

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT
Africa's Snow White,
SUMMER LOVE (*The 1st novel in this series*)

“As a real-life counterpart to a character in these novels, I'm truly amazed at how this talented author has made the characters, and this story, come to life—again. There are a lot of endearing, hard-won love stories in the world - this is just one of them. I'm very stressed-out and nervous, reliving this story! As I read about all of these events, I find myself having nightmares again, and difficulty sleeping (at age 57) - and I have the benefit of knowing how it all ends! If you really love stories of love found, then lost, then found again, then lost - seemingly forever, then found again miraculously, then lost again to the far corners of the world - in which the lovers try their best to stay together, but malevolent forces work hard to keep them apart, then you're going to love this story, especially if you believe in dreams, wishes, prayers and miracles! I can assure you of this: as happened in real-life, the mysteries have barely begun to unfold, and you will soon see why I wish to refer to myself as ...” **Safety Anonymous**

“As the title suggests, *Summer Love and its sequel— Jealous Winter* is a story of innocence and treachery. On one level there is pure, innocent teenage love in a simpler time, but underneath, controlling even the innocent, is the conniving manipulation of the antagonist. From the start, I was curious to discover how the innocence and treachery would mesh. Well, I was not disappointed. The tension mounts; the suspense is gripping. These seemingly gentle novels became page turners that threatened to keep me up all night! Eloff has cleverly woven the divergent threads into a powerful ending.” —**Margaret Wolf**, High School English Teacher, Alberta, Canada

“A delightful read. It evoked in me memories of my own teenage years, growing up in Cape Town. My father was from the Free State Province of South Africa and went to St. Andrew's School in Bloemfontein in the early 1920's as a boarder. When we later went back to Bloemfontein as a family in the mid-1960's, my father was Chairperson of the St. Andrew's Old Boys' Association and I got to know the school well, although I never attended St. Andrew's. I am sure my father would have enjoyed the passages about the school and the typical schoolboy pranks. I now serve the people of South Africa as Ambassador to Panama and have had the pleasure of meeting and getting to know the author. I look forward to reading Jonathan's sequel to this book, as I am sure there will be one.” **Ambassador Leslie Manley**, from South Africa to Panamá, Ecuador, Bolivia, & Perú

“This fact-fiction fairy tale is the beginnings of an amazing love story intricately woven against the backdrop of South Africa. It is textured and spirited and manages to lure the reader into its pages. I expect to see great things from this young, new writer and am looking forward to the sequel.” —**Geraldine Gilliers**, Librarian & Reviewer (*Rootz Mag.* S. Africa)

“Jonathan Eloff beautifully weaves together true life events of romance, heartbreak, betrayal, and suspense all the while describing South Africa’s natural landscape and daily life at the end of the Apartheid era.” —**Jody Hussey**, ESL Teacher

“Tender, hilarious, captivating . . .” —**Sue Merralls**, Special Events Organizer, Alberta, Canada **Special**

note to readers of these KINDLE and 2nd. Print Editions: *Jonathan won major concessions for these 2nd. editions – the right to include some of the more private details of the real-life love stories, which once you understand his relationship to characters within his novels, was a rather tricky decision! But how best to write about these more intimate details? By striking a deal with one of the real-life characters in these novels, to co-write the many added romantic scenes, adding much-needed realism, and also with another real-life counterpart to one of the novel’s characters, to edit said scenes. Truth is important for this story and, as happened in real life, truth is much stranger (and more entertaining) than fiction! Thus the characters agreed to shed their comfortably safe veneers of youthful innocence they’d previously enjoyed in his novels, so that now we can read how the teenagers in his novels were subject to similar temptations as have always existed and still exist to this day – and how they dealt with these successfully, though sometimes in rather humorous and very creative ways. These books are teen friendly, and they have a refreshingly normal feel to them, but that’s simply because they’re based on a very real story – one that proves again, that often real-life is stranger, and more entertaining, than fiction. The lovers even have their very own “secret place”, and it’s a much more beautiful, natural place than any “pink room”. Written (and actually lived) long before “50 shades of anything”, by contrast, it’s river, waterfall and pool is a very loving, caring place in which love is discovered, nurtured and matures, over 7y, 7m and 7 days, until it blossoms forth into a consuming life-time romance that spans hemispheres, continents and decades - one that fights hard to stay alive! It’s a love-story that simply couldn’t be planned or imagined. It’s “secret Author” clearly had a lot of fun scripting it, choosing players for the roles - then watching it all unfold. So sit back, relax, read and enjoy it.*

Download them FREE: <https://amongfriends.us/downloads.php>

NOTE TO THE READER: Author, Jonathan Eloff, lost the use of his hands and arms for almost 7yrs, and it was in that time that he asked to write his mom's story, using a special computer with laser beams and reflectors on his cap to track head movements (Mouse pointer) Foot-switches (Mouse buttons) WORD with speech recognition for text input/editing. The idea was to train him up as a novelist using her story. After lots of prayer by all, Canada's health care system having given up on him, the use of his arms & hands was restored by surgeons at Johns Hopkins, Panama, before finishing the novels. He switched to writing SciFi novels, and the project languished for several years. Jonathan became a world-famous, best-selling author (Amazon, Jasper Scott) The task of finishing the novels fell to his dad (a terrifying task!) so you'll notice a change in writing style for "Reunion" and "The Wedding", but at least they're done now. To honor answered prayers, these novels are FREE. Enjoy them as you relive the story along with us, and, as we did, conclude "All things work together for good ..."

Africa's Snow White v1

Summer Love (Kindle version)

By: JONATHAN ELOFF (Some 2nd. Ed. scenes co-written by Nicholas Strauss)
Download them FREE: <https://amongfriends.us/downloads.php>



Sweet sixteen ... Do you remember the feelings of falling in love as a teenager? Summer vacations, summer romances, The boy (or girl) next door, summer camps...As you're reading, think of Veronica, Betty, Archie, Reggie, Moose, Midge, Jughead. *Funny thing is, we all read the Archie comics in Africa ... and then it all happened to us! As you read the novels, see if you can figure out who is who?*

Vol-1: **Summer Love** (e-Book / PDF)

By: JONATHAN ELOFF (Some 2nd Ed. scenes co-written by Nicholas Strauss)

Download them all FREE at: <https://amongfriends.us/downloads.php>

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The "Africa's Snow-White" series of novels have a fairytale feel to them, so people may assume that these books are works of fiction, but places and characters as well as almost all of the incidents, are quite real! Specific dialogues, however, are a product of the author's imagination. Names have been changed to protect the identities of characters — the guilty ... and the innocent victims.



Imagine meeting the love of your life (mind you, at 15 & 16, we all think that) but only for the three weeks of Summer vacation, then having to return to opposite ends of the country to resume life-as-usual, with only the post-office to help you stay in touch - no long-distance phone calls! That was reality in the 1970's. No Cell phones, Email, cheap Long-distance calls - no cheap flights either.

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE FICTION

I can't take credit for the real story, since it's older than I am. What you're about to read is a compilation of actual events, involving characters who, for the most part, are still alive today. With only minor exceptions, I wrote everything as it was described to me by the people who were there to witness these events, and not merely as my imagination would have dictated. The result was a surprising mix of the mystery, laughter, tears, and heart-wrenching scenes which typify real life. The more I researched and wrote, the more I realized that imagination was almost superfluous to the process, which I suppose makes me more of a journalist than a novelist. That said I didn't go looking for this story. It was under my nose for many years before I actually saw it for what it was, and when I saw it, I realized it had to be written down before it died along with its characters. So read knowing that as you do, you're turning through the pages of history. By the end of the series you'll fully appreciate why I chose the title of **Africa's Snow White**. The first six novels are done the 7th & 8th still planned ([Note to readers: They're done now, written by Jon's dad](#)) That will bring about an interim conclusion to this real life fairy tale, without which I would not have been born. There may be 9th & 10th novels, at a later date, which will conclude the story in its entirety. Until then, fasten your seat-belts for a wild ride. Along the way, you will get to see where I fit into this story, and along with me, you will get to attend 3 weddings on three continents, but not even that's as simple as it sounds! Sensing that my relation to some characters would take the passionate edge off the story, I enlisted help from some of the story's real-life characters to co-write scenes, to make the romance & passion inherent in the story come back to life again. I'd have to say they did a good job of that, but relax, this is still a teen-friendly series, though in real-life there were characters in this story who were not at all friendly to the sweet, innocent teenage lovers. What a shame! Oh well, without them there would be no story, as all Fairy-tales need dastardly villains ... as well as innocent victims. Villains fuel all of these stories! **But the most intriguing aspect** of this real-life fairy tale, is that whilst this love story seems to begin with 15y old Elizabeth & 16y old Nicholas meeting, in the Wilderness national park in South Africa, in 1971; without them suspecting - yet, it also seems to have some connections to a tearful farewell of the French Huguenot a 15y old Genevieve & 16y old Charl, on the dockside in 1700's France. Both love-stories are set to have a happy ending, in South Africa, 7y+7m after their serendipitous 1971 reunion, in 1979. Or we can imagine, 2 1/2 centuries after a sad farewell in France! As you read, look for "the Ring", a nondescript little silver amethyst ring given to French Huguenot Genevieve by her childhood sweetheart, 16y old Charles du Plessis, on the dockside, before his family escapes religious persecution in France to South Africa, hers escaping to safety in England, cruelly separating them and resulting in a 2 1/2 century old unrequited love-story! Some readers may think of this as a "flight of fancy", but the supporting evidence is quite compelling, making all this either a huge series of coincidences, or one of those strange series of events in life that, against all odds, defies any other normal explanations. I was saving this part of the love-story for novels after "the wedding", but those may never be published now, then this unique story would be lost forever. That would be a terrible shame! So newer editions of these novels have this story woven into their fabric, as it unfolds in real-life. We think you'll find the overlay of an older, but connected, unrequited love-story, within (and over the top of) the modern love-story, quite fascinating!

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO:

All boys and girls who grew-up in boarding schools—especially to those boys who have attended St. Andrew's School and the girls who attended St. Michael's School in Bloemfontein; all of the boys and girls who attended Hugenote High School in Wellington; also to those people around the world who found true love and discovered it was out of reach but went on reaching for it anyway; to all the many victims of life's villains; and lastly, to the girl next door ... you know, the one who's mom bakes cookies.



Prologue

Wellington, South Africa, 1960: Edwin Smythe sat enjoying a cold beer at the bar with his best friend and boss, Lawrence Stevens. They'd just finished a round of golf after work, and now they'd gone to the clubhouse—the 19th hole. It was getting late, and Edwin knew his wife would be upset if he didn't get back soon, but he lingered anyway. Constance was always upset about something, so his lateness wasn't going to change her attitude much. He *had* been spending more time than usual at the bar after work, but could he help it if it were easier to unwind here than it was at home? The minute he got home, he was barraged with little things to do around the house as his wife played the tired martyr who could do nothing but lie on the couch and complain of how exhausted she was after spending the whole day doing housework and looking after Elizabeth and sickly little Hattie—their two daughters, four and one respectively. After a long day at work, Edwin felt the same way as his wife, and the only thing he wanted was to lie on the couch, too, but with a cold beer in his hand—which his wife would never allow—and no one telling him what to do for a while, which she could never refrain from doing. Was that too much to ask? Apparently it was, so he didn't bother asking anymore; he just came straight here, and ignored his wife's subsequent game of sulking and bitter disapproval.

"That was some game," Lawrence remarked, bringing Edwin out of his thoughts.

Edwin turned to his friend in the dim, smoke-clouded light of the bar. "Yes, it was a close one. Next time I'll best you."

Lawrence chuckled into his beer stein. "We'll see about that."

The phone behind the bar trilled, interrupting them. Edwin's gaze settled carefully on the bartender as the man moved to

answer the phone. Lawrence's eyes had skipped to the barman, too, and he was watching over the rim of his mug.

"One moment please . . ." Edwin overheard the barman say. "Edwin Smythe?"

Edwin felt his gut twist with apprehension. "Yes?" he answered.

"It's your wife on the phone. Some sort of emergency. Would you like to speak with her?" the barman asked, holding the phone out to him.

Edwin hopped off his barstool and rounded the bar counter to the side where the barman was standing with the phone. "Thank you," he said as he took the phone and placed it to his ear. "Constance?" he asked.

"Edwin! Come quickly! Hattie is terribly ill."

"Again?"

"We have to rush her to the hospital right now."

"Right. Ill meet you at home in ten minutes," Edwin said.

"Good. See that you do!"

Edwin handed the phone back to the bartender and thanked him before walking round the bar once more to get his blazer. "I'm sorry, Lawrence, but I have to go," Edwin suppressed a sigh and ran a hand through his thinning brown hair.

"Why? What's the matter?" Lawrence asked, his brow furrowed with concern.

"Hattie's ill, and I need to take my wife and child to the hospital."

"Oh, no—not again."

Edwin nodded as he snatched up his blazer and draped it over his arm.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Let me walk you out to your car, Eddie."

"Of course, but let's be quick." Edwin was already on his way out.

Lawrence turned to the bartender and pointed to the remainder of his drink. "I'll be right back."

Edwin strode back through the clubhouse and out into the cold night air. He looked up at the full moon and now he did sigh. *Why me?* he thought. What had he done to deserve such a sickly child? Was this some sort of punishment from God? No—he stopped himself there—that was a selfish way of looking at things. Instead he tried to focus on what his wife

and daughter must be going through. None of the doctors at the new, state-of-the art Carl Bremmer hospital in the nearby city of Belleville had managed to diagnose her yet. All they had to show for the past year of sickness was one endless stream of emergency visits to the hospital and an equally unending stream of puzzled doctors.

“Did your wife say what was wrong with Hattie?” Lawrence asked.

Edwin shook his head. “No, but no one really knows, so that’s nothing new.”

“Well, what are her symptoms this time?”

They arrived at Edwin’s car and he reached into his pocket for his keys. “I don’t know. Diarrhea and vomiting like usual, then dehydration, I suppose.”

Lawrence shook his head. “You need to find out what’s wrong with that child,” he said. “This is no laughing matter, Eddie.”

“Do you hear me laughing?” he shot back, his eyes flashing as he climbed into his car. In the next instant, Edwin realized he was lashing out, and he shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. I can only imagine what I’d feel like in your shoes. I’m just trying to say that there has to be something you can do for her—at least to find out what’s wrong! This has gone on for a year already. It’s long enough. You need to roll some heads at that hospital, or else find a better one.”

Edwin stuck the key in the ignition and cranked the car. The engine sprang to life with a throaty rumble, and he sighed. His eyes went out of focus as he sat there staring lifelessly out the window. “I don’t know what else to do,” he replied. “I’m afraid she might be dying, Lawrence. At this point neither Constance nor I have much faith in doctors. My wife seems to know more than they do about Hattie’s condition.”

Lawrence was silent for a long moment, and then he reached out to squeeze Edwin’s shoulder. “Well, it’s just as well your wife was a nurse. At least she has some medical experience to draw on. Keep me posted, Eddie. Whatever happens, you know you can count on me.”

Edwin looked up with a grateful smile. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“What are friends for?” Lawrence replied.

“*Best* friends,” Edwin corrected.

SUMMER LOVE

Lawrence nodded. "Go be with your wife and daughters, Eddie. They need you right now." With that, he shut the door and watched as Edwin drove away. Once he was out of sight, Lawrence looked up at the same full moon that Edwin had looked at, and wondered what the future held in store. He and his wife, Rebecca, were planning to start a family soon. It was frightening to think that life was so fragile and fate so cruel.

Poor Edwin, Lawrence thought, shaking his head and turning back to the clubhouse.

Innocence & Destiny



Chapter 1

South Africa, 1971: the little town of Wellington was located in a scenic valley of the Western Cape. To the east, it was hemmed in by the majestic Hawequa Mountain Range, and to the west by the dark, rolling green patchwork of the *Cape Winelands*, which stretched as far as the eye could see. The town lay on the banks of the Kromme River, and was nestled at the foot of the Gröenberg, a large, extinct volcano with lush, green slopes.

Today, December 10th, the sun was glaring down on Wellington with unusual fury; the ground seemed to crackle and smoke, like kindling just before it burst into flames, but Elizabeth and Hattie Smythe were walking home from school with seeming indifference to the weather. With their last day of school, a half day, now behind them, and the holidays ahead, only propriety, and their school bags, which hung weightily from their shoulders, kept them from sprinting the distance.

Elizabeth was nearly sixteen years old, with long, chestnut brown hair; a slender, curvaceous figure; and an exquisitely smooth, white complexion. She was five feet and three inches tall with deep blue eyes and an inescapably infatuating smile.

By contrast, her younger sister, Hattie, was shorter, with darker brown hair and sad, brown eyes. She was also very pretty, though barely twelve years old.

Both girls were wearing their school uniforms—blue dresses of a strictly regulated length, with white socks and trim. As was school regulation, their hair was done up in braids and their faces were free of any makeup. Their school blazers were draped loosely over their arms, every now and then waving in the warm breeze.

Suddenly, Elizabeth became aware of hurried footfalls pounding down the sidewalk behind them, and then she heard

a voice: "Lizzie, wait up!" Elizabeth and Hattie slowed and turned to see Pieter Kruger and his brother, Jacobus, running to catch up with them.

"You two seem to be in an awful hurry," Elizabeth commented, noting the sweat pouring down Pieter's and Jacobus's faces.

"Elizabeth—" Pieter began breathlessly, but then stopped himself, realizing that what he was about to say ought to wait until he'd had a chance to catch his breath. His expression softened in sympathy.

"What's wrong?" Elizabeth asked, noting his expression.

"We just saw Thomas and Sarah kissing in the schoolyard. I'm so sorry. I thought you'd want to know," Pieter said. Jacobus nodded solemnly, a pinched expression on his face—Sarah was his girlfriend. Likewise, Thomas was Elizabeth's boyfriend, but the news seemed to stab her like a blunt knife. She felt hurt and betrayed, but she hadn't been very interested in Thomas, so the wound was only skin deep. She was more surprised than heartbroken.

"Thank you," Elizabeth said in a subdued tone. "I'm glad you told me."

"If there is anything I can do . . ."

There was a pause as she thought about it. "Walk with me?" she asked, her blue eyes bright and shining in the sun, made bluer still by the color of her dress.

Pieter hesitated. He secretly *loved* Lizzie. He didn't want to take advantage of her vulnerability. But they were friends—neighbors, too—he had to be there for her. He would simply have to resist the temptation to be more than a friend.

"Sure, Lizzie, I'll walk with you," he replied.

The four of them broke into pairs, with Elizabeth and Pieter walking together in front.

"I suppose you'll be leaving for Siesta soon?" Pieter asked, chancing a lighter topic.

Elizabeth was grateful not to talk about Thomas. "Yes, tomorrow actually," she specified, her face brightening.

"That soon?" he asked. "I wish I was going. It sounds like you have a lot of fun there."

Elizabeth sent him an inviting smile, and he met her gaze openly. "How's Florence doing?" she asked.

He looked away. "We . . . broke up a few days ago. She didn't

want to go to Stellenbosch University with me, and I didn't want to go to Cape Town University with her. She couldn't handle the idea of a long-distance relationship . . . and that was that."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We weren't really in love. I would've gladly applied to her choice of university if we were."

Elizabeth nodded. "It seems like it was for the best, then."

"It was. Besides which, I'm in love with someone else," Pieter said, his gaze finding hers once more.

Elizabeth looked up at Pieter, a naïvely questioning look in her eyes. He broke eye contact nervously, turning his head to stare at the ground as they walked. He had been determined not to take advantage of Elizabeth's vulnerability, but she was sending all the right signals, and somehow, she didn't seem all that upset about Thomas . . .

"You know, Lizzie, I was thinking, when you get back from Siesta, we could—I mean—would you like to . . . to go on a date with me sometime?" he asked, swallowing visibly.

"I'd like that very much, Piet," Elizabeth said, smiling at his sweetly fumbled words. Pieter was handsome—six feet and two inches tall, with curly, golden-brown hair; green eyes, the color of spring; and a wiry frame—but his good looks had failed to impart much confidence.

"Really?" he asked.

"Of course," Elizabeth said and flashed him an alluring smile. She couldn't help being amused by his uncertainty.

As the four continued walking home, their conversations now flowing effortlessly, Pieter couldn't keep the smile from his face. He looked up at the clear blue sky and almost sighed. Somehow, the day seemed even brighter now than it had before.

* * *

"Edwin, dear, could you get that?" Constance Smythe called down to her husband from the second floor of their home as the telephone rang again. A brief silence followed her request as Edwin got up from the couch where he had been reading.

"I've got it," he replied just before picking up the phone in the kitchen. "Edwin Smythe speaking. What may I do for you?"

"Hello, Eddie." The voice sounded flat and very tired.

"You sound terrible, Lawrence. Are you all right?"

"Ben's dead." Lawrence's voice cracked as he spoke about his son.

"Oh no—" Edwin broke off in shock and was silent for a long moment. "I can't imagine what you're going through. . . . He was a good kid."

"The funeral is tomorrow. I'd really appreciate it if you could be there." Lawrence was having difficulty speaking now.

Edwin caught a glimpse of his wife as she entered the kitchen. "Don't worry; we'll be there, Lawrence. What time is it?" Edwin noticed his wife give him a disapproving look, her ice-blue eyes flashing briefly at him. He wondered what she expected him to do. Perhaps she was upset that he had accepted an invitation without asking her first.

"One o'clock," Lawrence said.

"Not to worry, we'll be there, and if there's anything else we can do—we're pretty busy getting ready for our trip to Siesta tomorrow—but I'm sure we could spare the time."

"Oh. Right. Your holiday." Lawrence blew his nose. "I forgot, Edwin. I'm sorry. I don't mean to be a downer."

