book!!”

— SMITTY, AN AVID READER OF CHRISTIAN  
FICTION



ESCAPE  
*from*  
TIMBUKTU  
THE AFRICAN SKIES SERIES

SHIRLEY GOULD



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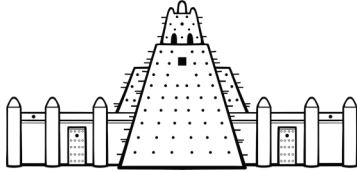
This is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all names, characters, businesses, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

To JR

*I'm so blessed to have been loved by you.  
You treated me like a queen and called me your lady.  
You believed in me  
and encouraged me to reach for the stars.  
You supported my dreams  
of being a published author.  
Writing suspense takes me back  
to the adventures we shared.  
Now as I launch my second novel,  
writing romance is easy to pen.  
I just let my thoughts wander down memory lane to the amazing  
love story we shared.*







If Ellie wanted to be boxed in, she'd have taken the CEO position at Bendale Enterprises. *Claustrophobic incorporated.* Flight attendant Elliana Bendale hurried around an African man who stood way too close and brushed against a woman's sweaty body, saturating her arm. *I want to be among the people—but not all of them at once.*

Deboarding from the late-landing flight, minutes behind two others, the mass of travelers resembled a herd of cattle being driven down Main Street in an old west town, stirring dust in their wake. With those surrounding her lacking appreciation for personal space, Ellie inched forward in the customs line as a woman with mismatched clothes and a ratty wig molded her body to Ellie's.

"Hey guys, I want to be your friend, but we Americans like our space." Talking to herself again. A bad habit.

*I'd suffocate in an office. Four walls would close in, just like a trap from the Indiana Jones movies.* All the more reason to land this job with *Above & Beyond Magazine*. At twenty-seven, it was time to prove herself—to make it as a photojournalist, to meet the challenges, and get the job of her dreams. Flying the African

skies opened her eyes to other options for her future—presenting exciting opportunities—such as the one that put her in this perspiring mob of travelers.

Ellie took the concrete stairs toward baggage claim, where a sea of passengers moved en mass, crowding for a spot next to the conveyor belt delivering their luggage at a snail's pace.

*And I thought the airlines packed the cheap seats like sardines.* She shook her head and joined the mayhem, the chaos of languages from several African tribes swirled through the Mali West Africa Bamako Airport baggage claim area. With high temperatures creating a stifling sauna effect, Ellie wished for air-conditioning as sweat rolled down her back.

Her blonde hair, western attire, and fair skin set her apart from the mass of curious dark-skinned passengers. Ceiling fans stirred the heat, humidity, and odors, making breathing difficult. Spotting her American Tourister piece between a spray-painted metal suitcase and a dilapidated box tied with twine, she moved closer to the luggage belt to grab it before it disappeared in this throng of people. She couldn't lose it—her research for this project was inside.

Squeezing through two sweaty men, Ellie attempted to retrieve her shiny blue suitcase, but a hulk of a man with earbuds in his ears and a phone in his hand barged through the crowd to grab his duffle bag.

“Sir, yes, sir. My plane landed late. I'll be there before the Embassy closes. I'm moving as fast as I can.” Engrossed in his loud phone conversation, competing with the noise of the crowd, the swoon-worthy Frenchman reached for his bag.

His physique caught Ellie's attention. He looked to be about thirty, with dark brown hair and steely grey eyes, the build of a man who spent time in a gym, and a French accent that would make a teenager drool.

When the Frenchman grabbed his duffle, Ellie's carry-on toppled. She reached for it, colliding with him. He glanced at

her, paused, nodded his head, and gave a hint of a smile. With a small salute, he righted the piece, and trudged forward, his combat boot smashing her toes as he rushed past her.

Searing heat pierced her foot. Air whooshed from her lungs as she slapped her hand over her mouth, smothering a scream. *He. Broke. My. Toe!* With tear-filled eyes, she sat on her carry-on. While she lingered in excruciating agony, her suitcase traveled around the large block-walled, warehouse-style building. On the bag's fourth trip around, Ellie managed to stand and pull it off the belt.