"No, that's quite all right. We will see you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Eddie. I knew I could count on you," Lawrence said and hung up the phone.

Edwin put the receiver down gently. "That was Lawrence Stevens . . . calling to invite us to his son's funeral tomorrow."

Down on her haunches, Constance seemed to be fuming as she rummaged through the kitchen cupboards, banging pots and pans in a discordant racket.

"You should have told him we couldn't go," she said, still searching the cupboards.

"He was in quite a state. I couldn't exactly refuse. Don't worry, we'll have plenty of time tomorrow; a funeral isn't going to slow us down much."

"Such depressing news should have been saved for a more appropriate time. He knew you were going on holiday. He should have waited until you got back to tell you."

"He said that he forgot about our holiday . . ."

"Oh, I'm *sure* he forgot," Constance replied. "But what's done is done. There's no use crying over spilt milk."

Edwin felt relieved that she was going to drop the subject. "Don't worry, dear. We'll forget all about this morbid business once we're in Siesta."

"I hope so," Constance said, and with that, she gave up searching the kitchen cupboards and stood up to face her husband. Constance was a small person, roughly the same height as her eldest daughter, Elizabeth, with an equally small frame and a soft, pleasant face that made her appear delicate and unassuming.

"What time is the funeral tomorrow?" she asked.

"One o'clock. I imagine the service won't be more than an hour long, and we can skip the reception," Edwin said, fiddling nervously with his shirt collar.

"Well then, I suppose we'll just have to be ready to go the minute we get back," Constance said, her long, darkly-dyed hair flaring as she left the kitchen.

Edwin heard her calling for the maid as she left. No doubt it had something to do with what she'd been searching for in the kitchen.

Now that his wife was gone, Edwin let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He still felt dazed. *Poor Ben*, he thought. *Dead at age seven. What a life. What a world.* He was still standing next to the phone and now he eyed it accusingly. *A harbinger of doom, that's what you are*, he thought. Edwin ambled back to the couch in the living room where he'd been reading earlier.

A minute later, the doorbell sounded and Thandiwe, the maid, ran to get it. Thandiwe was one of the local people, dark skinned and chubby, but very kind—like her namesake, which was *Xhosa* for *loving*. She came by a couple of times a week to help with chores around the house.

Thandiwe opened the door. "Oh, hello, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Hattie. Did you have a good day at school?" the maid asked with a cheerful smile.

"Very good, thanks," Elizabeth answered.

"I'm glad to hear that," Thandiwe said, her smile broadening. "Your father is in the living room. I suspect he'll want to speak with you . . ." Her smile faded now. "He's just received some bad news from Mister Stevens." Thandiwe reached for their school blazers.

"Oh . . . ?" Elizabeth replied, absently handing Thandiwe her blazer.

"What sort of bad news?" Hattie asked.

"It has something to do with Mister Lawrence's son; that's all

I know.”

Edwin was sitting on the couch, contemplating the front cover of his book. He was thin and slight of build at five feet, seven inches tall, with receding ash brown hair that was swept back from his forehead to reveal a distinct widow’s peak. His most remarkable feature, however, was his eyes: they were light brown and oval-shaped, slanted slightly down toward his nose and up at the corners, with his dark eyebrows naturally following the slant and heightening the effect. The look wasn’t oriental, since he still looked distinctly English, but it did cause the casual observer to wonder.

Elizabeth and Hattie strode into the living room, but they slowed upon seeing their father’s brooding expression.

Elizabeth set her backpack down on the floor. “Hi, Dad . . . Thandi told us you have some bad news?”

Edwin looked up from idly studying the front cover of the book he’d been reading. “Oh—hello girls.” He hesitated, then sighed and said, “Lawrence’s son, Benjamin, died, and your mother and I will be attending the funeral tomorrow.”

“That’s horrible!” Elizabeth said, her eyebrows drawing together. Hattie’s lower lip was quivering, but she said nothing. “This is just a day of bad news, isn’t it?” Tears were forming in Elizabeth’s eyes. She barely knew Benjamin, but that didn’t stop her from caring.

Edwin stood up from the couch and moved to put a hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder. “I know, dear, but that’s life isn’t it? There’s no use crying about it.” Edwin missed the implication that Elizabeth had received some bad news of her own. “Well, go on, girls. Dry your eyes and put your books away. You’d better do some of your packing for tomorrow.”

Elizabeth picked up her books again and headed upstairs, but Hattie just stood there in shock, looking up at her dad and sniffing.

Edwin looked down at Hattie. “Well? Time is wasting.” At that, Hattie charged away in a mad dash for her room.

Edwin sighed. “Don’t run up the stairs, Hattie!” He called after her, but it was no use. She wasn’t listening.

Hattie ran past Thandiwe at the top of the stairs, nearly knocking a load of washing out of the maid’s hands. Thandiwe looked startled, but she turned with a frown to watch Hattie run past. The door to Hattie’s room slammed shut, and

Thandiwe took that as her cue. She set the washing down in the hallway and knocked gently on Hattie's door.

"Is everything all right, Miss Hattie?"

* * *

Hearing all of the commotion, Constance emerged from her room in time to see Thandiwe disappear inside Hattie's room.

Suspicious, Constance ambled down the hallway. She appeared in the doorway to Hattie's room a moment later. "Thandiwe . . ." Constance said, trailing off warningly as she took in the scene—Hattie receiving a warm hug from the maid.

Thandiwe broke the hug and turned to face Constance. "Yes, madam?"

"Come to my room, would you please?"

"Yes, madam."

Constance headed back to her room, but Thandiwe lingered to give Hattie a reassuring smile before following. Thandiwe arrived in Constance's room a few moments later, whereupon Constance immediately leveled a reproving frown upon her.

"I don't want you spoiling my girls, Thandiwe. We've talked about this before. We mustn't encourage them to behave so emotionally," Constance said.

"But, madam, everybody needs some comfort from time to time."

"I've said my piece, Thandiwe. Don't let it happen again. You're a good maid and I'd hate to lose you over such nonsense."

"Yes, madam," Thandiwe replied, sounding crestfallen. "It won't happen again."

"Good, I'm glad that we could reach an agreement. You may go, Thandiwe—oh, and don't forget to iron my beige dress," Constance said as she went to her closet to retrieve it. "I'll be wearing it for the journey to Siesta tomorrow," she explained, handing the dress to the maid.

"Yes, madam," Thandiwe said, taking the dress and leaving the room.

Constance watched her go with a sigh lying dead upon her lips. *Grief is a strange sort of thing, she thought. It makes people behave so improperly.*

She considered for a moment that Lawrence Stevens and his family would be grieving far more than her daughters. Apart from his late son, Benjamin, Lawrence had two young

daughters and his wife, Rebecca. *They must all be missing Benjamin terribly*, Constance thought.

A thought occurred to her then—the Stevens family might be interested in moving someplace where they wouldn't constantly be reminded of what they'd lost. Constance nodded to herself. *Perhaps the boy's death won't be in vain. . . .*

Chapter 2

Earlier that morning: golden rays from the rising sun were slanting into the dormitory through tall, lattice windows, and little clouds of dust were dancing down through them like tiny snowflakes. Outside, the sprawling, grassy campus was broken neatly in places with majestic green trees, rising like watchtowers between the large, colonial stone buildings.

St. Andrew's was an old, English, all boys boarding school, located in the city of Bloemfontein. Today was the last day of school before summer and Christmas holidays began. Families had been looking forward to this day all year; it was an opportunity to get away from the maddening monotony of work, home, and school. One such family was the Strauss family.

Nicholas Strauss was the middle child of three, 16 years old, with thick, wavy, chestnut-brown hair. One inch shy of six feet tall, blessed with a good complexion, a naturally athletic build, a striking smile, and piercing green eyes, Nicholas was the kind of guy who could make a girl blush just by looking at her.

As Nicholas lay in his bed, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, a cacophony of roaring erupted in his ears. His eyes shot open. His heart began to pound.

Lions.

Nicholas blinked in confusion, panic rising in his chest before he remembered what the sound meant. He groaned, buried his head beneath his pillow, and went back to sleep. The city zoo was barely a mile from campus, and early morning was when they fed the lions.

Nicholas dreamt that he was standing on a verdant plain with a broad, blue sky overhead and lush, tropical mountains soaring in the near distance in front of him. A cool, winding river was flowing from between the mountains and gently

hedging the plain on one side. Half a mile behind him, the river bisected a sprawling, white sandy beach just before it emptied into the warm Indian Ocean.

It was Siesta, the caravan* park where he and his family spent their summer and Christmas holidays each year. Nicholas found himself wishing he could see the ocean again, and his subconscious accommodated by sending him whirring across time and space to walk barefoot along the beach. His senses were bombarded by a blessed recollection: the clean, white sand tickling warmly between his toes, the rippling azure water frothing a brilliant white as the waves crested and rolled to a crashing stop upon the shore—

Clank clank, clank clank, clank clank. Nicholas awoke to the cold, brassy sound of the Twells Bells, which were two pieces of iron railroad track strung up next to each other in the courtyard below.

By now sunlight was streaming into Nicholas's dormitory—an uninspired, rectangular room with old, scuffed wooden floors, dull brown walls, and white trim for the windows.

Nicholas sat up in his bed and surveyed a scene of unusual disorder through reluctantly opening eyelids. Where normally there would have been a neat double row of gray steel-frame beds and lockers traversing the length of the dormitory, this morning everything was out of place.

The last day of school! Nicholas recalled. *They may as well call it prank day,* he thought, as he surveyed his surroundings. His schoolmates were waking up all over the dormitory only to find that their shoelaces had been tied together, or that their hands had been filled with shaving cream—which had subsequently migrated to numerous other places during the night. Being the last day of school, no long-term punishments were possible, and the result was mayhem.

The pranks were all done in good fun, Nicholas reflected, unless the victim wasn't liked by his classmates, in which case he'd better be somewhere else on the last day of school.

Nicholas noted with a smile that Grant (*Bakkies*) Baker's bed had been raised up onto four lockers while he slept. Even as Nicholas watched, Bakkies sat up, and apparently not having

* *Caravan*: British English for an RV or camper

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noticed his predicament, swung his legs over the side . . .

A second later, Nicholas heard the boy's startled cry and he watched as Grant nearly fell from a dizzying height. The Beckett brothers—Jamie Beckett, known as *Shorty* for his stature; Billie Beckett, or *Muffy* as he was called for his often clumsy nature; and Harry Beckett, known as *Checkers* for his pervasive freckles—were standing there at the foot of Grant's bed, laughing hysterically at the effects of their prank.

Grant glared daggers down at the Becketts as he calculated a jump to the floor. It never paid to be a deep sleeper at boarding school.

Feeling suddenly nervous, Nicholas checked himself over to make sure that he hadn't been the victim of any pranks last night . . .

And then he found a sticky knot of toothpaste in his hair. "All right, who was the weasel who pranked me last night?" Nicholas asked above the clamor of people laughing and yelling as they got out of bed.

No one answered.

Figures, Nicholas thought.

* * *

As Nicholas walked down the long, stone corridor, he heard indignant shouts coming from the shower room. With a sinking feeling, he turned the corner.

Everywhere he looked, there were more people standing outside the shower stalls than in. The vast majority of the students were toweling off prematurely, and with vigorous enthusiasm. Some of the guys still had glistening white suds in their hair. Most telling of all was the fact that there was no steam floating about the room.

Nicholas slowly undressed, setting his clothes and towel down on one of the wooden benches. Finding a free shower stall, he tentatively stepped inside. Cringing, he braced himself for the inevitable as he reached for the shower knobs—

"*Jislaaik*,* man! That's cold!" Nicholas's deep, baritone voice echoed from his shower stall, drawing knowing smiles and chuckles from the guys standing safely *outside* the shower stalls.

* *Jislaaik*: Afrikaans for *wow*

“Yeah, it really takes the mickey out of you, doesn’t it?” Jamie Beckett said just outside Nicholas’s shower stall.

After a flurry of activity, there was a short pause as the sound of running water stopped, and Nicholas hopped eagerly out of the shower.

“I guess old Mister Benson forgot to stoke the boiler again, huh?” Nicholas asked as he toweled off.

“That would be my assessment,” Jamie said. Grinning, he pointed to the sticky knot of toothpaste still lodged in Nicholas’s hair. “I think you missed a spot.”

Nicholas scowled. “Shorty . . . it was you, wasn’t it?”

“You wound me, Beaver,” Jamie said, using Nicholas’s nickname—so named for his two front teeth, which had appeared a little too large for his eight-year-old head when he’d first arrived at St. Andrew’s. “Why am I always the first to blame?”

Nicholas shot Jamie a narrow-eyed look. “Maybe because you’re always grinning like an idiot when these . . . *unfortunate incidents* occur.”

Jamie’s grin widened. “A bloke can’t help being happy, can he?”

“Hah,” Nicholas grunted, wincing as he tried to massage the toothpaste out of his hair with his towel.

* * *

The boys of Twells and Chandler House congregated in the courtyard for morning roll call, chatting excitedly as they waited for their house prefect to call the roll and inspect their uniforms, which were clean and neatly pressed as usual, consisting of navy blue blazers and gray pants, topped off with stiff straw hats, affectionately known as *Cheesecutters*.

The boys heard Mr. Benson, a kindly, lean old man, with a dark, weather-beaten skin and a regrettable lack of hair, whistling merrily as he rode slowly by them on his bicycle.

“Enjoy your morning shower, boys?” Mr. Benson asked with a toothy grin.

Conversations were abruptly suspended as the boys turned to watch Mr. Benson ride away, their eyes narrowing in suspicion. One by one, their mouths dropped open as the puzzle pieces snapped into place.

“That rotter!” Jamie Beckett exclaimed. “He pranked the lot of us!”

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* * *

Nicholas's parents arrived to fetch him from St. Andrew's at just after nine o'clock—the time when lessons would normally begin.

Nicholas saw them arrive from his place at the dormitory window. After saying his farewells, he grabbed his suitcase and left the dormitory. When he reached the stairwell, he encountered the Beckett brothers at the top, holding their suitcases two-handed in front of them. They were energetically chatting amongst themselves, every now and then giving Billie Beckett a gentle shove toward the stairs. Billie was shaking his head, his eyes wide. Nicholas shot them a curious look, but thought better of asking them what they were doing.

When Nicholas was about halfway down the first flight of stairs, he heard Billie raise his voice.

"Fine, I'll do it!"

This was followed by a loud scraping noise which grew rapidly in volume, giving Nicholas his first warning. Then he heard Jamie yell, "Look out, Beaver!"

And that was his second.

Nicholas turned around, his eyes bulged, and he dove to one side just in time to miss Billie Beckett skidding down the stairs on top of his suitcase. Billie hit the bottom of the stairs with an *oomph* and sprawled out like a beached whale. Nicholas sat blinking in shock on one side of the staircase. He heard Jamie and Harry begin laughing like hyenas behind him.

"So? How was it, Muffy?" Jamie called from the top of the stairs.

Billie hauled himself off the floor and stood, swaying for a moment. Then he raised his fists into the air. "Bloody awesome!"

"Sweet! Come on, Checkers, let's go!" Jamie said, and launched himself down the stairs atop his own suitcase. Harry followed suit.

Nicholas scrambled to his feet just in time to dodge again as Jamie rocketed through the spot where he'd been sitting, and then he came to an abrupt stop as Harry came whirring down right in front of him.

"*Jislaaik* man! Watch where you guys are going!" Nicholas called after them. They gave no response. He shook his head with annoyance and walked to the bottom of the stairs. He

passed a pile of laughing Becketts on the landing, turned, and then started down the next flight of stairs.

The laughing quieted a little. “Hey, Beaver! Your parents arrived?” Jamie asked. Nicholas paused and glanced back over his shoulder, nodding once. “Take care!” Jamie said, and his two brothers echoed the sentiment.

Nicholas looked them over for a second—uniforms no longer neatly pressed, limbs entangled, chubby faces smiling impishly at him—and then he grinned in spite of himself. “You too, guys,” he said, and continued down the stairs.

Nicholas marveled at how good it felt to be going home again. The prospect of sleeping in his own bed, of having his *own* room, and of eating *home-cooked* food was overwhelming. He noted an additional spring in his step as he made his way outside. Halfway through the parking lot, he met his parents on their way to the dormitory. They stopped in front of each other, everyone smiling, and Kathleen rushed forward to give her son a hug.

“You were well-behaved, I hope?” Kathleen Strauss asked, holding her son at arms length, her short, artificially dark hair waving in the warm breeze. Dark hair was in fashion, since everyone wanted to look more like Elizabeth Taylor, and though Kathleen didn’t bear much resemblance to the famous actress, she was very good-looking in her own right—a one-time cover girl, tall and slender, with a clear complexion and vivid blue eyes.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I was very well-behaved,” Nicholas replied, grinning. Kathleen smiled back, and they turned and began walking toward the car.

“Of course, he was well-behaved,” Nicholas’s father, Dr. Johann Strauss agreed. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he thought to add, “All harmless fun aside, right, son?”

Kathleen looked shocked as possibilities ran through her mind. “You didn’t get into any harmless *mischief*, did you Nicholas?”

“No, Mom,” Nicholas chuckled.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

Nicholas noticed his father straighten his suit, a self-satisfied smile lurking at the corners of his mouth. Every bit the aesthetic equal of his wife, Johann was six feet tall, with a long, masculine face, and hair the color of charcoal with veins

of silver running through it, worn habitually swept back by a liberal dab of Brylcreem.

Nicholas and his parents arrived at their car, its distinctive pair of triple taillights glinting various shades of crimson in the sun. It was a muscle car—a two door, dove gray, Chevrolet Impala, with the barest hint of fins on the back. His parents opened the doors, and Nicholas climbed in behind his mother's seat.

As Johann was driving through the school gates, Kathleen said, "Oh! By the way, Nicholas—" She opened the glove compartment, brought out a white envelope, and turned to her son. "You got a letter from Karen yesterday." She held the envelope out to him. "I thought you might like to read it in the car."

Nicholas's eyebrows scrunched together as he took the letter from his mother. "Thanks . . ." *That's odd*, he thought, gazing down at the envelope. He and Karen had met and briefly dated during his family's summer vacation at Siesta last year. Afterward, she had insisted on visiting him at his home in Sterkspruit, complicating his life immensely, as he already had a girlfriend there—Denise, a sweet, blond-haired girl whom he had grown up with and with whom he had been friends with for as long as he could remember.

While Karen was visiting, Nicholas had introduced her to his best friend, Reggie Muir. Months later, he'd found out from Reggie's brother that Reggie and Karen were sending letters to each other from school. It had been obvious to Nicholas what that had meant.

So why was she writing to him now?

Chapter 3

“Edwin,” Constance called as she reached the landing. There was no reply, so she turned and descended the next flight of stairs. *Where is he?* she wondered.

She walked down the hallway to the living room and found him there, sitting on the couch, reading a book.

“There you are.”

Edwin looked up, his eyes dull and out of focus. She gave him a brief smile, then walked over to the armchair opposite him and took a seat.

“What do you think of the Stevens family’s home?”

Edwin blinked once, slowly, then shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“Just answer the question, dear.”

He gave a shrug. “It’s a home.”

Constance raised an eyebrow. “Don’t be abrupt, Edwin. Do you like their home?”

A frown creased Edwin’s brow. “Yes, I suppose. It’s a very nice home. Probably the best in Wellington.” His wife began nodding, and a smile touched her lips. That smile faded with what Edwin said next. “But what does this have to do with anything? And what on earth made you think to ask such a silly question—now, of all times?”

Constance crossed her arms over her chest. “Silly question?”

Edwin felt a flutter of trepidation; perhaps he’d gone too far.

His wife’s frown turned back into a smile, like a chameleon changing its colors to avoid being seen. “Well, never mind, dear. I suppose the question would seem silly to *you*.” She got up from the armchair. “Nevertheless, you’ve given me my answer.” With that, she left the room.

I did? What answer? Edwin wondered, confusion wrinkling his brow.

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* * *

The car was kicking up clouds of reddish-brown dust, and jostling its passengers with every bump and rock in the road. The sound of loose gravel grinding under tires was a constant background noise.

Johann Strauss was driving through the rocky Drakensburg Mountains, not far from their home in Sterkspruit—a small town in a very rural part of South Africa, with a non-native population of about five hundred people.

As he looked out the window, Nicholas saw that the road and mountains were lined with nothing but a few pathetic shrubs and dry-looking grasses. But occasionally, a short, scruffy-looking thorn tree would sweep into view to break up the monotony of the landscape.

They rounded a corner and began descending into the river valley where Sterkspruit was located. Even in the valley, the altitude was five thousand feet, high enough that snow was not unheard-of in the winter.

As they descended, they drove past a local woman trudging up the road with a big bundle of sticks balanced on her head. She was dusty and sweating profusely through her short, black hair. Topless and covered with nothing but a red piece of cloth draped around her waist, the woman brazenly emulated the nakedness of the land in her way of dress.

Nicholas shook his head. This was rural Africa, a striking contrast from the city of Bloemfontein where he lived and went to school for most of every year.

The car hopped through a particularly large pothole and jarred Nicholas out of his contemplation. He saw his mother trying vainly to anchor herself to her seat.

“Couldn’t you go a little slower, Jan?” Kathleen asked.

“Nee,* I need to be at my clinic by two o’clock and it’s already half past twelve. As it is I’m going to be late.” Johann made his living as a traveling African doctor, and he had a series of clinics around the countryside that he took turns visiting.

“You’ll really be late if we lose a wheel in one of those potholes.”

Johann smiled at his wife’s discomfort. “Kate, I need you to

*

Nee: Afrikaans for no

write a letter to Kwasi today to tell him we'll be leaving on the twelfth." Johann saw another pothole and prudently steered around it this time.

"But why? You know he can't read English very well."

"Well enough, but you can get one of the other servants to write it out for him in Xhosa."

Kwasi was Johann's male nurse, translator, and assistant. He'd recently come down with a cold, so he didn't know when the Strauss family would be leaving for Siesta.

Nicholas remembered his own letter then. He'd already read it, but now he picked up the envelope and studied it, as though it held more clues to the letter's contents than the letter itself. Something about what Karen had written was troubling him. He gave up scrutinizing the envelope and opened it to read the letter again.

Dear Nicholas,

I had so much fun last year. I was hoping that we could continue where we left off. I've missed you. I know you will probably be leaving in a few days, so don't bother replying to my letter. I'll be waiting for you in Siesta. You know where to find me. XOXOXOXO.

Love, Karen

Nicholas had read the letter more than three hours ago, just as he was leaving boarding school, but after reading it for a second time, he was no closer to formulating a response. The letter indicated that he didn't have to reply, but in a way that made responding even more difficult, because he'd have to wait until he saw Karen in person.

Belatedly Nicholas realized why Karen's letter was troubling him—she was acting like nothing had changed. Maybe she hoped that he didn't know about her and Reggie . . . Nicholas sighed. He would be able to judge the situation better when he was in Siesta and he had a chance to speak with Karen about it.

The car's engine stopped, and Nicholas looked up, surprised. He'd been so absorbed in his thoughts that he hadn't noticed when the car had pulled into the driveway.

"There we are," Johann declared, as he removed the keys from the ignition. "All home safely—and we didn't even lose a wheel," he added with a wink in Kathleen's direction.

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As he exited the car, Nicholas took a moment to appreciate his surroundings. At last, he was home. Boarding school was a poor substitute. In the distance, broad, grassy plains swept up into rocky hills and grew from there into the magnificent Drakensberg Mountains. Not far below Nicholas's house, a vegetation-lined river could be seen winding through the valley.

Nicholas eyed the cool waters of the stream. Still dressed in his school uniform, he was feeling like a marshmallow that had been dropped from its roasting stick and into the fire. The river would be wonderfully cool and refreshing, but the muddy brown that it was, it would make more sense to cool off in his family's swimming pool.

Turning from the view, Nicholas saw Matata, the gardener, digging up weeds in front of the house. The Strauss family employed six such natives to take care of their cooking, cleaning, gardening, and other various tasks. The servants received a modest wage for their work and two of them lived on the Strauss family's property in a round sandstone hut with a thatched roof, known by the *Afrikaners** as a *rondavel*.

As Nicholas reached inside the car to retrieve his suitcase, he spotted a flurry of sound and movement barreling around the corner of the house. He turned to look and saw Bobby and Scampy, the two family dogs, racing each other to greet his parents.

Bobby was a Boxer with big, droopy jowls, floppy ears, and a stump of a tail; his short fur ranged from white on his chest and one front paw to black and brown everywhere else. He was grinning broadly and drooling as he ran toward the car. By contrast, Scampy was a Fox Terrier, small and energetic, with a pointy, triangular face. He was patched black and white like a milk cow, and masked black around the eyes like a raccoon.

Suitcase in hand, Nicholas rounded the side of the car to greet his dogs, but before he could get there, they both crashed into his dad. Johann responded with a smile and a pat on the head for each dog before heading to the garage.

Nicholas took over for his dad in receiving the dogs' welcome, which became all the more frenzied when they recognized him. "Hey guys, did you miss me?" Nicholas asked the dogs as they

* *Afrikaner*: African; a South African of Dutch and European descent

vied for his attention—Bobby shuddering with excitement, his whole hindquarters wagging with his stump of a tail, and Scampy bouncing up and down for lack of Bobby’s height.

By this time, Nicholas’s eight-year-old sister, Kristina, was bounding out to greet him, too. Nicholas also had an older brother, Philip, but he had made plans to spend the summer with friends from university.

“Hello, Krissy,” Nicholas said, turning from greeting the dogs to say hello to his kid sister. She was slightly chubby, with a round face, a small mouth, and boyishly short blond hair.

“Hi, Nick! Did you get me anything special?” she asked, her blue eyes squinting up at him.

Nicholas’s face went suddenly blank. “Oh . . . uh, hmmm . . .”

Kristina’s face fell.

Then he reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out a yo-yo. Pretending to miss the way his sister’s eyes lit up, he frowned down at it. “Well, I did get this thing, but it’s not really *special*, so I suppose we’d better just throw it away . . .”

He heard his sister gasp, and he looked up from the toy, grinning wryly. He shrugged. “Or you could have it, I guess.”

“Wow, thanks!” Kristina exclaimed and ran back to the house. Nicholas smiled and started after his sister, the dogs following close at his heels. As he approached the house—a large, one-level design with white cement walls and a red, corrugated metal roof—Matata looked up from pulling weeds in the garden.

“Welcome back, Master Nicholas,” he greeted.

“Thank you, Matata. It’s good to see you again.”

“And you, sir.”

On the way to his room, Nicholas came to the kitchen, where he stopped and greeted Jane and Emily. They were responsible for the cooking and cleaning around the house.

“Would you like me to take care of that for you, sir?” Jane asked, gesturing to his suitcase with a chubby arm. She offered him a cherubic smile and Nicholas smiled back.

“No, thank you, Jane. I can handle it,” Nicholas replied. He continued on to his room, planning to pack his things away as quickly as possible and then cool off with a quick swim before lunch.

* * *

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Elizabeth was sitting across from her best friend, Dilly, in one of the red vinyl booths of Sandy's Diner. Between news of Thomas cheating on her, and Benjamin's death, she'd really needed to get out of the house for a while. Fortunately, she had already done most of her packing for the trip to Siesta tomorrow.

Their waitress returned with their order. Noting the somber silence at the table, she said nothing as she placed a Coke float in front of Elizabeth and a vanilla milkshake in front of Dilly. She gave them the barest hint of a smile, and then left.

"So . . ." Dilly began, struggling to break the silence. Elizabeth had just told her all the bad news. "Well, first of all, Thomas is a rat, not even worth crying about."

Elizabeth was staring into her Coke float, stirring it slowly with her straw. She took a sip and nodded. "I know."

"Good." Dilly was going to say something about Benjamin next, but seeing that Elizabeth hadn't even looked up from her drink, she decided to lighten the mood instead. "I guess you're going to be in Siesta tomorrow—" Elizabeth shook her head. "—oh, that's right, Swellendam first. Well, the next day, then. You lucky fish."

Elizabeth looked up now, and smiled. "You sound jealous."

"Because I am! You're going to be spending the summer in the most romantic place imaginable, while I'm stuck here in this silly *dorpie*.^{*} Imagine all the guys you'll meet." Dilly shook her head and took a sip of her milkshake.

"Well, I suppose there's always Eric . . ."

Dilly frowned. "The tooth fairy?"

Elizabeth smiled at her friend's nickname for the guy she'd met in Siesta last year. "So he was a little concerned about his teeth."

Dilly arched an eyebrow. "Concerned? From what you told me, *obsessed* would be a better word." She shook her head. "You can do better."

Elizabeth shrugged. "Maybe. He *was* handsome, though."

"Sure, handsome like a fruitcake," Dilly said under her breath.

Elizabeth laughed. "You're terrible."

* *Dorpie*: little town

Dilly smiled. "All I'm saying is Siesta is the kind of place that belongs in a fairytale, so your guy should, too."

Elizabeth quirked an eyebrow over her Coke float and smiled wryly at Dilly. "Isn't the tooth fairy from a fairytale?"

Dilly gave an involuntary snort of laughter and her milkshake almost came out of her nose. She took a napkin from the center of the table and wiped her mouth. "Not funny, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth just smiled.

"Well, cheer up, Lizzie. I've got a feeling you're going to meet someone amazing at Siesta this year."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "Is that a prediction?"

Dilly shook her head. "It's a bet."

Chapter 4

After work the following day, as Johann was packing his temperature-sensitive medications inside the refrigerator, he caught a momentary glimpse of his son hurrying past the kitchen, a tennis racket in his hand.

“Hello, Nicholas.”

Nicholas came to an abrupt halt. “Oh—hi, Dad. Did you have a good day at work?”

“*Baie*.^{*} The shorter the better,” he replied, and closed the refrigerator door.” Like almost everyone else in South Africa, Johann had to work until noon on Saturdays. “So, where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“I was just about to bike up to the clubhouse to play tennis with Dale.”

Johann’s reply was cut off before it began as the phone started ringing, one long ring and two short rings, which meant that the call was for the Strauss family. Since Sterkspruit had party lines, all the telephones connected to the line would ring, and each person had to listen for the sound of their particular ring tone.

Johann walked past his son and into the living room, where an old hand crank telephone was attached to the wall. “Doctor Strauss speaking,” he said into the wall-mounted receiver after picking up the earpiece. “Ah, one moment. Nicholas, it’s for you.”

“Who is it?”

“Denise,” came his father’s quiet reply as Nicholas reached for the earpiece and turned to face the telephone.

“Hello, Denise.”

“Hi, Nicholas. It’s been a while since we’ve talked, hasn’t it?”

* *Baie*: very

"It certainly has." Nicholas could imagine Denise absently twirling her long, golden hair around her finger as they talked.

"My family is going to the clubhouse now to play some tennis. . . . I was hoping that if you're not too busy we could meet there sometime today?"

"Actually, I was just headed there myself, so I guess I'll see you there."

"Wonderful! See you soon," she said with an audible smile and then she hung up the phone.

"Nicholas," Johann said, poking his head around the corner from the kitchen, "if you're still going to the clubhouse, I could give you a ride there on my way to the Hilltop Hotel."

"That would be great, Dad, thanks."

* * *

Elizabeth was waiting for Pieter on a bench in the park not far from her home. Her parents were attending Benjamin's funeral, so she had some time before her family left for Siesta.

Elizabeth's thoughts turned to Benjamin while she waited. Her parents had forbidden her and Hattie from going to the funeral because they thought it would be too upsetting, but Elizabeth was upset anyway. It wasn't fair; life wasn't fair. How could anyone die so young? If there was a God—and she believed there was—how could He allow such horrible things to happen? It didn't make any sense.

"Hi, Lizzie," a voice said from behind her.

Elizabeth turned to see Pieter smiling down at her. "Hello, Piet," she said, returning his smile weakly.

"What's wrong?" he asked, picking up on her expression. He moved to sit beside her on the bench. "You look upset." He paused, frowning at her. "It's about Thomas, isn't it? Look, Lizzie, if you need time to get over him, I'll understand."

Elizabeth smiled more genuinely now. "It's not that. My dad's best friend just lost his seven-year-old son to leukemia. My parents are at the funeral right now."

"Oh," he said, taken aback.

"Come on." Elizabeth stood up. "Let's walk through the park for a while."

Beneath the speckling shade of the trees, Elizabeth and Pieter slowly threaded their way along an old gray cobblestone path. A rolling green carpet of grass stretched out to their left, and a quiet stream to their right. Before long they came to a

bridge, the entrance marked by hedges of bright pink and red bougainvillea. They walked onto the bridge and both stopped in the middle of it to overlook the stream. Elizabeth found the peaceful melody of gently running water soothing.

"It doesn't seem fair," she said softly.

"What doesn't?" Pieter asked from close beside her.

"That anyone should die so young. Do you think he's in Heaven right now?" she asked, turning to face him, her blue eyes shining with unshed tears.

Pieter looked deeply into those eyes, sparkling like two flawless sapphires set in two equally magnificent pearls, and for a moment, he almost forgot to reply.

"I hope so," he said.

They stood there looking into each other's eyes, each of them wondering what the other was thinking, but neither of them quite ready to take the chance. It was too soon. Instead, Pieter opened his arms and Elizabeth fell gratefully into them.

* * *

Thwack! The racket hit the tennis ball and sent it sailing through the air. Nicholas ran to greet it, braced himself to hit the ball, his mind already calculating how much force to use, where to hit the ball, and when to strike. The ball was speeding directly toward him in a high arc. Suddenly, the moment was upon him; he raised his racket and—

"Nicholas!" A girl called. Startled, he turned to look. *Thud!* The ball hit him squarely in the side of the head.

"Ai!" Nicholas yelped.

"You *domkop*.* You're supposed to hit the ball with the racket, not your head," the girl, who could only be Denise Hepburn, admonished with a smile from the entrance of the tennis court. She was wearing a white with black trim form-fitting shirt, and matching athletic shorts. He watched her set her tennis racket and tennis balls down along one side of the green chain link fence around the court.

"Ha ha," Nicholas said, and began walking toward her.

"Nice hit, Nicholas!" Dale Van Heerdan exclaimed as he approached Nicholas and Denise from the opposite side of the court.

* *Domkop*: Afrikaans, meaning *idiot*

Nicholas turned to Dale. "Go ahead and laugh, but if Denise hadn't distracted me, you'd be singing a different tune right now!" Nicholas frowned and felt around for the spot where he'd been hit.

"Awww," Denise said, and placed her hand on top of his injury.

"Don't worry, Nick; your head isn't very noticeable with that enormous bump rising out of it," Dale said, grinning.

"Thank—" Nicholas began, but stopped himself as he realized what his friend had actually said, at which point he turned to glare at Dale through dangerously narrowed eyes. "Something tells me you'd look good wearing a tennis racket . . ."

"Heh, heh . . ." Dale chuckled nervously and started backing away. "I'll leave you two to catch up. I'm going to go to the clubhouse to see if any other guys are up for a match. *Tot siens, mense*,"* he said, and with a mock salute and a return of his mischievous grin, he turned and left.

Nicholas shook his head wearily and turned to face Denise, who was looking up at him adoringly. "It's been a while," he said. "How have you been?"

"Miserable," she said playfully, leaning in toward him, standing up on tiptoes, and planting a short, flirtatious kiss on his lips.

"Wow, some welcome," he said. "I think I could get used to that."

"Really?" she said. "So . . . how have *you* been?"

"Absolutely *rotten*," he said, mimicking her playful tone, and returning her kiss, but not withdrawing quite as quickly as she had.

"Well . . ." she said, looking flushed. "Now that introductions are over, how about a round of tennis of our own?" She flourished her tennis racket for emphasis.

Nicholas grinned. "Prepare to lose."

Denise shook her head. "Always the optimist."

* * *

"Come on, girls, quickly now. We want to reach Swellendam before suppertime," Constance said as she ushered Elizabeth and Hattie out the door.

* *Tot siens, mense*: goodbye, people (a common farewell)

They all piled into the family car—a spotless white Mercedes, with four doors, a hardtop, and a rich, beige leather interior.

Anchored securely behind the car was their holiday trailer, colored white and army-gray with a rounded rectangular profile. It was a small camper, balanced on two wheels, and only 14 feet in length.

Edwin had already made the round trip to Siesta last weekend in order to leave his motorboat there so that they could use it on vacation. Now, he would make the trip again, but he would not be returning until their vacation was over, in three weeks time.

Edwin started the car and said, “Three and half hours from now, at about six o’clock, we should be in Swellendam—halfway there, in case you were thinking of asking, Hattie.”

“I wasn’t,” she said innocently.

Edwin glanced skeptically at Hattie in his rearview mirror, thinking, *Sure you weren’t*, and then he reversed out of the driveway and drove on for Swellendam. It was more than a six hour drive from Wellington to Siesta, so they always stopped at a caravan park in Swellendam to break up the journey. The alternative—completing the trip in just one day—was not something Edwin wished to attempt with his kids sitting in the backseat.

They were terrible travelers.

* * *

“How much farther is it?” Hattie asked.

Edwin’s eye twitched. “Just as far as it was when you asked two minutes ago.”

“You mean we haven’t moved at *all*?”

“He means that we’ve moved so imperceptibly that your question doesn’t deserve a fresh estimate,” Constance said.

Sensing the tone in her mother’s voice, Hattie went quiet for a few more minutes, which she spent fidgeting restlessly.

The silence couldn’t last.

“*When* are we going to *be* there?” Hattie asked, inciting an irritated sigh from Edwin.

“Stop whining, Hattie. We’ll get there when we get there,” Constance said.

Elizabeth sat staring out the window. She was just as bored and tired of traveling as her sister, and she was counting cars to pass the time.

Hattie glanced impishly at her sister. “What’s *that?*” she asked in a sudden voice, leaning toward her sister and pointing to something outside.

Elizabeth strained to see what Hattie was pointing at. “What? I don’t see it,” she replied. Catching a quick rustle of movement in the corner of her eye, she turned to look at her sister. Hattie was now sitting placidly in her seat, facing forward, having seemingly forgotten all about the remarkable sight that she’d been pointing to.

“What were you pointing at?” Elizabeth asked.

“Oh, you must have missed it,” Hattie giggled.

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes, and then she noticed that her lap was freckled with bread crumbs.

“You little brat!” Elizabeth exclaimed, and whirling on her sister, she responded by emptying her own sandwich bag full of crumbs onto Hattie’s lap. Hattie began to whine piteously.

A peevish frown twitched its way onto Edwin’s face.

Constance sent an icy stare over her shoulder. “Girls! Settle down immediately! I will not have you turning this car into a circus. Sit quietly.”

The unspoken threat in their mother’s voice, heightened by long years of spoken threats made good upon, was enough to impose a strict and immediate silence, but it didn’t stop Hattie from pouting and casting dirty looks in her sister’s direction.

Elizabeth chose to ignore Hattie and returned to looking out the window. Bored of counting cars, she spent her time daydreaming instead, remembering Pieter . . .

They’d said goodbye more than three hours ago, but she wished they hadn’t had to. She wished that Pieter was also going to be at Siesta.

But he wouldn’t be anywhere close. He was going to stay in Wellington for the summer, and she was going to be all alone in Siesta with so much to do and no one to do it with. Who was going to take her dancing?

It would be three weeks before she’d even see Pieter again, and to make matters worse, it felt like she’d left in the middle of something. They’d always been good friends, but now everything was changing. Suddenly, he had become more than a friend to her, and she wasn’t sure how that made her feel . . . Excited? Fearful? Indifferent? *Emotions can be so confusing*, she thought, sighing to herself.

SUMMER LOVE

* * *

It was getting late, and people were arriving at the clubhouse by the dozen. Every Saturday during the summer, at around five o'clock, nearly everyone in Sterkspruit would turn out for a huge *braaivleis*,* with each family bringing food and drinks to contribute.

Once everyone had arrived, they would light the bonfire and stand around drinking and chatting for the best part of an hour, waiting for the fire to die down to coals before cooking the meat.

Nicholas and Denise were inside the clubhouse, sitting together by the window and watching for their parents to arrive. Denise's family had left more than an hour ago to get changed out of their tennis clothes and to bring their own contributions for the *braaivleis*, but Denise had opted to stay at the clubhouse with Nicholas.

"You know," Denise began, "I've often wondered: why is it that everyone seems to think we'll end up together?"

Taken aback at the way she'd chosen to break the silence, Nicholas said, "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's just that our parents, our friends—everyone really—kind of takes it for granted that we're together and that we always will be. It's almost like we're destined to be together and everyone knows it."

Nicholas wasn't sure what she was getting at, but she was right. He'd noticed it, too. Everyone did seem to take it for granted that he and Denise would end up together. Yet, somehow, she felt more like a friend than a girlfriend. She was the girl next door, except that *next door* meant nearly a half an hour's drive away.

"It does seem a little that way, doesn't it?" Nicholas replied.

"It wasn't like that when you were dating my sister."

He turned to her and shrugged. He was about to reply when he caught a glimpse of a white vehicle pulling into the parking lot outside. "Hey, look—there's my mom," Nicholas said, pointing at the white pickup truck. "Let's go see if she needs any help unloading the food."

When they reached the truck, Kathleen was already busy

* *Braaivleis*: meaning *barbecue*, often a social event

helping Emily retrieve the food from the covered back of the truck. "Can we help?" Denise asked, pointing to some of the food that Emily had piled onto the tailgate.

Kathleen turned to see them standing there. "Oh, hello there, Denise. That's nice of you to offer. Here, take this," she said, handing Denise a large bowl of salad. Nicholas held out his hands to take something as well. "No, Nicholas I want you to go fetch your father from the hotel. Run up there and tell him that we're going to light the fire shortly. Tell him to hurry down so that he can help with the meat."

"All right, I'll be back soon," Nicholas said, and then ran off in that direction.

* * *

Five minutes later, Nicholas was walking through the front entrance of the Hilltop Hotel. He made his way from the small lobby to the smoke-clouded bar which curved off to the right of it. Low, yellow lighting was shining through the swirling gray smoke to reveal dark wooden walls, tables, and chairs. Nicholas strode across the room to one table, where his dad was sitting with his friends: the bartender, mayor, magistrate, and chief of police. Johann had his back turned to his son, but Sergeant Wepner saw Nicholas coming.

"Hello, Nicholas," the sergeant greeted. "You look warm," he said, noting the beads of sweat on Nicholas's forehead.

"I *am* warm. I just ran up from the clubhouse."

Johann turned to look Nicholas up and down. "Hello, son. Why the hurry?"

"Mom wants you to come down to the clubhouse now. They're going to light the fire soon and you'll be needed to help with the meat."

"Ah," Johann replied. "Well, just let me finish my drink and we'll head on down there." Johann gestured to an empty space at the table. "Pull up a chair."

Nicholas pulled up a chair and sat down next to his dad, while Johann picked up his drink and placed it on his lap. Nicholas followed the motion with his eyes, noticing with some dismay that his father's beer stein was more than half full. He hoped that his dad would hurry up and finish the drink so that they could go—so that he could get back to Denise—but Johann just left it there in his lap, as though he had no intention of drinking it.

“Have I ever told any of you the story of Herbrant and the lion?” Johann asked.