She limped to the customs desk, gave the officer her passport and VISA, and waited as the steady throb worsened. Seeing the handsome toe-breaker detained in a glass-walled office for further screening by the officials, Ellie smiled. A customs officer had unloaded his duffle bag and was inspecting every pocket. *Ha!* The elephant in the room had met his match.

Stepping out of the baggage claim building, Ellie was greeted by a group of drivers holding signs with names on them. Glad to see a line of cabs filling the area with exhaust, she made her way to the curb, motioned for one, and reached for her luggage. While her back was turned, the cab door slammed. She spun around. The hunky Frenchman had stolen her cab.

"You're kidding me!" She stomped her foot and gritted her teeth as sharp throbs screamed a reminder of her injury. "Hey, that's my taxi! Who do you think you are?" Ellie raised her hands in disgust. But it was too late. A mixture of exhaust and dust from the fleeing cab burned her eyes. She wiped her eyes and hailed another taxi.

Something cold and hard pressed into her back.

"The gun is loaded. Don't make me use it." A man's harsh whisper sent a chill up her sweaty spine as he barged into her personal space and jerked her away from the curb.

Ellie stood frozen in one-hundred-degree sunshine.

“English, *monsieur*?” Beau de La Croix asked the driver.

“Yes.”

“French Embassy—and hurry!” Beau looked back to make sure no one was following and saw the blonde tourist he’d passed at the luggage belt. Her eyes were wide under raised eyebrows. Was she upset?

*Not every beautiful woman needs my assistance. Losing Jezelle has tainted my thinking.* He ran his hand through his hair. *Keep your head in the game, de la Croix. You’re on a tight schedule.* Beau lost sight of the blonde as dust rose behind the taxi.

Pulling his button-down shirt away from his skin, he tried to cool himself from the African heat. He lowered his window and tolerated the dust blowing in for a little relief.

“Looks like traffic ahead.” The driver caught Beau’s eyes in the rearview mirror.

“I must be there before the Embassy closes at five. Get me to the gate, and I’ll double your fare.” Beau wiped the sweat off his brow and hoped this bumpy road wasn’t a precursor to the week ahead. His assignment, if successful, could benefit this region of the world, but if he failed, the situation could turn dangerous.

“We will arrive on time.” The Malian cab driver took a detour through the crooked, rutted back streets lined with old kiosks and shanty dwellings. Motorcycles raced around them. The driver dodged children as squawking chickens took flight above the pot-holed road. An ibis cried overhead, competing with horns blaring as the smell of fresh cow dung fragrancd the air.

After fifteen minutes of rough riding, avoiding donkeys and scrawny dogs, the driver jerked to a halt in front of the Embassy so fast a cloud of dirt blew toward them. Turning to his passenger, he smiled, displaying a jagged row of brown teeth.

Beau reached forward and grabbed the driver's shoulder. "You did it. Thanks." He gave him a stack of francs and slipped out of the cab.

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"What?" Ellie's eyes widened as she scanned the mass of people hurrying around her, oblivious to what was happening. *I'm invisible. Someone is holding a gun to my back in broad daylight, for crying out loud!* "I'm a visitor here—a photojournalist on assignment. I don't know what you want, but—" Her hands slicked with sweat as icy dread clenched her gut. She willed herself not to throw up on the gritty sidewalk.

The man leaned forward and muttered close to her ear. "Don't say a word! Take a step back." He jabbed his weapon into her ribs with bruising force.

Ellie sucked in a breath—then stepped back as she turned her head slightly. *Where's a guard when you need one?* Getting a glimpse of his clothing, the man had to be foreign military since his camo was unlike American military uniforms. He spoke down to her, so she guessed his height to be at least six-foot. But gathering info like a reporter would not get her out of this predicament. Hypervigilant to his threats, Ellie let out the breath she'd been holding.

"Was that man Dubois?" His breath smelled of masala and strong tobacco as his scruffy beard brushed her cheek. His clothes reeked of sweat and motor oil, and the toes of his boots were worn and sandy.