“Ja, I’ve heard it,” Sergeant Wepner said, chuckling with the memory, “but I don’t know about Dallas and Jimmy.” They shook their heads.

Johann grinned. “Well, you see, it was like this . . .”

Nicholas tuned out the story, having often heard his father tell it, instead keeping his eyes glued to his father’s drink, waiting impatiently for his father to finish it so they could go. He imagined Denise all alone down by the clubhouse, waiting for him to return . . .

He’d far rather be spending his time with her, after all, this was the first and last day they would have together for the next three weeks; he would have to say hello and goodbye all in the span of a few short hours, and he wanted to make the best of that time.

Johann took a short sip of his beer, then set his mug down and resumed his story. Nicholas stared pensively at his father’s mug. *Still half full—so much for, “I’ll be back shortly,”* he thought.

The next five minutes passed with agonizing slowness, but then there was a round of raucous laughter from those seated at the table, and Nicholas realized that the story was over. *Good.* Sensing that he had an opportunity to remind his dad why he was there, he said, “Well, we’d better get going. They’ve probably lit the fire by now, and they’ll need your help to cook all that meat.”

Johann looked over at his son and gave him an apologetic smile. “My drink is still half full,” he replied. “We’ll go as soon as I finish it. The fire takes a while to die down to coals anyway, so we still have plenty of time before they start.”

Nicholas frowned and glared at his dad’s abominable drink. This wouldn’t do. At the rate his father was drinking, Nicholas figured that he could be there long enough to hear yet another well-remembered anecdote from start to finish. *Still half full . . .* he mused. *Roughly half a pint. Should be possible. Definitely worth it.*

In one sudden, fluid motion Nicholas stood up, grabbed his father’s mug from the table, and gulped ferociously. A second later, he slammed the mug down on the table in front of his father—empty. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he said,

“There, your drink is finished! Now we can go.”

There was a moment of stupefied silence. Johann looked up at Nicholas with an expression of sheer disbelief. He turned his head to look at the empty glass standing defiantly in front of him, then back to his son, and suddenly his expression cracked into a crooked grin. Johann’s laughter thundered out uncontrollably and quickly spread around the table.

Nearly a minute later, still almost paralyzed with laughter, Johann got up from the table, placed a hand on Nicholas’s shoulder, and said, “All right, son, lets go.”

* * *

After they had finished eating supper, Nicholas and Denise excused themselves and made their way down to the river below the clubhouse. It was the same river that flowed past Nicholas’s house.

Upon reaching the river, they located their favorite spot—a long, flat rock on the river’s bank which extended part way into the water and was shaded by an old willow tree. Removing their socks and shoes, they sat down on the rock and let their feet dangle in the water.

“So,” Denise began, while tracing the point of her foot across the surface of the water. “I heard you got a letter from Karen.”

“How’d you hear about that?” he asked.

“Mothers talk,” she said, alluding to the fact that their mothers were best friends.

“Ah, and apparently you listen,” he said, smiling.

Denise shrugged and returned his smile. “From time to time.”

“Well, that’s all right. I probably would’ve told you anyway. Karen wrote to tell me that she wants to get back together with me at Siesta this year.”

“Didn’t she cheat on you with your best friend?”

“Yes. I suppose they’ve broken up now.”

“She said that?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Hmmm . . .”

“I know what you’re thinking. I’ve been thinking it, too. Honestly, I don’t know what happened. She might just be looking at me as a fun way to pass the time while she’s on holiday.”

Denise turned to face him. “Well, you’ll never know if you

don't give her a second chance."

Nicholas nodded. "So, what about you? Any guys waiting for you in East London?"

"None in particular, but that doesn't stop them all from trying," Denise said with a wink in his direction. Nicholas smiled, knowing just how true that was.

It might have been strange that Nicholas and Denise talked so openly with each other about their other relationships, were they not such good friends, and were it not for the fact that having several girlfriends or boyfriends was commonplace in South Africa. Until a certain age, children were encouraged by their parents to date a lot of different people and often forbidden to be exclusive with anyone. Even once they were old enough, a relationship only became exclusive if it was very serious.

Nicholas and Denise were sitting and watching in silence as the sun set gently on the horizon and splashed the sky with fire. The clouds seemed to flicker slowly, in shades of red and yellow, like embers beneath a dying flame, casting the whole valley in a warm glow.

Nicholas watched out of the corner of his eye as Denise twirled a strand of golden hair around her finger. Normally, she was very pretty, but just now, in the fire-like glow of the setting sun, she was *stunning*. He watched her long, smooth legs splashing in the water.

"You're so beautiful," he said, unable to resist saying what was on his mind.

She turned to look at him with bright emerald eyes that caught and reflected the fiery hues around them until they burned with a subtle light of their own. She smiled. "Thank you." She leaned close and whispered into his ear, "So are you, handsome."

Nicholas grinned and turned his head toward hers. The space between them now confined to mere inches, they drew steadily closer until their lips met and they kissed, long and passionately. His hand moved up to touch her hair, and gently tuck a few golden locks behind her ear.

Sitting there, framed by the hanging leaves of the willow tree, the scene tinged in hues of amber and rose by the dying rays of the African sun, they shared a moment—a fond farewell.

Chapter 5

Swellendam was a small farming town located at the foot of the long and mighty Langeberg mountain range, 40 miles inland from the southern tip of Africa. It was the third oldest settlement in South Africa, and it had developed a reputation for being the foremost “refreshment station” for travelers on their way to the Garden Route.

Elizabeth stirred quietly in her bed inside the camper. It was three in the morning, and the roosters were up and crowing insistently. An irritating sound for some, but for Elizabeth it was the sweet song of things to come. Every time she awoke to that sound, it was with the knowledge that in just three hours she would be in Siesta.

Edwin was already awake and bustling around outside the camper, collecting odds and ends from around the campsite, making sure that they didn’t leave anything behind. Swellendam was a strikingly scenic town, but at this hour all Edwin could see were the dark shadows of caravans and trees, a black sky speckled with silver stars, and the dull orange glows of lingering campfires, still flickering with fading warmth from the night before.

After the final preparations had been made, the family filed groggily into the car, and Edwin drove on for Siesta.

Shortly after leaving, Edwin glanced in his rearview mirror to find Elizabeth and Hattie sleeping soundly in the back seat. It was no accident that the Smythe family always left Swellendam at three in the morning. All that could be heard was the steady purring of the engine and the occasional whirr of another car passing theirs. Edwin smiled to himself, thinking, *Peace and quiet . . .*

Constance, who had been deep in thought since leaving Swellendam, soon added a counterpoint to that silence.

“Edwin, I’ve been thinking . . .” she began.

“About what, dear?”

“The Stevens family must be dreadfully unhappy, and I think that we should do something to help them.”

Edwin considered that Constance’s concern was quite remarkable, since she made no secret—at least to him—of the fact that she held Lawrence Stevens in very low esteem. She had often told him to spend as little time as possible in Lawrence’s company. What she didn’t know, or perhaps wouldn’t accept, was that he loved the opportunities to get out of the house that Lawrence gave him. They were a welcome reprieve from the stresses and responsibilities he had at home. The best part was that his outings with Lawrence were so easy to justify. Lawrence was his *boss* so it was easy to blur the lines between business and pleasure, making his outings seem more like a necessary evil to his wife.

“Well, what did you have in mind that we should do?” Edwin asked.

“They’ve lived in that house of theirs for years. Benjamin grew up there. Now that he’s . . . passed on, it must surely hold more bad memories for them than good.”

“Hmmm . . . probably,” he conceded. “But how do we help them with that?”

“Well, it occurred to me that we might offer to trade homes with them. They’ll be rid of the constant reminder of what they’ve lost, without having to list and sell their house, and we’ll benefit from slightly improved accommodations.”

Edwin was shocked. What a proposal! Trade homes? Certainly, the Stevens family had a much nicer home, and his wife’s argument that they would be happier living elsewhere now that Benjamin was gone made sense, but . . . he didn’t want to move. All that work, all that trouble, and he’d be saying goodbye to his memories just as surely as the Stevens family would be saying goodbye to theirs. Besides which, there was something vaguely unsettling about the whole idea.

“I don’t know . . .” Edwin paused, trying desperately to think of a reason that might deter his wife. “Who’s to say that they’ll even be interested in a trade? They have a very nice house.” Edwin picked his words carefully, knowing that if he openly opposed her, it would only make things more difficult.

“Of course they’ll be interested,” Constance admonished. “So

long as we make a good impression when we suggest it to them.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Edwin noticed the stiff set to his wife’s lips, the unblinking stare she was giving him, and he knew she wasn’t going to back down. “Well, I suppose it couldn’t hurt to offer . . .”

“Good, it’s settled then. You’ll suggest the idea to Lawrence when we return from Siesta.”

Edwin still wasn’t sure, but once his wife made up her mind about something, it didn’t matter if he disagreed, and he usually decided it wasn’t worth voicing his opinion. There was a price to pay for keeping the peace in his marriage, and Edwin paid it gladly, because the alternative was far worse.

Elizabeth stirred in the backseat, neither fully awake nor fully asleep. She thought she’d heard something important, but couldn’t quite remember what it was.

“Did you say something?” she asked sleepily.

“No, it was nothing, dear,” Constance soothed. “Go back to sleep.”

* * *

“Wake up, girls. We’re almost there!” Edwin exclaimed.

“We’re there already?” Hattie asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“What happened to ‘when are we going to *be* there?’ ” Edwin asked.

Hattie had no reply for that.

By this time, Elizabeth was awake as well. She stretched, though without much success due to the confines of the car; Then she noticed the scene in front of her, and she sat up in a hurry.

“Hey, look!” Elizabeth pointed through the front window. In the distance, near the mouth of the Kaaimans River, which they were traveling beside, was a high, semi-circular train bridge with a long, steam-powered passenger train billowing clouds of white smoke as it rushed across the bridge. Behind the train, the white, frothing surf was rolling in to meet the river delta, and still further beyond that, the Indian Ocean sparkled—vast, warm, and welcoming—glinting like thousands of tiny diamonds in the sun. Closer by, the deep, leafy greenery of the jungle seemed to be reaching out from the sides of the road with open arms. Everywhere Elizabeth looked, the sights

were overwhelming. It was like something out of a fairytale.

The scene wasn't lost on Hattie either, but for her, instead of awe, it seemed to have inspired an unquenchable eagerness. "When can we go to the beach?" she asked loudly, all vestiges of sleep suddenly gone. She was nearly bouncing out of her seat.

"Soon enough, but first you must help your father and me set up camp. And, of course, you'll need to eat breakfast. We don't need the two of you fainting from exhaustion," Constance replied.

"Then can we go to the beach?" Hattie pressed.

"We'll see," Constance said.

Hattie wasn't satisfied with that, but she knew better than to push her luck.

The car rounded a bend at the mouth of the river to travel parallel to a long—five mile long—white, sandy beach, and the steam train, now no longer visible, pleaded for attention one last time with a few short, piercing blasts of its whistle.

Elizabeth smiled. This was summer holiday—just the way she remembered it.

* * *

Edwin assessed the task before him. It was a familiar one, but he broke a sweat just thinking about it. There in front of him was the unassembled form of the large, blue tent that he had to put up in front of his family's camper. Every year he had to fight with that tent, and every year it was a hot and miserable battle.

He glanced over at Hattie and Elizabeth who were making themselves look conveniently busy down by the water's edge—in this case a little inlet which came off of the nearby Touws River.

The inlet served as a small, protected harbor for the boats in the caravan park. Among others, Edwin could see his own small, red and white powerboat, the *Constantine*.

Glancing back at his flabby blue adversary, Edwin sighed and looked up to Heaven. "Why couldn't I have had boys? Or at least, a smaller tent?"

There was no answer, but Edwin imagined God smiling down on him with amusement. Frowning, Edwin lowered his gaze and went to hire some help.

* * *

Elizabeth, Hattie, and their mother watched as Edwin and the two black men he'd hired struggled to pitch the family's tent. The tent was almost as large as the caravan it adjoined.

"All right, we're almost there. At least we've got it up now," Edwin said, his voice muffled by the tent. "Now, just hold that there while I . . . *No! Quick, grab it!*" Edwin's voice rose to a panic, then came the sound of tent poles clattering to the ground.

"Ach, bloody, *stupid* . . ." he muttered to no one in particular as the tent collapsed around his ears, making him and his hired help the only three tent poles still standing.

Elizabeth put her hand to her mouth to stifle a laugh, and Hattie giggled. Constance merely shook her head.

"Do you need some help, Edwin?" Constance offered.

"No, it's . . ." There was a ruffle of movement beneath the fabric of the tent. "It's quite all right. I'm almost done. I'll have the tent up any moment now . . ."

Constance placed her hands on her hips. "You don't look like you're *almost done*—you look more like you haven't even started."

Edwin's only response was a muffled grunt of effort as he began lifting fallen tent poles back into place.

* * *

Nearly three quarters of an hour later, the tent was finally standing. Edwin stood outside the tent looking up at it. *A hard-won victory*, he thought.

The sun was burning fiercely now, and Edwin was *hot*. Sweat was pouring from him in rivers. He cast an irri-tated glance up at the solitary tree that stood near his tent, providing no shade whatsoever. It was a pathetic shrub that had no business being called a tree. Right then, in his hot and unreasonable mood, it seemed to Edwin that the tree had grown as small as it possibly could—just to spite him.

He went inside the tent.

"How is it that we have the *only* spot in Siesta with *no* shade?" Edwin asked his wife, who was sitting serenely on a chair inside the tent, reading a magazine.

Constance didn't bother to look up. "I'm sure I have no idea, but perhaps if you were someone more important they would have given us more consideration. I'm told that the doctor gets the best spot in the park."

SUMMER LOVE

Edwin bit back a hasty retort which would've got him into more trouble than he was looking for. "I need a beer," he said, and looked around frantically. "Where's the cooler?"

"It's in the caravan," Constance said, lazily pointing to the door.

* * *

Johann pulled grudgingly into the gas station to refill his truck for the second time since leaving Sterkspruit. The truck was towing a sixteen foot camper, and as a result, it was greedily guzzling twice as much fuel as usual. Nicholas watched an old black man with short, white hair come up to the driver's side window and ask his dad in *Afrikaans* how much and what type of gas to fill the tank with. Nicholas also noticed his mother, driving the Chevrolet Impala, pull into a parking space in front of the gas station. Since the Strauss family lacked sufficient room for all of them to travel comfortably in either of their two vehicles, they always traveled down to Siesta in convoy. This year Nicholas was traveling with his dad in the truck, while his mother and sister traveled in the car with Jane in the backseat.

Nicholas watched as Kristina and Jane climbed stiffly out of the car and ambled toward the gas station. He guessed that they were heading for the restrooms, and decided that he'd better follow suit as there was no telling when the next stop would be.

He exited the truck and started walking toward the gas station. He heard his father calling after him to hurry. It was a ten-hour drive from Sterkspruit to Siesta and they always managed to make the trip in one day, but that meant that they had to be very frugal with time.

* * *

Kathleen was sitting in the car, waiting for her daughter and Jane to return from the restrooms. Unlike them, she didn't need to use the restroom, partly because she hadn't had enough to drink. It occurred to her that while she was waiting for everyone to return, she could fetch a drink from the camper. *A nice cold Coke. Yes, that will do nicely!*

* * *

On his way back from the restrooms, Nicholas noticed his dad inside the convenience store, standing at the cashier's station and paying for a chocolate bar that had evidently caught his

sister's eye. Nicholas smiled to himself and shook his head. Upon reaching the glass door of the convenience store, he overheard his dad telling Kristina to hurry back to the car. *Just in time*, Nicholas thought, opening the door and lengthening his strides as he headed back to the truck.

When Nicholas reached the truck, he began to wonder why he hadn't seen his mother go into the gas station with Kristina and Jane. He cast a glance back to the car.

She wasn't in there, either.

That's odd. I must have just missed her.

Nicholas climbed into the truck. Half a minute later, Johann climbed in on the other side, and they resumed their journey.

* * *

Kathleen opened the can of Coke with a *click*, and took a long sip of its cold, fizzy contents . . . *what a relief!* she thought, lowering the can from her lips and noticing with a rueful smile, the red smear of lipstick that had appeared around the rim of the can. Feeling much better now, Kathleen headed for the door of the camper, can of Coke in hand—

And then the ground beneath her feet gave a sudden jerk and she nearly spilt Coke all over herself. Hastily, she reached out to steady herself. *An earthquake?* she wondered.

Then, with a sudden horror, she realized there was a more likely explanation. “*Stop! Stop the truck!*” she yelled. Hurrying for the door, she reached for the doorknob, turned it, and opened the door—

Only to find that the camper was moving far too fast for her to get out. Seeing the ground whirring past her feet, her head spun dizzily, and she took a hasty step back inside the camper.

Oh no . . . she thought. I'm trapped!

* * *

“How about some music, Nick?” Johann asked. Choosing a cassette tape from those scattered across the dashboard, he looked briefly at it. “Beethoven?”

“Sure, why not,” Nicholas replied.

As Beethoven's fifth crackled to life, Johann managed to make it a duet by achieving a rough approximation of the melody: “Dum-dum-dum *dum*, dum-dum-dum *dum*.”

That elicited a small smile from Nicholas. Blessed with a musical ear, his father was able to mimic Beethoven's masterpiece fairly well. *Beethoven and Strauss—together at*

last! Nicholas thought, chuckling to himself.

Then another melody began to play, wailing almost imperceptibly against the combined strength of Johann's vocal cords and Beethoven's strings. Nicholas was the first to notice it.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, straining his ears to listen.

Johann stopped his mimicry. "Hear what?"

The wailing continued.

"*That,*" Nicholas said. It sounded familiar. He could almost make out . . .

Words.

He shot a quick glance at the side view mirror to verify his growing suspicion.

"It's Mom!" Nicholas exclaimed, watching in the mirror as she hung out the door of the trailer, waving wildly, and yelling for them to stop the truck.

* * *

Kathleen hung on to the camper for dear life as she tried to make herself visible in Nicholas's side view mirror. She was simultaneously waving her free arm and shouting into the wind at the top of her lungs, and was nearly exhausted with the effort, which appeared to be wasted anyway. There was no indication that she'd been either seen or heard.

Kathleen was just about to give up, when she lurched abruptly forward and almost fell out of the camper. *It's slowing down!*

* * *

"What on *earth* were you doing back there?!" Johann asked as he rounded the front of the truck to face his wife.

"I was getting a Coke. Didn't you see me go inside the camper?" Kathleen returned. She shook her head angrily and her hair bobbed and waved with the movement. It had been worked into a voluminous mass by the wind.

"No, you should have told us you were going back there," Johann said, calming a little as he noticed her hair. A small, tight smile creased his lips. She looked ridiculous: with her hands on her hips, a scowl on her face, and that frizzy mass of hair, she looked like an enraged circus clown.

"Well, if you hadn't been in such a hurry, none of this would have happened," she said.

Johann's smile was spreading. He imagined his wife hanging

out the side of the camper with her circus clown hairdo, trying desperately to get their attention. The mental image was too much for him, and he began laughing.

“What? What’s so funny?” she demanded.

Johann pointed. “Your hair.”

Nicholas, who was standing passively next to his dad, suddenly couldn’t help himself either and began laughing, too.

“What about my hair?” she asked, as she felt around carefully for the source of their mirth. Then, after a moment: “So it’s a little poofy. What do you expect? I had to hang on for dear life with the wind blasting me at a hundred kilometers—”

“*Poofy?*” Johann parroted. “It’s *enormous!*” With that, he burst out laughing again.

Kathleen frowned. “We’d better get back to the petrol station. Kristina and Jane must be wondering where we are.”

“All right, let’s get this *bakkie* turned around,” Johann said, falling back on a well-practiced grin.

Chapter 6

Nicholas awoke in his family's caravan, which could only mean one thing: he was in Siesta. It took an extra moment for Nicholas's sleep-clouded mind to realize this, and when he finally did, he had the misfortune of sitting up too suddenly in his excitement.

Clang!

"*Jinne!*" Nicholas exclaimed, rubbing his head and glancing up accusingly. "Who makes a bed frame out of metal, anyway?"

Nicholas heard his sister giggle. She was the occupant of the top bunk.

"Oh, so you think that's funny, do you?" Another giggle answered his question, and Nicholas responded by surreptitiously slipping out of his bed. He crouched low to the ground so that his sister couldn't see him.

"Then I suppose you'll find *this* even funnier!" Nicholas said as he sprang up to his full height and began tickling his sister mercilessly.

Kristina giggled unstopably as she wriggled around in her bed and tried ineffectually to block Nicholas's hands.

"I thought you might," Nicholas teased and turned away to get dressed. A moment later, a heavy feather pillow flew past his ear.

Nicholas froze in mid-step, and with grave, exaggerated patience, he picked up the pillow and threw it at Kristina. She flattened herself to her bunk, taking cover beneath the blankets, but the pillow landed on top of her with a heavy thump.

"You missed me," he said, and with a grin, turned around to retrieve his clothes from his suitcase. He allowed his back to tempt Kristina for a long, incautious moment, listening carefully for the sudden rustle of movement which would give

her away . . .

Swish!

He promptly ducked to avoid the pillow's return. But Kristina had aimed lower this time, and the pillow hit Nicholas squarely in the rear.

He gave a short yip of indignation. "Hey!"

Another giggle from Kristina.

* * *

After breakfast, Nicholas found himself wandering through Siesta, reacquainting himself with the park and the people—people he knew well or had at least met from years before—whom he now greeted with a friendly wave or nod as he walked through the park.

He felt the soft brush of the mild morning air across his face. There was just a hint of moisture, and a rich floral fragrance that was delicately mingled with the loamy smell of recently cut grass. Then there were the birds, whistling and chirping a dozen different tunes as they swooped and dove from tree to tree.