Biting the inside of her mouth, she tried not to panic as her body trembled. The hubbub of taxis honking and backfiring added to her angst. "I don't know him." She paused, wanting to run, but afraid he'd shoot her. "He wasn't on my flight."

"I saw you with him. You watched him as if you knew him. Where is he going?" He pressed his gun deeper into her back.

“Ow.” She sucked in a breath. “Since I don’t know his name, I didn’t ask him where he was going.” Her eyes filled with tears. *Lord, help me!*

“What destination did he give the driver?” Spit flew from his mouth as he spouted his question.

“He took my taxi. I was yelling at him, so I didn’t hear a word he said.” She felt the press of the gun decrease slightly. The tightness of his grip on her arm lessened. “Is this how you treat all tourists who come to Mali? No wonder tourism in West Africa has dwindled. I was sent to write an article enticing tourists to visit this country.” She waited—amid the airport chaos—no more questions came. She took a risk, braced herself, and turned slowly—he’d vanished.

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The tall decorative iron gates guarding the ornate building opened as Beau approached the stately French Embassy. “Good to see you again, de La Croix.” The uniformed guard saluted Beau. “Deputy Chief Auguste is waiting for you in his office. You can leave your bags with me and go right in.” He waited for Beau to return the salute, then locked the gate.

“Great to see you too, John Paul.” Beau left his duffle and backpack and entered the distinguished compound housing the Embassy.

Unaccustomed to being dressed in civilian clothes, he followed the pristine sidewalk leading to the building. Taking the steps two at a time, he entered the lobby. Its decor, with its long drapes on tall windows and elaborate paintings of Ambassadors who had served Mali in years past, looked out of place in this dusty West African country.

Beau took a right and hurried to the office of Dax Auguste, the Deputy Chief of Mission, his liaison on this assignment. In

the waiting area, he stood at attention among uniformed soldiers until he was summoned.

“de La Croix, come in. I was glad when your name came up on my roster. It’s been a while since our paths have crossed.” Chief Dax Auguste stood and approached Beau.

“I’m glad to be back in Mali, sir.” Beau saluted his superior.

The Deputy Chief returned the salute. “Your shipment has arrived. I think I have what you need.” Dax Auguste, austere in his military uniform, carried himself with utmost confidence. He went back to his desk, a magnificent piece of furniture that perfectly matched the bookcases lining the room. Definitely imported from France. “Get that door for me.”

After shutting the door, Beau stepped farther into the office.

The Deputy Chief opened a drawer and pressed a button unlocking a hidden compartment in the paneled wall. He ambled over and moved the panel revealing Beau’s weapons before returning to his desk.

“Your orders arrived yesterday from Philippe Leroux. Keeping this photojournalist safe while completing your mission will be a juggling act. But if anyone can accomplish it, I believe you can.” Auguste looked at the photo attached to Beau’s orders.

“I needed a ruse, a cover story to get me into Timbuktu to carry out my assignment. It’s imperative we know if terrorists are still active in the area. For Timbuktu to rebuild tourism, we must end their reign in this country. Several men were available for this mission, but I drew the short straw.” Beau smirked and moved to the display of his weapons.

“You’ve been spending too much time in America. That sounds like one of their sayings.” Auguste took a seat in his tufted leather desk chair and steepled his fingers in front of his mouth.

“Yes, a cynical cliché meaning I’m the unlucky guy who was given this grand opportunity—but if Hussein is involved, I’d

volunteer for this task just to settle a score with the man.” Beau smiled as he hid the armory on his person. “Besides, since I’ve been undercover on my last assignment, I had the look of a civilian with this long hair.”

“You’d think as long as Saddam has been dead, we wouldn’t still be haunted by his distant relatives,” Auguste said.

The Glock fit perfectly in Beau’s palm before he slid it into his boot. He looked at his Smith & Wesson pistol, then holstered it in the waist at the back of his pants. Beau opened and closed his spring-loaded pocketknife and slipped it into his other pants pocket. In his shirt pocket, he stashed a SOG flashlight. Once the panel was empty, he closed it and stood at attention.