To his left was the cool, winding Touws River; in front of him, the lush, tropical mountains; overhead, a broad, blue sky; and beneath his feet, the verdant plain that was Siesta. The trees, the river, the mountains, and the park itself—they were all just as he had dreamt them, just as he had remembered. Year after year, the unique sights, smells, and sounds of Siesta were etched into his memory as a part of the three most magical weeks he spent all year. Nicholas sighed. There was only one thing that could dampen his spirits.

Karen.

But people can change, can't they? People can certainly make mistakes—we're all human—so how can I begrudge her that?

She could have at least told me about Reggie.

Nicholas frowned. He wasn't getting anywhere. He still wasn't sure what to think, and it was too early in the morning to go looking for her, so he would have to wait to find the answers to his questions.

* * *

Yesterday had been mostly uneventful for Elizabeth, even anticlimactic considering it had been her first day in Siesta. Now she was walking through the park, squinting out against the morning sun as she looked for Eric, a.k.a. the Tooth Fairy,

her boyfriend from last year. She hadn't forgotten Pieter, but technically they were still just friends.

Elizabeth reached the campsite where Eric had been last year, but she couldn't see his family's caravan anywhere. She turned around—

And in the distance saw Eric! But she still couldn't see his family's caravan. *They must have had to park somewhere else this year. . .*

Elizabeth walked up behind Eric and tapped him on the shoulder. "Guess who!"

Eric turned around, a quizzical look painted across his too-sharply angled face. His green—*should be blue*—eyes widened as his eyebrows shot up. "Do I know you?"

"Oh—" Elizabeth broke off, frowning in disappointment even as her face flushed bright red. "Sorry, I thought you were someone else."

The boy smiled. "That's okay." He extended his hand. "I'm Charley."

She took his hand and smiled. "I'm Elizabeth. Nice to meet you."

* * *

Nicholas glanced at his watch and noticed that it was nearly nine o'clock in the morning. He had been walking around for about an hour, and had nearly walked the perimeter of the entire park. He decided that he should probably get back and see what his parents were doing, so he headed for his family's campsite.

When Nicholas had made it about halfway there, he was greeted by a familiar sight. There, beneath a large pine tree, were Karen, her sister Yvette, and their parents, sitting on tree stumps for chairs around a smoking fire pit. On an impulse, Nicholas headed their way, and a minute later, he was standing behind Karen.

"Hello, Karen."

Karen looked up from her plate and spent a brief moment panning her head around to find the source of the voice. She spotted him in her peripheral vision and twisted around to see Nicholas standing stiffly behind her. He was wearing an uncertain frown, which he now turned to a tight smile for her benefit.

"Nicholas! You got my letter!" She bolted up from her stool,

set her plate down, and covered the short distance between them with a few quick strides. “How have you been?” she asked as she gave him a hug.

Nicholas relaxed his posture a little and returned Karen’s hug. “I’ve been good,” he replied, his voice almost as stiff as his posture had been.

Karen broke the hug to look at him. “Well, that’s good,” she said, hesitating slightly as she picked up on his tone. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence where neither of them could think of anything to say. “So, um, do you want to do something sometime?”

“Sure, how about now? I just have to check with my parents to see what they’re planning—probably nothing—and then we can do whatever you like.”

“Let me just see if that’s okay with my parents.” Karen glanced in their direction and received a reluctantly affirmative nod from her mother.

“I suppose *I* can do the dishes,” Karen’s mother said as she made her way around the fire pit, collecting empty plates, “but take Yvette with you.”

A resentful look crawled onto Karen’s face, and she cast a contemptuous glance at her younger sister. Realizing that she wasn’t in a position to refuse, she said, “Fine,” then turned on her heel and offered Nicholas her arm. “Let’s go, Nicholas.”

He hesitated for half a second, then looped his arm through hers, and they began walking in the general direction of Nicholas’s campsite. Yvette caught up but decided to trail behind them.

Karen was trying to put Nicholas into a less serious mood, swaying jovially, pulling him this way and that while holding on to his arm. It wasn’t working. In fact, Nicholas found himself becoming increasingly irritated.

Nicholas’s posture stiffened again. Frowning, Karen gave up swaying on his arm, and sent him a glance that mixed frustration and puzzlement.

Before long, they arrived at the Strauss family’s campsite. Nicholas could see his sister running along the riverside to catch up with a little toy boat, and his mother wasn’t far off, sitting in a folding lawn chair with dark glasses and a hat, watching her daughter.

“Hello, Mom,” Nicholas called as he approached. “You

remember Karen, and her sister, Yvette?”

“Of course,” Kathleen said, too blandly to be welcoming. She knew all about Karen.

“Hello, Mrs. Strauss,” Karen said, and self-consciously withdrew her arm from Nicholas’s. Yvette gave a polite nod.

“Before we make our own plans,” Nicholas began, “I wanted to check what you and dad are planning.”

“I think we’re just going to relax, so you can do whatever you like, but make sure you’re back in time for supper.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you later, then,” Nicholas said, and then turned and started walking down toward the river. Karen hastily following suit, and Yvette lingered for just a second, letting them walk on ahead.

“Well, what would you like to do?” Nicholas asked as the three of them reached the riverbank and gazed absently across the river to the other side.

“Hmmm . . . how about table tennis?”

Nicholas began nodding. “All right, let’s go.” With that, he began walking again.

As she walked beside Nicholas, Karen glanced over her shoulder. “You can keep score, Yvette.”

Nicholas frowned. “No, she can play, too. We’ll take turns.”

Yvette caught up with them now and kept pace on the other side of Nicholas. She sent him an appreciative smile, which revealed a brief flash of somewhat crooked teeth. Even in spite of them, she was, in Nicholas’s opinion, incredibly cute—short and skinny with long, slightly curly blond hair, and a small, impish face that somehow always reminded him of Tinkerbell from Peter Pan. By contrast, Karen was taller and plumper with straight, black-brown hair, and a long face with hard, stately features.

With the benefit of hindsight, Nicholas had come to realize that Yvette was actually the prettier—and nicer—of the two sisters, but she was too young for him. Yvette didn’t seem to think so, however, and was favoring Nicholas with a look that Eve might have given the proverbial apple.

As the trio approached the gazebo, Nicholas tried to summon more positive feelings about Karen. *After all, she deserves a second chance, doesn’t she?*

Upon reaching the tennis table, Nicholas picked up one of the paddles and held the other one out: “Who wants to go

first?”

Yvette began reaching for the paddle.

“I will,” Karen said, and took the paddle from Nicholas. “You can go after me, Yvette.”

“Okay,” Yvette agreed, her hand falling back to her side.

Nicholas frowned, but said nothing as he picked up the ball and got ready to serve.

Yvette took a seat near the tennis table and watched the game. The gazebo they were playing in was large and open to the outside, just four gray cement pillars and a brown, thatched roof, with a number of tables and chairs scattered beneath.

Nicholas served the ball and the game began. It was a pitched match, but Nicholas was the first to reach eleven points with a two point lead.

The ball rolled to a quick stop in the grass behind Karen. “Good game. You almost had me,” Nicholas said.

“Bad luck!” Karen spat, her face scrunching up as though she had just tasted something sour. “You won’t get so lucky next time!”

“Luck?” Nicholas grinned. “*Luck* has nothing to do with it.”

“Says you,” Karen replied, crossing her arms and sending him a defiant stare.

Nicholas blinked. She was serious! But he had no intention of continuing the childish argument. He already knew from last year that Karen was a sore loser.

Karen seemed to take his silence to mean that she’d won the argument, and she broke her stare. “Well, I’ve got to go to the *loo*,” she said, and then headed for the nearby women’s restrooms.

Taking that as her cue, Yvette got up from her chair and retrieved the ball from the ground.

* * *

Elizabeth and Charley were sitting on a wooden bench, looking up at a star-dappled sky. They’d spent most of the day together after meeting early that morning. He seemed nice enough to Elizabeth, and quite handsome, too: fine, masculine features; bright, if slightly unfocused, green eyes; and short, brown hair. He was a little edgy though. She glanced at him. He was bouncing both of his knees at a furious rate, and every now and then she’d catch him biting his already stubby nails.

As if on cue, Charley began biting his nails again. Elizabeth reached over and clasped his beleaguered hand in both of hers. He turned to look at her. His eyes were wide and shining as he stared unblinkingly back at her.

“Relax, Charley. You’re on holiday. Whatever you’re worried about, it can wait until you get home.” He smiled uncertainly and let his hand fall into his lap.

A warm breeze was blowing now. Elizabeth’s eyes half closed as she felt the air rushing past her face. It was a very pleasant evening.

And yet, Charley gave a sudden shiver.

Elizabeth sent him a smile, about to comment on his involuntary gesture.

But Charley had not stopped shivering.

“You look cold,” she said, a worried frown etching her pretty features.

Charley stifled his shivering with a visible effort before replying. “I am cold,” he said. “Aren’t you?”

“No, I’m fine.” Elizabeth studied Charley as he began shivering again. “Maybe you’re getting sick?”

“Y-yeah, maybe that’s it,” he said. “Ch-check out the stars. Can you see the big d-dipper?”

Elizabeth frowned, but accepted the change of topic.

“No, I can’t. Where is it?”

“Right over th-there,” he said, pointing with his finger.

“Ah. Now I see it.” Elizabeth covered a yawn with her hand. Suddenly reminded of the time, she checked her watch. Her eyes widened. “Hey, Charley,” she began, “I’ve got to go. I was meant to be in bed by nine and it’s now ten minutes past.”

That got his attention. “By n-nine?” he echoed. “Even when you’re on holiday?”

“I’m afraid so. My parents are pretty strict about that kind of thing.”

“That’s a sh-shame. Well, goodnight, Elizabeth,” he said, and began leaning toward her. Their lips drew closer, and the space between them steadily narrowed, but Elizabeth turned her head to the side at the last moment, causing his lips to land on her cheek. It was too soon for a real kiss. She hardly knew him, and besides, she *really* didn’t want to get sick on her holiday.

* * *

"You're late," Constance said, watching her daughter approach. She was standing outside the caravan, arms crossed and waiting. "Fifteen minutes late."

"I know, I'm sorry, Mom. I wasn't watching the time carefully enough."

Constance frowned. "Don't let it happen again."

"I won't."

Elizabeth reached her mother and they walked together inside the tent. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Very much," Elizabeth said.

Constance zipped the tent's door flap closed behind them. "What's he like?"

"He's nice . . . but a little high-strung—always biting his nails and fidgeting. And . . ."

"And?" Constance turned to face her daughter.

Elizabeth hesitated, then said, "I think he's coming down with a cold."

"What makes you say that?"

"Tonight, he was shivering uncontrollably, even though it's warm out."

That caught Constance's attention. Highly strung, fidgeting, shivering . . . She'd been a nurse before she'd had children. Shivering was common enough if one had a fever, but sometimes, when the patient was agitated as well, it bespoke other things.

Constance nodded, as though agreeing with her daughter's analysis. "Well, dear, I suppose you'd better get ready for bed. Be careful not to wake Hattie."

"Okay. Goodnight, Mom," Elizabeth said, and started for the door of the camper.

"Goodnight, Elizabeth," Constance returned absently. She watched Elizabeth climb the short staircase to the door of the camper and then go inside. Her mind was still busily churning over what her daughter had said. *The boy could just be getting sick, but it never hurts to be careful.*

Tomorrow, she was going to have to do some fact-finding about Charley.

Chapter 7

Constance watched Elizabeth and Charley swimming in the ocean. The beach was sprawled to either side of her, shining white-gold in the sun; off to the right it was bisected by the mouth of the Touws River. Beach umbrellas dotted the sand as far as the eye could see. Constance could hear powerful waves hammering the beach and the noisy shouts and excited chatter of the beach goers.

Lying on the beach in close proximity to Constance, were her husband, and Duncan, Charley's father. His mother, Carol, was getting ready to join Constance for a quick swim.

It was now a full day and a night after Elizabeth had confided in Constance some worrying details about Charley. Constance had spent yesterday making her own observations to either confirm or deny her suspicions. She had noticed Charley's nervous habits, but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

"Well, I'm ready," Constance said. "How about you, Carol?"

"Just a second," Carol replied, grabbing a bathing cap from her beach bag. "Okay, let's go."

As they walked down the beach, Carol tucked her hair into the cap. Constance looked over at her. "Carol, I hope you won't think me impertinent to say this, but I couldn't help noticing that Charley is suffering some . . . *familiar* symptoms."

Carol tried hard to conceal a pained look. "What do you mean?"

"I used to be a nurse, and I don't know if you know anything about this, but I think your son may be suffering withdrawal symptoms."

Carol sighed, but kept silent, carefully considering what she should and shouldn't say. They were forced to stop walking as a small horde of beach goers carrying colorful beach umbrellas

and towels cut across their path. Feeling the scalding heat of the sand on the soles of her feet, Carol began impatiently shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Unwilling to suffer that indignity, Constance just endured the pain. The horde now past, they continued walking, more quickly now, down toward the water.

As they went, Carol finally spoke. "Actually, we do know about it." She sighed again. "Charley was caught in possession of drugs at school."

Constance nodded, her suspicions confirmed.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said. "You've probably realized then that Elizabeth won't be any good for him right now."

Carol knew what that *really* meant: Charley wasn't any good for *Elizabeth*; Constance would tell Elizabeth, and that would be the end of it. She would have done the same thing in Constance's place.

Carol nodded haltingly. "You're right. He doesn't need the distraction right now."

"I'm glad we can agree," Constance said, sending Carol a tight-lipped smile as they reached the water's edge.

* * *

Further down the beach, Nicholas and Karen were sitting on wet, hard-packed sand, dripping wet, sand sticking to their legs and swimwear, the waves periodically rushing up around their ankles, sometimes going as high as their waists. Karen was pushing sand around with her feet while Nicholas stared blankly out across the ocean.

Nicholas had spent the past few days with Karen, but things weren't the same as they'd been the year before. Maybe it was the knowledge that she'd opportunistically dumped him for his best friend, all the while trying to keep it a secret, so that she could always retrace her steps if she felt like it. Or maybe it was the fact that she hadn't even tried to explain herself, or maybe . . . He shook his head.

He wasn't sure.

"The water was nice," Nicholas commented.

"Yeah, it usually is," Karen replied, her voice soft, disinterested.

Silence.

"So . . ." Nicholas began, struggling to find something to say. *It shouldn't be this hard*, he thought. "How was school this

year?”

“It was fine.” Her answer was brief and to the point, stifling yet another topic of conversation.

“That’s good . . .”

More silence.

This is painful, he thought, and glanced at her. She was still pushing sand around with her feet, acting upset—depressed even. Nicholas considered that. Her initial excitement at seeing him again had faded sometime during the past two days, and had been promptly replaced by a deep and brooding melancholy. Initially it had been he who had had trouble resuming their relationship, but now they’d switched roles, with her acting uninterested, and him trying to make it work. Nicholas frowned and resumed staring out over the water.

* * *

Not far from where Nicholas and Karen were sitting, Kristina and Yvette were working on a sand castle. Or rather, Kristina was working on the sand castle, and Yvette was watching Nicholas and Karen enviously.

“You know . . .” Yvette began, “my sister is just using your brother.”

Kristina looked up from the sand castle, her head cocked to one side, a blank look on her face. “What is she using him for?”

Yvette rolled her eyes. “I mean she doesn’t *really* love him. She’s still in love with Reggie.”

“Oh . . .” Kristina trailed off.

“Yeah, *oh*. Did you know that it was Reggie who broke up with *her*? She’s not even over him yet.”

“How come you know all this?”

“I was there when Karen got Reggie’s letter saying that he was breaking up with her, and I was there to see her mooning about for the weeks and months afterwards.”

Kristina was silent for a moment. If what Yvette was saying was true, then her brother ought to know. Or should he? *Someone ought to know!* Kristina thought.

“Why are you telling me this?” Kristina asked.

“Well,” Yvette paused, “I guess I don’t want to see your brother get hurt.”

“What you want me to do?”

Yvette shrugged. “Whatever you think best.”

* * *

It was now shortly after noon, and the Smythe family was driving back from the beach for lunch.

“Elizabeth,” Constance turned in her seat, and waited for her daughter’s attention. Elizabeth met her mother’s gaze. “I don’t want you to see Charley anymore.”

Elizabeth’s mouth popped open, and she looked like she was about to object, but Constance continued before she could interrupt.

“I was talking to his mother while we were on the beach, and apparently, he’s a recovering drug addict.”

“Oh my goodness!”

“After lunch, I want you to go and do whatever you need to, to send him on his way.”

Elizabeth’s brow furrowed, and her gaze dropped to her feet. She didn’t like breaking up with people. But her mother was right: she couldn’t date a drug addict. She nodded slowly. Seeing this, Constance turned to face forward again.

* * *

After lunch, Kristina, having duly considered her burden of knowledge, decided to tell her mother what Yvette had confided in her. *She’ll know what to do*, Kristina thought, as she approached her mother.

“Mom . . .” Kristina began.

Kathleen was sitting in a lawn chair outside the tent, reading a magazine. She looked up. “What is it, Kristina, dear?”

“Well, when we were on the beach earlier today, and I was making a sand castle with Yvette . . . she told me something about Karen.” Kristina was looking down at her feet as she said it, shifting her weight from one foot to the other and toeing the grass with one shoe.

Kathleen cocked her head in question, but when Kristina didn’t look up, she prompted, “And? What did Yvette tell you?”

Kristina told her mother.

Kathleen looked thoughtful for a moment, then frowned. “Thank you for telling me, Kristina.” Kristina nodded absently, still gazing at her feet. “But . . .” Kristina looked up now. “I think we’d better let Nicholas know, too, don’t you?”

“I guess.”

Kathleen got up from her chair and set her magazine down where she’d been sitting. She made her way across the grassy campsite, Kristina following along behind her, to where

Nicholas was sitting at a nearby picnic table, talking with his friend, Kevin.

“Hello, boys,” Kathleen said. They looked up and chorused their own greetings. She went on, “Nicholas, I need to speak with you for a moment.”

“Sure, Mom. What’s up?”

“It’s about Karen,” she replied, glancing pointedly in Kevin’s direction.

Kevin caught the look. Noting the ominous tone in her voice, he said, “Right. Well, I’ll leave you to talk to your mother, Nick. See you later.” He grabbed his red baseball cap from the table and left.

“Bye, Kevin.” Nicholas watched his friend depart until he was out of earshot, then turned back to his mother, who was now seated at the table with his sister. “So, what about Karen?” he asked, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach.

* * *

“Charley, we need to talk,” Elizabeth said, turning from the river to face him. They were seated side-by-side on a park bench along the river.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked, completely missing the note of foreboding in her voice.

“I don’t think we’re right for each other.”

Charley’s features suddenly froze as if he’d been slapped, then he just sat there, blinking. After a long moment, his shoulders slumped. He had been expecting this, but not so soon. “How did you find out?” he asked, his voice dull.

“I—” she stopped short. Elizabeth had already planned what to say next—some excuse about her having recently broken up with a boyfriend at home and not being ready for another relationship yet. It was at least half true, but Charley had surprised her by guessing the real reason that she was breaking up with him. She considered her response, looking for a way to avoid causing trouble for Charley’s mother. “Well, the way you shiver, it was obvious what the reason was when I realized that you weren’t ill.”

“Ah . . .” he trailed off.

“I’m sorry.” Elizabeth gave Charley a hug. “Get better soon.” She pulled away to hold him at an arm’s length. For his sake, she pretended not to notice the tears shimmering in his eyes.

* * *

Well, Nicholas reflected as he walked alone back to his campsite, at least she didn't take it too badly.

Nicholas took a deep breath of the fresh morning air and let it out slowly.

He'd spent most of yesterday after lunch avoiding Karen, wondering what to do. Yet he'd known what to do as soon as his mother had told him that Reggie had broken up with Karen, and not the other way around. Unfortunately, knowing what to do and actually doing it were two different things.

He remembered . . .

"Karen, this isn't going to work," he said.

"What? Why—what did I do?" she asked.

"Nothing," he lied, but ironically it was more the truth. Karen had done nothing—nothing to apologize, nothing to explain, nothing to convince him that she was really interested in him, and nothing to restore his confidence in her. "You're obviously not over Reggie yet."

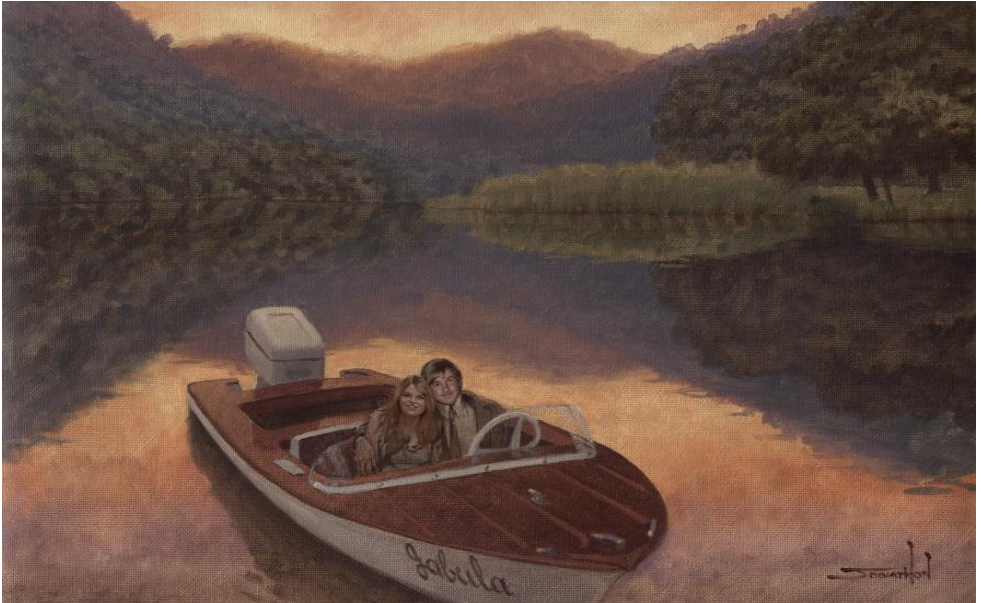
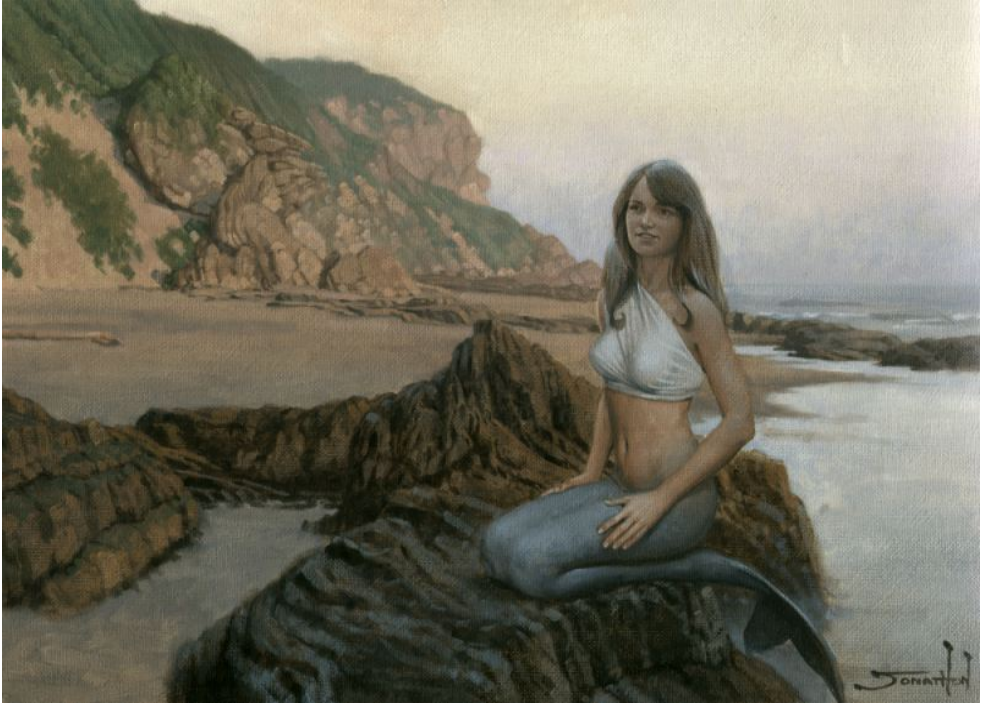
Her face blanked—apparently, she'd thought he didn't know about her and Reggie. She recovered smoothly. "Yes, I am," she said, but the look on her face said otherwise.

"No, you're not, and I'm not playing runner-up to my best friend."

"Fine," Karen said. "I don't need to waste any more of my time with you. There are plenty of other guys in Siesta who would be thrilled just to be seen with me!"

And with that, she'd turned on her heel and stomped away. Nicholas sighed at the memory. *Well, I guess that's it for girls this summer . . .*

Love



Chapter 8

“Elizabeth, hurry up, we want to get to the beach and back again before noon,” Constance called.

“I’m coming—just a minute!” True to her word, a minute later she emerged from the camper, a picture of radiance, wearing a baby blue bikini covered with a loose cotton shirt. A colorful beach towel was slung over her shoulder. “I couldn’t find my towel,” she explained as she walked toward the car.

“Silly girl. I suppose you’ll remember where you put things in future?”

“Yeah, Lizzie, I suppose you’ll remember where you put things in future,” Hattie said, mimicking her mother’s tone.

“Hattie . . .” Constance warned.

Elizabeth spared a meaningful glance at Hattie as she climbed into the car.

On the way to the beach, Hattie found that she was hungry and fished a banana from the lunch basket between her and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth thought this was fitting: still feeling mildly stung by her mother’s words and her sister parroting them back to her, she watched Hattie sitting beside her, eating a banana, and managed to see a monkey sitting there instead.

“I hope the beach is not too busy,” Constance said.

“I’m sure it isn’t, dear,” Edwin said. “The whole point in going so early is that most people don’t. I imagine we’ll have our pick of spots.”

* * *

They didn’t.

“How can it be so busy already?” Elizabeth asked, looking dismayed as she surveyed the beach and its forest of colorful beach umbrellas.

“Because you took so long fretting about your towel and who

knows what else," Constance answered irritably.

Edwin gave his daughter a sympathetic look. Elizabeth caught the look, smiled, and shrugged. Her good mood had surpassed her mother's ability to alter it, and besides, she had no intention of sitting on the beach, so good spot or no spot, it didn't really matter to her. She was there to swim, and the water looked more than empty enough.

"You would think that with an eight *kilometer*-long beach, people could at least *try* to spread out a bit," Constance said, apparently not noticing that she could set the precedent by walking the extra distance to the emptier parts of the beach herself.

"Over there . . . how about that?" Edwin said, pointing down and to their right with his free hand—the other was carrying a variegated beach umbrella of their own as well as their brown wicker picnic basket. Where Edwin was pointing, a young couple was getting up from the beach and beginning to pack away their things. "What luck!" he remarked and started off in that direction.

"Just a minute, Edwin . . ." Edwin jerked to a halt and turned to face her, his eyebrows raised in question. Constance shook her head. "I don't think that spot will do."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's too close to the river. There are bound to be dangerous currents there," she replied, and after casting about briefly with her eyes, she continued, "There, that's a better spot," she said, and headed off in her own direction. Elizabeth and Hattie followed their mother. Edwin watched them retreating into the distance, and started reluctantly after them, only to stop abruptly a few paces later as the umbrella slipped from his hand and dug into the sand in front of him. With a grimace, he picked up the umbrella and struggled forward again.

When they reached the spot Constance had picked, Edwin noted that it was almost as close to the river as the one he had chosen, but he had more sense than to say so.

"All right, girls, have fun," Constance said. "There are drinks and snacks here when you need them."

"Okay," Elizabeth replied, leaving her things in a bundle on the sand and then heading with her sister for the sparkling blue ocean.

* * *

Nicholas couldn't help feeling depressed. This was his vacation, a vacation which he had looked forward to all year, and it had started out with him breaking up with Karen. He sighed. As he drew near to the campsite, his mother spotted him returning.

"Are you going to be okay, Nicholas?" she asked from the folding chair where she was sitting under the awning of the tent.

"I'll be fine. I think I'm over her anyway."

"Do you want a cookie?" Kathleen asked, holding out an open box that had been lying on the folding table beside her.

Nicholas smiled, and wondered if all mothers thought food was a panacea for heartache. "No, thanks. Actually, I think I'm going to go to the beach to collect cuttlefish bones."

"You're going to walk?"

"Yeah, I could use the exercise."

"Oh. Okay. Have a good time." Her worried frown said she didn't think he would. "Don't forget to come back for lunch—and take a drink with you! It's very hot outside."

"Nee, I won't need it," Nicholas said, walking past her and into the tent to get a bag for the cuttlefish bones.

* * *

Edwin lay on the beach, feeling the sand tickling warmly between his fingers and toes. The heat was making him drowsy—drowsy enough to fall asleep, except now that he had some time to think, Edwin was preoccupied by his thoughts. He glanced surreptitiously at his wife.

Edwin was thinking about the suggestion she'd made on the way to Siesta. *Why in the world would she want to trade homes with the Stevens family?* No, he knew why *she* would want to trade, but he wasn't sure why *he* would want to. *Not that it matters what I think*, he reflected bitterly. He didn't want to move. Besides that, there was something about the idea that unsettled him. Perhaps it was the fact that his wife had never really liked Lawrence, and now she was suggesting that they help him and his family. It didn't quite ring true.

Maybe if he came up with a good reason why they shouldn't trade homes, his wife would agree to forget about the whole idea. Edwin's eyes lit up as he thought he'd found the perfect angle of attack.

"Constance, dear, I've been thinking," he began, steeling himself.

Constance turned her head lazily toward him, her eyes masked by dark sunglasses. "Yes? About what?"

"Well . . . it occurs to me that it might look to others as though we're trying to take advantage of the Stevens family, if we try to trade homes with them now, so soon after their son has died."

There was a moment of silence in which Edwin felt sure that Constance was glaring at him beneath her sunglasses.

"Nonsense. They'll see it as an act of mercy. Which it is. By trading homes with them, we eliminate the inevitable and endless hassles with estate agents they'd have to go through otherwise. Not to mention a tiresome wait while dozens of prospective buyers traipse through their home without buying."

Edwin contemplated his wife's counter-argument.

"Try to relax, Edwin. We needn't bother about the details just yet." Constance turned her head away from him, as if dismissing the conversation.

Edwin let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Perhaps his wife was right. Maybe he should relax. He glanced at Constance again, enviously noting her tranquil features. *Besides, he thought, if I know Lawrence's wife, she won't be interested in trading homes either.*

Now, convinced that he'd been worrying for nothing, Edwin did relax. He closed his eyes and allowed the warm sand to make him sleepy again.

Constance frowned as the sun went behind a cloud, turning off the radiating waves of light and heat coming through the umbrella as surely as if a switch had been flicked. Yet she wasn't frowning about that. Now that Edwin had reminded her of the Stevens family, she couldn't help thinking about the opportunities they presented. How could she ensure that the Stevens family agreed to a trade?

If Edwin were more motivated, he could be the managing director, and we would have a home like Lawrence's. She sent her husband a sideways look beneath her glasses, taking in his beer-thickened midriff. *No, there's no chance of that,* she thought, stifling a sigh. *He's not the least bit concerned with improving his lot in life. He's even trying to dissuade me from what little means I have to do it myself! The gall of it!* Her frown deepened. *No, the future is best left in capable hands, and at*

least I am capable.

"You are *not*."

Constance jumped with a jolt of adrenaline, and her heart began pounding. *Who said that?*

"I am too a better swimmer than you!" Hattie insisted.

Elizabeth gave her sister a skeptical look.

Constance blinked. *Of course, who did you think it was?* She gave a nervous laugh, amazed that she could be startled so easily. She should have recognized Elizabeth's voice.

"Hello, girls. Did you enjoy your swim?" Constance asked, sitting up and lifting her sunglasses as she did so.

* * *

It wasn't a very long walk to the beach, having taken Nicholas only twenty minutes to get there, but that had been twenty minutes spent sweltering beneath a hot, morning sun, walking along the dusty, dirt road to the beach, and choking on a mouthful of sand with every car that passed him by.

Now, standing on the beach, a long way from the heaviest concentrations of people, he squinted out at the gleaming ocean, thinking what a relief it would have been to go swimming. What had he been thinking to walk to the beach without a towel or a swimsuit? Making his way down to the water, he resolved to at least get his feet wet.

After kicking his sandals off at the water's edge, Nicholas waded in up to his knees and looked out at the long series of waves rolling in from a few hundred meters off the shore. It was a shallow beach, long and unprotected from the waves. He closed his eyes against the salty spray as a particularly large wave roared past his legs, soaking his shorts. *Oh well, they'll dry.* A second wave got his shirt, and the spray kicked up and splashed him in the face with a barrage of cool droplets. Nicholas smiled, and just stood there for a long moment, breathing deeply. *Jinne, I've missed this place!*

Reluctantly, he made his way back onto dry land and slipped his now sandy feet back into his sandals. Nicholas began walking down the beach, scouring it for the characteristically flat, white fish bones for which the witch doctors around Sterkspruit would pay twenty-five cents apiece. He walked for more than a kilometer, away from the crowds, every so often bending down to pick up one of the fish bones.

His bag now full, Nicholas started back. He had unbuttoned

his patterned, white and gray shirt, and it was flapping behind him now as he walked into the breeze. It, along with his shorts, had long since dried. With the sun beating down mercilessly overhead, it was almost a pity. He wouldn't be feeling the heat so much if his clothes were still wet. Nicholas grimaced, and picked up his pace—the cream-colored canvas bag full of cuttlefish bones in his hand was going *clink-clink, clink-clink* in time to every step. Now he really *was* thirsty, and it was going to take some time for him to make it back to camp. He hadn't intended to go quite as far as he did.

Nicholas's mouth grew drier just thinking about the long, hot walk back to camp. With a rueful smile, he asked himself, *Why didn't I listen to my mother?*

* * *

"Elizabeth, Hattie, come on! Hurry up! It's time to go back for lunch!" Constance called down to the water's edge. The only reply she got was to see her daughters pick up their pace.

A minute later, Elizabeth and Hattie arrived.

"It's time to go already?" Hattie asked.

"Yes, and not a minute too soon. Look at you! You're as red as a tomato."

Elizabeth helped pack their things into the wicker lunch basket they'd brought, and then watched as Edwin took down their beach umbrella and closed the lunch basket.

Edwin turned to his wife, waiting for her to signal that she was ready to leave. Constance responded by leading the way back to the car.

As her father drove them back to camp, Elizabeth found herself thinking about Fairy Knowe, a hotel downstream from Siesta. Dances were held there every Friday and Saturday night, and tomorrow was Friday. The problem was, now that she had broken up with Charley, she had no one to take her to the dance. She supposed that maybe she could go anyway and see if there were any single guys there, but she discarded the idea as being too awkward. *Well, there will be other dances, so I might still have an opportunity to go.*

If only she could find someone to take her.

* * *

Nicholas was about halfway home, his shirt now buttoned to prevent the dust kicked up by passing cars from sticking to him. He tried to keep his pace as brisk as possible—his bag of

cuttlefish bones going *clink-clink, clink-clink* in time to every crunch of gravel beneath his feet. Every step was an agony of unquenched thirst.

Coming from behind him, Nicholas heard the distant rumble of a car. A few moments later, a white Mercedes sedan roared past and left Nicholas amidst a spreading brown cloud of dust.

* * *

Deep in thought, Constance was only vaguely aware of the passing scene—a handsome young man with light brown hair, walking along the road to Siesta and carry-ing what appeared to be a heavy, white canvas bag in his right hand. Seeing the boy made her lose her train of thought, and she found herself idly wondering about him.

She considered her two daughters sitting in the back of the car, remembering that it was her job to find them each suitable boyfriends. It was an important matter, not to be left to the inexperienced—such as her daughters themselves. *That would be a recipe for disaster. After all, boyfriends eventually turn into husbands, and husbands become a part of the family. It would never do for us to allow just anyone into the family.*

As young as they were, Constance knew that they would need her help to wade through the morass of dating and come out ultimately triumphant, having found the perfect husband—or *as nearly perfect as possible*, she thought, remembering her own husband. *What else are mothers for?*

“Edwin, stop the car,” Constance said.

* * *

Nicholas felt like coughing from all the dust he’d in-haled, and his mouth tasted full of the gritty, salty flavor of earth. Then, he noticed something strange. The brake lights of the Mercedes that had just passed him were lit and shining crimson through the hanging brown curtain of dust. Even as he was trying to figure out why the car might have stopped, Nicholas heard the car start spitting gravel as it reversed down the road and pulled up alongside him. The passenger’s side window rolled down, revealing a sophisticated-looking, middle-aged lady.

“Young man, would you like a ride back to Siesta?”

He was surprised by the offer, but greatly relieved. “I’d like that very much, thank you,” Nicholas replied. She nodded once, and then the back door of the Mercedes opened for him, as if by magic.

He saw a flash of one slender, white hand and arm as someone opened the door from the inside. Curious, he hesitated before climbing in, and squinted into the relative darkness of the car, trying to determine who was in there. But his eyes wouldn't adjust fast enough and he didn't want to delay, so he climbed in and closed the door behind him. He caught just a glimmer of long, brown hair as he did so. *A girl?* he wondered, as he set his bag of cuttlefish bones on his lap with a heavy *clank*. Turning from the door, he hazarded a glance and saw that there was not one, but two girls sitting on the backseat next to him. Nicholas noted that the girl sitting closest to him, the one who had no doubt opened the door, was about his age—and shockingly beautiful. She had long, straight brown hair, similar in color to his own, and she was wearing only a light blue bikini with a loose-fitting cotton shirt, open in the front, and draped delicately across her shoulders. Given how little she was wearing, Nicholas couldn't help but also notice her incredible figure. Noticing his scrutiny, the girl smiled shyly at him. He smiled back.

"What's your name?" this from the passenger's seat in front of Nicholas—*unfortunately*. He would have preferred if the question had come from the girl seated next to him, rather than her mother.

"Nicholas." Reluctantly, he tore his eyes from the girl.

"A good name. Where are you from?"

"Sterkspruit, in the Transkei, but I go to school in Bloemfontein," Nicholas replied, catching a glimpse of the younger girl on the other side of the back seat. She was trying very hard, but failing, to stifle her giggling as she pointed at him and whispered something to her sister. The older girl began having similar difficulty. Nicholas frowned and shifted self-consciously in his seat. *What are they on about?*

"That's interesting," the girls' mother said. "What does your father do there?"

"He's a doctor."

"*Really?*" *So this is the doctor's son*, Constance thought, now very glad that she'd asked him if he wanted a ride. "That's even more interesting. I used to be a nurse. Does he work in a hospital, or general practice?"

"Well, it's a small town, so he's a traveling doctor. He treats the natives and traders who live in the area."

"I see. You speak English very well. Is your family British?"

"No, actually we're *Afrikaners*, but I go to an English boarding school in Bloemfontein."

Constance paused to mask the disappointment from her voice. *Points for being a doctor's son, but you just lost some for being an Afrikaner.*

Nicholas didn't infer the reason for the pause, but felt a need to fill the silence. "My mother thought it best that we go to an English school, since the whole world speaks English nowadays."

"*We?*" Constance asked. "You have siblings?"

"Yes, an older brother and a younger sister."

"What are your ages?"

"I'm sixteen, my brother is nearly twenty, and my sister is eight."

"Oh, well, then you're just a little older than my eldest daughter, Elizabeth." *So that's her name*, Nicholas thought, taking the opportunity to steal another glance at her. "She's turning sixteen in February. Is your brother in Siesta as well?"

"No, he's spending Christmas holidays with some friends from university."

"I see. What is he studying there?"

"Medicine," Nicholas said. "He wants to be a doctor."

"Like your father."

"I guess so," Nicholas replied, noticing that they were now coming to the entrance of Siesta. "Could you drop me here, please? My family's caravan is parked nearby." He pointed in the direction, but Constance already knew where his family was. It was common knowledge that the doctor was given the best spot in Siesta, and that that spot was right inside the entrance.

"Stop the car here, please, Edwin," Constance directed, and the car promptly ground to a halt.

Nicholas opened the door with one hand and grabbed his bag of cuttlefish bones with the other. He climbed out of the car and hesitated with his hand on the door, about to close it, yet hoping for one last glimpse of Elizabeth before he left. His wish was granted, and he found himself hesitating for a second longer as he watched her tentatively grasp an empty banana peel between the thumb and forefinger of one hand and removed it from the seat where he'd been sitting. *So that's why*

they were laughing at me! Nicholas grinned. He'd sat on that banana peel.

He closed the door, turned to the still-open passenger's side window, and said, "Thanks again for the ride."

"You're very welcome. I hope well see you again soon," Constance said, and meant it. He was, after all, the *doctor's* son.

And then the car drove off, again leaving Nicholas in a spreading brown cloud of dust. He watched the car depart for a second, then crossed the road, heading for the grassy riverbank and the glade of trees where his family's caravan was parked.

As he walked, Nicholas couldn't help feeling dumbstruck. *Elizabeth . . .* he repeated the name silently to himself, committing it to memory. *What just happened? Where is she from? Why didn't I say something to her?* The answer to the last question struck him as obvious. Her mother had kept him busy answering questions about himself from the moment he'd entered the car. *Well, I can always go looking for her. The park is small enough that I shouldn't have trouble finding her.*

Chapter 9

After lunch, Elizabeth found herself wandering through the caravan park. She was looking for the handsome young man her family had given a ride to before lunch.

She wasn't having much luck finding him. *What was his name again?* She racked her brain for a moment. *Nicholas. That's it. Nicholas. Maybe he'll take me to the dance tomorrow night? That is, if I can find him.*

The trouble was, she didn't know what his family looked like, or what their caravan, or even their car looked like. In fact, it had become increasingly apparent to her that she didn't even know where their campsite was. Nicholas had seemed to indicate that his family was parked near the entrance of the park where he'd been dropped off, but "near" was such a nebulous word. All she really had to go on was his windswept, light brown hair, his roguishly handsome face, his piercing, green eyes, and his patterned, white and gray t-shirt. *And he might have changed his clothes by now. . . .*

Elizabeth sighed and panned her head back and forth. Everywhere she looked, she saw milling crowds of people, and a myriad of caravans, cars, tents, chairs, boats, and smoking fire pits. The sounds of adults' laughter and children's boisterous games reached her ears, and the air was thick with the smoke and smell of grilling *boerewors** and lamb chops. But there was no sight or sound of Nicholas. Elizabeth had never realized how busy Siesta was, or how large the park was—until now.

She turned another corner, saw another caravan, walked past yet another family that didn't match the description Nicholas had given of his own. No little eight-year-old girl, no

* *Boerewors*: Afrikaner farmer's sausage

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handsome young man with rakish features and wind-addled, brown hair . . .

That's it! Elizabeth thought, finally giving in to despair. *This is impossible.* And with that thought, she turned around and headed back to her family's campsite.