“Allow me to recap your assignment. Tourism in Timbuktu has dwindled since terrorists invaded several years back. I’ve received intel of a cell working undercover in the city.” He paused. “I requested for someone to be sent in to ‘spy out the land,’ so to speak. This is a tentative situation. In January, the Festival of the Desert will take place on the outskirts of Timbuktu. The Tuareg band Tinariwen is scheduled to perform. Make sure it’s safe. I wish you success, but this can turn dangerous, so don’t get yourself killed. Understood?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll take that as an order.”

The Chief leaned forward with his elbows on his desk and handed Beau a folder holding his assignment details with a picture of the photojournalist paper-clipped inside the folder.

Beau accepted the folder, put it under his arm to look at later, and saluted Dax Auguste.

“For this job, try not to act so military—it could blow your cover. Watch your back.” Auguste extended his hand.

“I will, sir.” Beau shook his hand.

“Reneé said to tell you hello.” Auguste smiled.

“Please greet her for me and ask if I could get some of her baklavas when I get back to Bamako.” Beau smiled, then



pivoted on his steel-toed boots and left the office. The sound of his footsteps reverberated in the deserted halls. Leaving through the front gates, he found his taxi idling outside.

The driver threw his cigarette butt out the window and waved.

Opening the back door, Beau slung his bag and backpack into the back seat and slid inside. The smell of cheap cigarettes filled the vehicle. “You waited?” Beau unzipped his backpack and shoved the folder inside, then tossed it on top of his duffle.

The cabbie grinned. “Yes, I knew you would not be here long and would need a ride—and you tip well. I need the francs.” He laughed.

“Thanks. Azalai Hotel, *Monsieur*.” Beau leaned into the vinyl of the cab’s bench seat and blew out a breath. He’d barely made it before they locked the gates.

The spunky driver plunged them into evening traffic as Beau relaxed for the first time since his arrival. Being armed, he felt whole—ready for action.

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Terrorist leader, Dhakir Hussein rubbed the jagged scar on the side of his scruffy jaw—a constant reminder of Dubois. The scar added to his rugged look that attracted the ladies, but the pain Dubois had inflicted fueled the fire that kept Hussein fighting—pursuing all enemies of their agenda.

He released a hot breath and ran his mill file down the rough edge of his tactical knife, the Frenchman on his mind. Sweat ran down his back as the African sunshine baked his skin. He tossed the knife and file into the passenger seat and moved his Hummer to a petrol station across the street. Scanning the area in front of the station, he searched for the American woman or Dubois.

The scent of burning garbage drifted toward him. He

punched a number into his phone. “Emir, I got a glimpse of Dubois at the Bamako airport after I loaded our shipment.”

“Dubois? Are you sure it was him? I didn’t think he would ever return to Mali.” Emir said. “He’s either really stupid or extremely brave.”

“Or following orders,” Hussein said as fuel poured into both tanks. “It was him. I have his face memorized. Rage drives his actions. He’s been waging war with us since I blew up a restaurant in Paris, killing his woman. He was livid, as he left the remains of the restaurant with her blood on his military getup. I carry a scar from our last meeting, where he stabbed me before I shot him. I look forward to facing off again. We have a score to settle.”

“You will enjoy the challenge. I have no doubt. Are you on your way back, Dhakir, sir?” Emir asked.

“No. I’m waiting for Conan. He is buying provisions. The flight into Mali was delayed, and since it is so late, we’ll return to Timbuktu tomorrow. Have a man watch the airport. If Dubois flies in, stay hidden, but follow his movements until I arrive. No slip-ups. Understand?” Hussein reached for his knife and sliced the file down the knife’s edge one last time.

“I understand. It will be as you have said.” Emir ended the call.

Hussein checked the sharp edge of his knife and shoved it into its sheath. He finished a bottle of water, crushed it, then chucked it into a pile of trash accumulating along the road. With his tanks full, he paid for the petrol and started the Hummer.

Conan tossed several packages into the back seat of the SUV and jumped in, just as Hussein plunged them into the mayhem of Bamako’s traffic, daring anyone to pull in front of him. Road rage took on a whole new meaning to an angry military man driving a bulletproof all-terrain vehicle.