* * *

There was no sign of her *anywhere*. Nicholas had been searching up and down Siesta for the last twenty minutes. All he had to go on was a white Mercedes and that smile. *Elizabeth, where are you?* He'd seen every color of Mercedes but white: red ones, black ones, silver ones . . . *it shouldn't be this hard to find a car!* As Nicholas turned another corner, a little kid almost ran into him at top speed, but he dodged out of the way at the last second. *Jinne! It's busy here,* he thought, shaking his head.

He looked around again. No white Mercedes. *Maybe they were visiting some friends and now they've left again? Or maybe I just missed seeing their car?* Nicholas frowned. Given how little luck he'd had finding them, he decided they'd probably left. He turned around . . . and saw in the distance . . .

A girl with long, chestnut brown hair!

His heart leapt.

He walked up behind her.

"Elizabe—" She turned around. His face fell.

It wasn't her.

"Oh. Sorry," he said, "I thought you were someone else."

The girl smiled but said nothing, and Nicholas walked on, now thoroughly discouraged and more than a little embarrassed. *I guess I may as well head back.*

* * *

It was just past one o'clock; Elizabeth had returned to camp not five minutes ago, and now she was sitting outside her family's tent, beneath the awning. Bored, she was drumming her fingers on the armrests of her chair, wondering what she was going to do with herself for the rest of the day.

Hearing a rustling noise behind her, she turned her head to look. It was just her mother coming out of the tent. Constance took a seat in the folding chair next to Elizabeth and looked over at her daughter. She searched Elizabeth's face for a moment.

"You look bored," Constance decided.

Elizabeth smiled. "I am."

"Well, don't wish your life away." Constance bent down to pick up a magazine that was lying on the grass next to her chair. She opened the magazine and began reading.

Elizabeth contemplated the cover of the magazine, and a thought occurred to her. "I'm going to go to the *Duka* to see if I can find something to read." The *Duka*, meaning "little store" in Swahili, was Siesta's small convenience store.

"That sounds like a fine idea," Constance agreed as she turned a page in her magazine.

Elizabeth left the tent and her mother behind, dodging and weaving her way through the milling crowds of people on her way to the *Duka*.

* * *

Nicholas and his sister, Kristina, were sitting on a brown picnic bench beneath the shade of a large spruce tree, playing a game of rummy. Nicholas laid three cards out on the table and discarded his last one.

"Not fair!" Kristina pouted.

"Sure it is," Nicholas replied. "I got rid of all my cards first, so I win."

"But I was just about to go out, too, see?" Kristina showed him her cards.

"Not bad. You almost won."

Kristina glared at him.

Johann walked by them, a beer in his hand, a carefree look on his face. Kristina twisted around in her seat and called after her father: "Dad! Tell Nicholas he didn't win."

Oh, brother. This should be good, Nicholas thought.

Johann turned around and smiled at Kristina. He took in the game with a glance, then said, "Let me see what you had in your hand, sweetheart." She turned her cards around, and he walked over to her so he could see. "Well, look at that!" he said with easily-feigned wonder. "Looks like a tie to me."

Nicholas's eyebrows shot up. His father gave him a quick *let's-not-rock-the-boat* look, turned, and then left. Their father now gone, Nicholas scowled across the table at his sister. Kristina was staring back at him with an insufferably self-satisfied smirk on her face.

"Seeee," she said, stretching the word out like a rubber band.

Nicholas shook his head and got up from the table. "You're such a child," he said. His sister's retort was lost on the wind as he left her alone at the table and made his way toward the caravan. As he drew near, his mother came out of the tent.

"Nicholas, could you do a favor for me? I need you to go to the *Duka* and buy some milk. We're all out."

"Gladly. I could use a walk."

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“Thanks, Nicholas. Here,” she held out some money, “take this. Feel free to get something for yourself with the change.” Nicholas took the money from his mother, put it in his pocket, and headed for the *Duka* - a *small* store—two car lengths at best—its cement walls painted a pale green with a darker, blue-green aluminum roof. It was a stubby T-shape with three pillars out front, supporting an overhanging section of the roof.

Nicholas walked through the entrance, eyes on the ground to watch the steps. The bells on the door signaled his arrival. He blinked a few times, his eyes still adjusting from the brightness outside. He brought his head up and

he couldn't believe what he saw ... *Elizabeth!* He almost gasped. After all his searching, there she was: browsing through the used books and magazines that the *Duka* had to offer, holding a small twig of peach-colored bougainvillea in her hand. As he watched, she turned his way to see who had come into the store, and in that instant, their eyes met. Elizabeth held his gaze for a long, heart-stopping moment, and then she smiled. Standing there, motionless, dazed, dumbstruck—Nicholas returned her smile.



Chapter 10

For a long moment, Nicholas just stood there, frozen in place, as if turned to stone by Elizabeth's smile, able only to watch as she walked—gracefully, like a ballet dancer—toward him. Then, like the sound of birds chirping in the morning, waking him from a deep sleep, he heard her voice for the first time.

"Hi, Nicholas," she said, still smiling.

"Ah . . . hello, Elizabeth," Nicholas managed.

"You remember me."

How could I forget?

Her eyes twinkled with amusement, and Nicholas allowed a hesitant return of his earlier smile, which began at the corners of his mouth and then spread across his tanned face, changing into a grin.

He's even more handsome than I remember, she thought.

Nicholas scrambled to think of what to say next and found his mouth suddenly dry. He wasn't usually so awkward around girls.

"How was your lunch?" he thought to ask.

"I enjoyed it," she said, her smile broadening a little. "And how was yours?" she returned, holding his gaze as she began walking a few steps closer to the door of the *Duka*. Nicholas just stood there, blinking after her, wondering what to do. She kept eye contact and sent him a beckoning look from the doorway, giving him plenty of time to follow.

Snapping out of his stupor, he gladly followed Elizabeth's lead, quickly catching up to her. "It was great," he replied, stopping beside her in front of the door.

Elizabeth made a move to open the door, but Nicholas snapped into motion again and held the door open while she went through.

George, the elderly storekeeper of the *Duka*, watched them go with a smile and a knowing shake of his head.

As they walked, Nicholas inexplicably reached for her hand, and instead of her acting shocked, she turned her head to look at him, and with a slightly bemused smile, gave his hand a gentle squeeze - much to his relief, as he realized what he'd just done!

“So where are you from? What's your surname?” he asked. “From Wellington.” Elizabeth self-consciously brushed a long strand of hair from her face, “I'm almost 16 and it's Smythe.

That's in the W. Cape, right?” Nicholas watched Elizabeth's hair bouncing lightly on her shoulders as she walked, shimmering golden-brown in the sunlight, silhouetting her like an angel against the brilliant, tropical green of the mountains in the background.

“Yes, it is. So what's your surname? And you're from . . .”

Elizabeth paused to remember. “Somewhere in the Transkei?”

“Strauss, I'm 16, and Sterkspruit. It's a small town,” he said.

“Well your surname's well known, but geography never was my best subject,” she admitted, sending him an apologetic smile.

“That's okay,” he said “How long is your family staying in Siesta?”

“Three weeks.”

“That's great, so is mine!”

Elizabeth flashed him another stunning smile. *Jinne (wow) she's beautiful*, he thought. They walked on in silence for a brief moment, wandering through the park with no particular destination in mind.

Elizabeth broke the silence. “What were you doing walking along the road earlier? It seemed like you had a bag of seashells with you?”

“Actually, it was a bag of cuttlefish bones.”

She stared blankly at him, her eyebrows raised.

He grinned. “Well, you're right, they're more like shells than bones since cuttlefish are really mollusks.” When Elizabeth looked confused, Nicholas realized he hadn't really explained why he'd been collecting cuttlefish bones in the first place. He gave a short chuckle. “I'm going to sell them for twenty-five cents apiece to the witch doctors, where I live.”

“Oh,” she said. “What do the witch doctors want them for?”

“They use them to make a lot of the tonics and remedies that they use to treat their patients.” Nicholas couldn't help the derisive sound that escaped his lips. “It's sad, because when *they* get sick, they go to my dad for treatment, meaning that deep down, even they know that their remedies don't work.”

Elizabeth laughed. “That's funny . . . but you're right. It's sad that they take advantage of people like that.”

“Yeah” Nicholas replied, looking down to shield his eyes from the sun. “Does your family come here often?” he asked, changing topics.

"We've been here a few times," she replied, "and yours?"

"Ah. My family has been coming here every Christmas for as long as I can remember ." He looked over at her , head cocked curiously to one side. "How come I've never seen you here before?"

"I don't know." She met his gaze, squinting her eyes from the sun.

Nicholas was transfixed. *She has such beautiful eyes. Deep, vivid and blue.*

"I guess it's a pretty big place ," he said , and abruptly broke eye contact to avoid staring, but not before he'd noticed that she'd nodded in agreement.

They came upon a thick stand of pine trees, and began walking through it, now nearing the furthest inland tip of the park . The sunlight was dancing down through the trees, speckling them like a golden rain. A warm breeze blew, and Nicholas caught the brisk scent of the pine trees , delicately intermingled with the rich and heady aroma of blooming flowers—by the look of pure bliss on Elizabeth 's face , she had too. Once through the stand of trees , they found themselves at the meeting of the two rivers—the Touws, and Serpentine , the latter named for its meandering shape—which bordered on the park. They walked beneath an old, beautifully crafted wooden archway with red and purple bougainvillea growing over and through it. On the archway was a sign which read , "The Siestuary ." As its name implied , it was a sanctuary , a miniature park in itself, with beautiful , tropical flowers and trees growing throughout . Like a peninsula , the Siestuary was surrounded by water on all but one side. It had a magnificent view of the Touws River as it wound down through lush, jungle-covered mountains, under a rail bridge, on to the sea .

"Let's sit for a while," Elizabeth said and gestured to an old, gray wooden bench that was situated near the water's edge. Nicholas walked to it with her, still hand in hand, and as they sat down together. He reluctantly let go of her hand so that they could face each other as they talked. But soon he put his arm around her shoulders, and she instinctively snuggled into his neck. Together they looked out across the rippling water, watching a young couple canoeing slowly up the Touws River, disappearing around a corner that took them ever deeper into secluded jungle covered mountains.

"That looks like fun!" Elizabeth said, turning to look up at him, coyly.

"Yeah?" Nicholas grew thoughtful. "Then we should do that sometime?" he said, making eye contact with her again, looking for signs that she'd agree.

Holding his gaze, Elizabeth smiled ... "Please do! I'd like that ... very much!"

Almost half an hour later, they left the Siestuary and made their way down along the sandy bank of the Touws River. Before long they came to a dead end, formed by the mouth of the inlet that served as a miniature harbor for Siesta. Elizabeth pointed out her family's small red and white speedboat.

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“*Constantine*. That’s an interesting name for a boat,” Nicholas said.

Elizabeth laughed. “Yes, it is. Can you guess why my dad named it that?” Her eyes twinkled with amusement.

Nicholas thought about it. “Why do I have the feeling that he wasn’t paying homage to Saint Constantine?”

“Good guess,” she said. “Actually, my dad named it after my mother, since her name is Constance.”

“Ah. So the boat’s name is a play on words. Well, that’s . . .” He gave her an apologetic look. “A little cheesy, actually.”

Elizabeth started laughing, then belatedly gave him a playful shove.

“It’s *not!* I think it’s sweet.” Nicholas arched an eyebrow feigning indignation. “Did you just *shove* me?”

She crossed her arms and smiled smugly at him. “So what if I did?” The defiance in her tone was belied by the fact that she was backing away slowly.

Nicholas shot her a quick grin and then rushed toward her. She gave a sharp squeal before turning on her heel and running in the other direction.

They raced back the way they’d come with Elizabeth in the lead, and made a U-turn to arch around the inlet and dash back through the park. Before long, Elizabeth had to stop to catch her breath. Nicholas rushed up behind her, wrapping his arms around hers and trapping both of her hands in his.

“Caught you!”

Elizabeth didn’t resist, a mischievous grin spreading across her face, and then with a twinkle in her eyes, she asked him, “And What makes you think I didn’t *let* you catch me?”

“Well,” he said, whispering into her ear, “for one thing—” He paused to catch his own breath. “—you’re out of breath and you couldn’t run anymore now, even if your life depended on it!”

She laughed. “It’s just as well you caught me, then. But you’ll protect me from harm, and from our unbridled passions ... won’t you?” she said, coyly.

“From fire-breathing dragons and other beasts, M’Lady,” he said, assuming a chivalrous tone, “but as for our unbridled passions,” he said, leaning in ...

Lizzie closed her eyes and her lips gently parted as she relaxed in his arms expecting his lips to meet hers, about to savor their first kiss, but then ...

“Hey, Nicholas!” came the sound of a barely adolescent male voice.

Bad timing! Nicholas thought, recognizing that pesky young voice.

Letting go of Elizabeth, he couldn’t help but notice her shoulders slump, as her eyes opened and she sighed. Their first kiss had been thwarted. They looked back to see who was responsible for the interruption. Kevin approached them.

Kevin was a stocky, blond-haired boy who couldn't have been mistaken for more than 14 and then only if he'd stood on a brick or two.

"Oh, hello, Kevin . . ." Nicholas said.

Kevin came to a stop in front of them, his eyes firmly glued on Elizabeth. "Who's your new friend?"

Nicholas suppressed a grimace. "This is Elizabeth ." He gestured to her. "Elizabeth, this is Kevin, an old friend of mine from Siesta."

Kevin fixed her with a steady grin. "Elizabeth ..." he repeated in a gravelly voice that he probably imagined to be charming. Holding his hand out to her, he said, "It's a pleasure to meet you Elizabeth!" he repeated in a gravelly voice that he probably imagined to be charming.

Elizabeth gave Nicholas a sideways glance, a flicker of amusement crossing her face, as she took Kevin's hand and shook it. "Nice to meet you, Kevin."

He grinned broadly at her. "How would you two like to join me for a game of cards in my tent?" Kevin gestured grandly behind him, as if his family's tent was a sprawling mansion.

"Well . . . it's okay with me ... Elizabeth?" Nicholas inquired.

"Sure, sounds like fun" she said then, winking at Nicholas, she leaned up and whispered in his ear "Nicholas, let's not forget where we paused our discussions when Kevin interrupted us!" Watching as she made him smile. They'd been playing cards for the last fifteen minutes. Elizabeth had spent the time stealing glances at Nicholas when he wasn't looking and making a pretense of studying her cards when he was. She barely knew what was in her hand. There were more important matters to think about than a game of cards : like how to get Nicholas to ask her to the dance at Fairy Knowe tomorrow night. *Maybe he doesn't know about it. Well, if that's the case, I'd better make sure that he does.*

Elizabeth was about to make a move that had nothing to do with the game they were playing, when suddenly Kevin laid his cards out on the table and in a loud voice declared, "I win again!"

Nicholas's mouth was agape. "That's twice in a row!"

"What can I say?" Kevin asked, puffing out his chest and drawing all of the cards into his hands until he had a full deck to shuffle. "I guess I'm just a better card player."

Nicholas eyed Kevin as he shuffled the cards by sending them sailing from one hand to the other. "That's it." Nicholas reached for the cards. "I'm shuffling this time."

Elizabeth sighed, watching as Kevin withdrew sharply from Nicholas's hands and held the deck of cards out of reach.

“Now why would you want to shuffle?” Kevin asked.

“I suppose you guys know . . .” Elizabeth began, pausing to get Nicholas’s attention and only half succeeding. He gave her a brief, questioning glance, then leapt up from his chair and lunged at Kevin from across the table. Kevin held the cards still farther out of reach, struggling to avoid Nicholas’s questing fingers. “Give me those cards, Kevin . . .”

“Never!” Kevin replied, enjoying the reaction he was getting.

Elizabeth went on blithely. “There’s a dance at Fairy Knowe tomorrow night, and I don’t have anyone to take me.”

Kevin and Nicholas both froze, the cards suddenly forgotten as their heads slowly turned toward Elizabeth.

Nicholas seemed to be mentally running back over what she’d just said to make sure he’d heard her correctly, but Kevin immediately piped up: “I, I’ll—”

“Ooomff.” Kevin’s breath left him in a rush.

Nicholas removed his elbow from Kevin’s ribs and said, “I’d love to take you, Elizabeth.”

She smiled, pretending not to notice Kevin’s look of shock and betrayal and the elbow that had caused it. “Really? That would be wonderful.”

Nicholas sent Kevin an apologetic look that seemed to say, *what did you expect?* Kevin shrugged and resumed shuffling the cards. As he did so, he cast a knowing glance between Nicholas and Elizabeth.

“Well, unlucky in cards, lucky in love, hey Nick?”



Nicholas and Elizabeth approached his campsite , walking hand-in- hand, having left Kevin’s tent after playing a few more hands of cards. Nicholas’s family was sitting outside with some friends. Johann had a beer in his hand, Kathleen had a Coke in hers, and like Johann, their friends, Bonnie and Flippy, both held a beer.

As Nicholas and Elizabeth drew nearer to the gathering , they heard laughter erupt from the group. Nicholas imagined his father was probably telling one of his many barroom stories , carefully tailored to draw laughs from even the most accomplished stoics . Kathleen was the first to greet them . “Hello , Nicholas . You sure took your time returning . . .” She trailed off upon noticing Elizabeth. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Elizabeth. Her parents were the ones who gave me a ride back from the beach this morning.”

Having now drawn the attention of the group, a chorus of greetings echoed their way. Nicholas and Elizabeth acknowledged them with smiles and nods. Kathleen was staring pointedly at Nicholas . “So?” she prompted . “Where’s the milk?”

Nicholas ’s face went blank , and he blinked a couple of times , trying to remember . When he’d found Elizabeth in the *Duka*, he’d been on an errand for his mother to get some milk, but then . . .

“I guess I forgot,” Nicholas replied.

Flippy was wearing a silly grin, his gaze resting squarely upon Nicholas’s and Elizabeth’s still-clasped hands. “I’ll *bet* you forgot,” he said.

Johann, now noticing the same thing, gave a short chuckle. Kathleen opened her mouth to object, but Nicholas stopped her with what he said next: “Don’t worry, we’ll go back to the *Duka* to get the milk. See you all again soon.”

“Bye,” Elizabeth waved.

Flippy smiled and raised his beer can to his lips as he watched them leave. A moment later he let out an “Aah!” of satisfaction . “Where are those days now, hey, Jan? Mom sends you out for milk, and instead, you come back with a milkmaid!”

Johann chuckled.

“Hey!” Bonnie shot her husband a look. “You better watch your pining there , mister . You’ve already found your milkmaid , and she doesn't take kindly to competition.”

Flippy grinned at her and said, “Don’t worry, since my youth I’ve become lactose intolerant.”

Bonnie gaped at him. “Why, you little . . .”

Constance climbed into the small red and white speedboat that was her namesake and sat down in the passenger's seat. She sat there fuming while Edwin busied himself getting the boat ready for their trip up the river. Elizabeth had been gone for an hour and a half now. *Supposedly, she was only going to the Duka to get a book*, Constance mused.

Edwin pushed the boat off the shore, waded in with it up to his knees, and then climbed aboard.

"Where do you suppose Elizabeth is?" Constance asked.

Edwin sighed. His wife had been preoccupied with Elizabeth's whereabouts for the last half an hour. It was unlike her to worry. "She probably just found some of her friends, like Hattie did, and got sidetracked."

"Yes, but we *know* where *Hattie* is. I hope Elizabeth isn't with that boy, Charley, again."

Aha! Edwin thought. *So that's why you're worried.* "I'm sure she's more sensible than that," Edwin replied as he yanked the pull cord to start the motor.

* * *

"I'm very sensible," Elizabeth insisted.

"You call running in heels sensible?" Nicholas asked, as he ran beside her. Upon returning from the Duka—this time with the milk—Elizabeth had suddenly remembered why she'd gone to the Duka in the first place. Now she was concerned that she'd been gone for two hours, when she should have only been gone for a half an hour at most.

"They're not particularly high. And besides, my parents are probably wondering where I am."

"You're already late. A few extra minutes aren't going to make a difference."

Elizabeth laughed at that. "You don't know my mother . . ."

When they arrived at Elizabeth's campsite, they initially found no one there, but after a few minutes Elizabeth heard the distant whine of a motorboat. When she turned to look, she saw the *Constantine* come roaring into the inlet.

Elizabeth turned to Nicholas and said, "Come on, let's go say hello." And with that, they walked down to the riverbank to greet her parents.

Constance recognized Nicholas even from a distance, and suddenly she knew why her daughter was so late. The reason was eminently preferable to the one she'd been imagining. Once the boat was close enough for Edwin to kill the engine and let it drift in to shore, Constance called out warmly: "Hello, Elizabeth." Then, her gaze settled upon Nicholas. "Nice to see you again, Nicholas," she said.

"Hello," Elizabeth returned.

"Hello again," Nicholas said, as the boat ran aground upon the river bank. Edwin acknowledged their greetings with a nod as he grabbed a stake, a hammer, and some rope out of the back of the boat. Those things in hand, he clambered out over the front of the boat and onto dry land.

Constance climbed out of the boat after Edwin and watched with a frown as he began awkwardly juggling the stake and hammer.

Noticing what he was doing, Nicholas said, "Here, let me help you with that," and bent down to hold the stake.

Edwin looked up at Nicholas, his eyes smiling beneath the rim of a short-brimmed, blue and white hat. "Thank you, young man." Then with a wink he said, "Don't worry, I won't miss." He gave the stake a few quick knocks on the head with the hammer, and then Nicholas and Edwin both straightened up again.

Constance nodded. "I don't believe we properly introduced ourselves the last time we met," she said. "I'm Constance Smythe, and this is my husband, Edwin."

"Nice to meet you," Nicholas replied. Edwin offered his hand and Nicholas shook it.

There was an awkward moment of silence and then Constance said, "Well, you two have fun." They nodded and began turning to leave. "Don't forget to be back in time for supper, Elizabeth."

"I won't," Elizabeth said, feeling both relieved and confused that she wasn't in trouble for being gone so long.

Chapter 11

It was now Friday afternoon, and like the day before, Nicholas and Elizabeth had spent most of the day together. They'd played cards and table tennis—of which Nicholas had typically won the former, but lost the latter. They'd also spent a significant portion of the day just walking through the park and talking. Now they were back at Elizabeth's campsite to ask her parents if they could go to the dance together.

"Mister Smythe," Nicholas said from Elizabeth's side as her father emerged from the tent with a beer in one hand and a bottle opener in the other. He waited for her father's attention, and promptly got it as Edwin looked up. Seeing the two of them, Edwin smiled, and Nicholas went on, "Can I ask you a question?"

"You may. What's on your mind, Nicholas?" Edwin asked, fumbling with the bottle opener and his beer.

"Would it be okay if I took Elizabeth to the dance at Fairy Knowe tonight?"

"It's fine with me." Edwin popped the cap of his beer and took a sip. Nicholas was about to thank him when he raised a finger and added, "As long as I don't have to fetch and carry."

"Don't worry. We'll find a way to get there."

Edwin smiled. "Good. Have fun, then!" He set his beer down on a folding table and took a seat in the chair beside it.

Nicholas and Elizabeth had just turned to leave when something occurred to Edwin. "Elizabeth." She stopped and turned. "You did remember to ask your mother for permission?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Of course."

"Ah. Good," he said, and took a sip from his beer.

As they walked away, Elizabeth sent Nicholas a questioning glance. "Shouldn't we ask your parents, too?"

"I told them this morning that I might be going. They're fine with it. Now all we have to do is figure out how to get there."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot about that." Elizabeth grew thoughtful. "Well, if we can't find a way to get there, I'm sure my dad will take us anyway."

"Really?" Nicholas asked. "Because he seemed to make his non-involvement a condition of giving me permission to take you."

Elizabeth laughed, then smiled at him. "I'm sure it was just the beer talking."

"Well, we'll try to make asking him a last resort. You up for another game of table tennis?"

"You're ready to lose again so soon?" she asked, referring to the game they'd played earlier.

"As I recall," he said, "you won on a technicality."

"Oh, and what technicality was that?"

You're so beautiful that I couldn't keep my eyes on the ball. He'd almost said that out loud. *It's true,* he thought, but decided not to use that particular excuse. He grinned wryly at her. "I believe it's mistakenly known as *skill*."

Elizabeth's mouth dropped open. "*Mistakenly?* We'll see who's *mistaken*."

* * *

Whizzzzz. The ball bounced up and flew past Nicholas's ear, too fast for him to return it . . . again.

"That's ten-zip," Elizabeth declared. "Ready to admit defeat?"

"Ten-zip—that's not so bad. Better than eleven-zip."

She laughed. "Are you always such an optimist?"

"Always," he said, and gave the ball an underhand tap, passing it back to her so she could serve. She caught it in her hand and then served it back over the net toward him. He made a long, reaching return and sent the ball sailing back at her. Almost casually, she batted it back, low and fast over the net, aimed for the side opposite to where he was standing. He had to scramble for the other side of the table and barely managed to get there in time. It went on like that for a while, rallying back and forth. Nicholas found that his abilities were stretching to the breaking point. The sweat was dripping from his brow. A quick glance at Elizabeth told him he was the only one who was finding the match challenging. If she'd suddenly had to stifle a yawn, he wouldn't have been surprised. Feeling

that he would miss a return any second, and thereby lose the match, he gambled by taking some of his attention off the ball and cast a glance over her shoulder.

“Hey is that your mother over there?” he asked.

Elizabeth turned to look at just the wrong moment, and her return went unusually high. The ball came down on Nicholas’s side of the net, bounced up at a convenient eye-level, and he smashed it back over the net with a triumphant grin.

Hearing the double *crack* of the ball hitting his paddle and then the table at high speed, Elizabeth whirled around, tried ineffectually to swat the blurry, white object that zoomed past her ear, and let out an indignant “Hey!”

Nicholas feigned innocence. “Hmmm . . . that’s funny. Must have been a good look-alike. Oh well. Score’s ten to one now.”

“You tricked me!” she said, wagging her paddle at him like an extension of her finger.

Nicholas shrugged. “Well, if you want to be *blunt* about it, then—” He unleashed a smug grin. “—yeah.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes and invoked the old maxim: “Cheaters never prosper.”

* * *

Elizabeth set her paddle down. “Eleven to three,” she said. “Not bad, you got one point more than last time—though you did get that point by tricking me.”

“At least I got it,” he grinned.

“You want to play again? I’ll give you a seven point lead. That should put us about even.”

Nicholas snorted. “What, so you can beat me with a handicap?” He shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Awww, come on. I’ll give you some lessons.”

“Hmmm . . .” Nicholas pretended to consider it. “Nope.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Fine, keep what’s left of your pride.”

“I will, thank you. You never know when I might need it.”

Elizabeth and Nicholas began walking away from the gazebo. Nicholas’s hand found hers.

“So . . .” Elizabeth began. “Do you have a girlfriend at home?”

“Yeah. And you?” She gave him a funny look. “Have a boyfriend, I mean.”

She smiled, having known all along what he’d meant, and thought back to Thomas who had been cheating on her with Sarah, and then there was Pieter . . . but she wasn’t really sure

what he was to her. “Not really, no,” she decided.

“*Really?*” Nicholas asked. He shook his head. “How is that possible?”

That elicited a small smile from Elizabeth. “I just broke up with my boyfriend.”

“Ah. That makes sense.”

“What’s her name?” Elizabeth asked.

“Who?” Nicholas was genuinely confused for a second, then his eyes lit up with understanding. “Oh—Denise.”

“And she doesn’t mind you being with other girls while you’re on vacation?”

Nicholas thought back to his last conversation with Denise, by the riverside, talking about Karen, but also about all the guys that would be eyeing Denise while she was in East London. “No, I suppose she doesn’t. Our relationship is only exclusive while we’re at home.” He shrugged. “We both attend boarding schools, and spend most of the year apart, so it makes sense for us to date other people in that time.”

Elizabeth nodded.

By now their aimless walking had brought them to the inlet; the boats docked there were bobbing and glinting in the sun, people bustling in and out of them. Nicholas’s eyes traveled among the boats as he and Elizabeth walked down along the river’s edge. He thought he recognized one of the people coming out of the boats.

“Hey, I think that’s Uncle* Flippy,” Nicholas said. “Let’s go say hello.”

Flippy spotted them coming and was the first to speak. “You two going to the dance tonight?”

They looked at each other, the same thought occurring to both of them simultaneously.

“Yeah . . .” Nicholas replied, getting ready to ask Flippy for a big favor.

“I can get my son to take you if you like,” Flippy offered, patting the side of his boat.

Nicholas’s eyebrows shot up, but it was Elizabeth who spoke first. “That would be wonderful, Uncle Flippy!”

“All right, then, just come back here when you’re ready to go.”

* Uncle: titles of aunt and uncle were used in South Africa to convey respect for one’s elders

I'll have him wait for you."

They thanked him and left, now angling for Elizabeth's campsite.

"That was nice of him," Elizabeth commented.

"Very," Nicholas agreed. "We didn't even have to ask." Nicholas didn't believe in fate, but it sure seemed like things were going their way. He glanced skyward and raised an eyebrow.

When they came to Elizabeth's campsite, she said, "Well, I'd better get ready for supper."

"Okay. What time should I come by to take you to the dance?" Nicholas asked, reluctantly letting go of her hand.

Elizabeth thought about it for a moment. "I should be ready by seven."

"Sounds good. I'll come by just after seven, then." He nodded once and smiled as he turned to leave.

* * *

True to his word, Nicholas returned at 7:05. He was wearing a gray suit, with matching pants and tie, and a gray-white shirt. Since it was summertime, it was still light out, though by this point the sun had sunk low in the sky, not quite setting, but bathing everything in a rich golden hue.

Nicholas stood outside the Smythe family's tent, waiting next to their white Mercedes, watching as a warm breeze swept across the park, rustling the leaves and branches of the nearby trees. Then, suddenly, he found himself paying attention to more important details, like the way the sunlight glinted off Elizabeth's hair as the wind caught it and gently lifted it from her shoulders, and the way her sleeveless blue and white dress brought out the color in her eyes until they sparkled like sapphires.

Wow, Nicholas thought, and whistled softly to himself. She stopped in front of him, her expression uncertain, her eyes searching his for . . . *what?* he wondered. Almost involuntarily, he found himself saying, "You look beautiful, Elizabeth."

Her face abruptly lit with a radiant smile, and her cheeks flushed. "Thanks, so do you—handsome—I mean." She tugged self-consciously at her dress, and Nicholas grinned.

Just then Edwin emerged from the tent with a camera. "Hold on a minute, let's get a picture before you go. Elizabeth, stand there next to Nicholas." Edwin began gesturing *closer-closer*,

and she sidled up next to him until her hip brushed his thigh. Nicholas responded by putting his arm around her shoulders.

Constance came out of the tent now, too, and watched in silence as her husband took the photo.

“Splendid,” Edwin said, as the shutter clicked. “Have fun, you two.”

Constance chose this moment to add her own parting words. “Don’t forget, Elizabeth. I want you to be back by midnight—not a minute later. And don’t you keep her out past then, young man.”

“I won’t,” Nicholas promised, curiosity tinging his voice.

As Nicholas and Elizabeth walked toward Flippy’s campsite, now out of earshot of her parents, Nicholas decided to alleviate his curiosity. “So, what if we’re back by five minutes past midnight?”

She gave a short, humorless laugh and then looked over at him. “You don’t want to find out.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Wow. Your parents are pretty strict, huh?”

“Yeah, they can be, but don’t complain. If I’m not going out to a dance or a movie, I have to be back by nine.”

Nicholas felt his jaw drop. “Why?”

“Because . . .” she hesitated, “that’s when I have to go to bed. You know, early to bed, early to rise—”

“—makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise,” he finished for her. “But whoever first said that neglected to mention what it would make a woman.”

Elizabeth laughed again, genuinely this time. “It makes her thoroughly embarrassed by her parents.”

Nicholas smiled. “Well, if it’s any consolation, you seem plenty healthy to me.”

“But not wise?” she asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

Nicholas shrugged. “You’re with me, so you must be.”

She smiled and shook her head with amusement.

When they reached Flippy’s campsite, they found him sitting outside his green and red-striped tent, next to a yellow, inflatable raft. There was a stand of enormous evergreen trees behind him, and his son was sitting in a folding chair beside him. Introductions revealed that Flippy’s son’s name was Frederik. He appeared to be a few years older than Nicholas, and was wearing a black blazer, with white dress pants, and a

bright yellow shirt that matched his sandy blond hair.

After talking with Nicholas and Elizabeth for a few minutes, Frederik abandoned his chair, picked up a wooden oar, and headed down to his father's boat, beckoning for them to follow. Flippy came down as well, to help his son push off the boat without getting wet.

It was a small boat, red on top, white on the sides and bottom, with a couch seat in front, which could hold up to three people if they squeezed.

Frederik held the boat from the front, while his father pulled it side-on with the shore. "All right, climb in," Flippy said, and steadied the boat while Nicholas helped Elizabeth climb into the front. Waiting for Elizabeth to sit down, Nicholas climbed in next to her. Frederik climbed in the back, wooden oar in hand.

When everyone seemed ready, Flippy gave them a hearty push, and Frederik added momentum with his oar, leading the boat into deeper water by pushing the oar against the bottom of the inlet.

* * *

Edwin watched the boat leave from his hiding place across the inlet. He was crouched behind some bushes, a camera in his hands. He'd taken photographs of Nicholas and Elizabeth as they'd stood on the shore together and again as they were leaving. Now he was watching as the blond-haired young man, who'd been standing in the back of the boat, rowing with an oar, climbed behind the steering wheel and sat down. He heard the boat's motor thrum to life. As the boat slowly turned, aiming for the mouth of the inlet, Edwin noticed its name, printed in bold red letters on the side. *Jabula*. Edwin frowned. He didn't recognize the word from either Afrikaans or English. He decided that it was probably from a native language and wondered briefly what it meant.

"What are you doing hiding behind those bushes, Edwin?"

Edwin turned to see his wife standing there behind him, arms crossed over her chest.

"I was just taking some pictures of Elizabeth and Nicholas."

"Well you look *ridiculous*. Get out from behind there before someone sees you. You could at least try taking pictures like a normal person, instead of skulking around like that."

"I didn't want to embarrass them."

"I'm not going to argue with you about it," she said, and

turned to leave.

Edwin got off his haunches. It didn't matter now, anyway, since Elizabeth and Nicholas were gone. He sighed, wishing his wife would lighten up a little.

* * *

Frederik aimed the boat for the shore and cut the engine, letting it drift silently toward Fairy Knowe. The hotel was surrounded by immaculately manicured grounds—beds and hedges of colorful flowers, a neatly trimmed lawn, and a perimeter of tall palm trees, all bathed beautifully in the yellow-orange glow of the fading sunlight.

When the boat scraped gently against the soft sand of the riverbank, Frederik scrambled out over the front, holding in his hands a camera that Nicholas hadn't noticed before. "Okay," he said, sighting through the lens, "smile." Nicholas put his arm around Elizabeth's shoulders, and they posed for yet another photo.

Click.

"Okay, let's go," Frederik said, and looped the boat's rope around one of the wooden posts that periodically dotted the shore.

They made their way up from the shore. A warm breeze carried the distant strains of some lively music and muffled singing to their ears, pointing the way to the hotel's dance hall. Once inside, Frederik left almost immediately to ask one of the single girls for a dance. Nicholas led Elizabeth by the hand onto the wooden dance floor just as the previous song was ending and the next one began . . .

*I can see clearly now, the rain is gone,
I can see all obstacles in my way
Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind
It's gonna to be a bright, bright, bright—
Bright sun-shiny day.
It's gonna be a bright, bright, bright—
Bright sun-shiny day . . .*

They danced—a lively dance to match the pace of the song—gliding across the floor with the other couples like so many spinning tops.

When the song ended, it was replaced by a slower melody.

Nicholas held Elizabeth closer now, and they slowed to match the pace of the song—standing there, wordlessly swaying to the music and looking into each other's eyes.

Song after song, dance after dance, they held each other close, time stretching out before them, slowing, and then seeming to stop all together.

Neither Nicholas nor Elizabeth noticed any of the older couples smiling knowingly at them. It was as if they were the only ones on the dance floor, with their own private band, playing songs at their request.

Several songs later, turning in unison, as if it were a choreographed part of the dance, they walked off the dance floor and out into the African night.

Their way was well-lit beneath the vast, starry sky and the near-full moon. They stopped by the shore of the river, beneath the canopy of a tall palm tree. A soft, warm breeze blew across the surface of the water, stirring it into tiny ripples and greeting their senses with the rich, floral fragrances of tropical flowers. Distantly, they heard the band's saxophone playing, joined every now and then by the rhythmic swishing of waves upon the riverbank. Still further in the distance was the muted roar of the ocean's waves, crashing relentlessly upon an endless, moonlit beach.

There, as the palm trees swayed and the African moon spread its shimmering glow across the river's rippled surface, Nicholas turned to Elizabeth, his eyes searching hers. Finding what he was looking for, he brought one hand up from where it had been holding hers to rest gently at the small of her back. He leaned in closer, pulling her gently toward him. Elizabeth leaned in closer now, too, her head tilting up, eyes locked on his. She met Nicholas half way and found her hand grasping the lapel of his jacket. She felt his other hand come to rest softly on her elbow, raising goosebumps on her arm and sending a shiver up her spine. Their eyes were closing now, his head tilting to the side and down to hers.

Their lips met tentatively and Elizabeth felt a rush of sensations sweep through her and settle around her knees, making her feel sure that they would've buckled if he hadn't been holding onto her.

Now purposely moving his head back, Nicholas gently broke the spell, gazing once more into her eyes, seeking confirmation

that what he was feeling was as real for her as it was for him. Elizabeth met his gaze openly, and Nicholas, finding the confirmation that he sought, held her more closely now. They kissed again, this time abandoning all caution, letting it drift away on the breeze and out into the night. As they kissed, their hearts seemed to catch alight, burning warm, bright, 2 candles in the dark, held so close that with their warmth they finally melted into one.



France, 1700's: A beautiful 15y old French Huguenot girl, Genevieve , is given a silver and amethyst ring by her 16 year old childhood sweetheart - just before his sailing ship departs for South Africa and safety, before her family also flees to safety in England , from the relentless , brutal religious persecution of French Huguenots . All contact was lost, their love story unrequited . Now Genevieve 's family is finally in Africa too, and there's a good chance that Elizabeth is Genevieve 's designated ring bearer! 250 years later, after that sad farewell in France, just maybe in some strange way, the love that once existed between two young sweethearts, that's remained unrequited for so long, is about to find a happy ending?

Chapter 12

The following morning, Elizabeth's family left early for the beach. It was busy as usual, but they managed to find a spot to Constance's liking. Almost as soon as they had set their things down, Elizabeth went looking for Nicholas. She knew from their parting words last night that he would be there, waiting for her.

This morning, Elizabeth had awakened to the sound of the birds chirping, and somehow, they'd never sounded so beautiful. There was a lightness in her step, a smile on her face.

She made her way through the throngs of people, kids and adults, swimming trunks and bikinis as far as the eye could see. It might take her half an hour to find him, but it didn't matter. It would be worth it.

But she only had to search for a few more minutes before she found Nicholas and his family. When Nicholas spotted Elizabeth coming, he walked down to meet her. He was dripping wet.

"Hey, Elizabeth," he called.

"Hi, Nicholas." She pointed to his wet swimming trunks. "Looks like you've been swimming already."

"Yeah. We got here an hour ago—I went looking for you, but—" He gestured to the crowds of people on the beach and shrugged.

"Actually, we just got here."

Nicholas nodded. "So, feel like going for a swim?" he asked. "The water's nice and warm . . ."

Elizabeth looked out at the sparkling, blue water. "Sure," she said, "let's go."

They walked down the beach together, and Elizabeth did her best to pretend she hadn't noticed how good he looked in those

dark brown swimming trunks, perfectly matching his evenly tanned skin and light brown hair. It probably had more to do with the fact that he wasn't wearing a shirt, and his well-muscled body was no longer hidden by those loose-fitting t-shirts he often wore.

For his part, Nicholas was careful to conceal his reaction to seeing Elizabeth wearing that baby blue bikini again. He remembered how good she'd looked in it when he'd first seen her in the back of her parent's car. She looked even better now—if that was possible—as she made her way lithely down the beach.

"Hey, look at the waves today!" Elizabeth said.

Nicholas observed the waves, crashing in the distance and rolling in to shore. "They're huge," he agreed. "I wonder why. There's not much of a wind."

Elizabeth shrugged. "Strange, but good for us; it's always more fun with big waves."

They reached the water and began wading in. Nicholas felt the sandy bottom beneath his feet, and listened to the waves breaking in the distance. When the water was just past his knees, the froth from a large wave came and brought the depth up to his waist. He almost stood up on tiptoes to avoid the cold rush of the water, but it wasn't that cold. He watched, then followed suit, as Elizabeth dove over the froth and began swimming out toward the breakers. They had to hold their breath and close their eyes periodically as the newly-broken waves washed over and past them. When they reached the breakers, they stopped swimming and stood up to catch their breath. The water was now up to Nicholas's waist. They weren't given long to rest, however, as another wave came and threatened to break right on top of them. Nicholas and Elizabeth dove under the wave.

But Elizabeth had been the last to dive and she hadn't had the chance to get deep enough. She felt the wave starting to roll her end over end. A tumbler. She swam faster, harder, but she was losing the battle. She panicked and swallowed some water. Suddenly, a strong hand grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her through. Her head broke the surface on the other side, and she came up coughing, trying ineffectually to wipe the burning salt water out of her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Nicholas asked, letting go of her wrist.

She nodded as another cough racked through her. “I dove a little too late,” she explained, and winced as she swallowed past the burning in her throat.

“Well, it’s not over yet. Here comes another one,” he nodded toward the wave. “Ready?” he asked, this time waiting for her to dive first.

“Ready,” she said, and then dove.

Nicholas followed suit and quickly swam until he reached the sandy bottom, making extra sure that the wave couldn’t find him. He felt it rush past overhead, the current tugging viciously at him, and heard its muted roar.

When they broke the surface again, they had just enough time to catch a breath before diving under another smaller wave that had been hiding in the shadow of the first. They emerged once more, and this time the only wave waiting to greet them was a harmless swell.

“Looks like we’ve passed the breakers,” Nicholas said.

“The water’s over my head. I can’t stand here.”

“You’ll be able to stand when the swells pass.” Sure enough, a moment later Elizabeth was able to stand.

There, out beyond the breakers, they stayed, talking and laughing—bobbing like corks and treading water when the larger swells came, then sinking down and standing again when they passed.

* * *

Kathleen Strauss was lying on the beach next to her husband, watching Nicholas and Elizabeth as they swam out past the breakers. She was keeping half an eye on the horizon, watching for fins in the water. The beach was not protected by a reef, which meant that sharks could, and sometimes did, pay an unwelcome visit to the beachgoers.

There didn’t appear to be anything to worry about—at least, she hadn’t seen anything to worry about—but that didn’t stop her from watching the horizon. It was always good to be careful.

Johann noticed his wife’s vigilance, and his mouth quirked into a wry grin. “Are you still looking for sharks? Relax, they never come close enough to the shore. It’s the surfers who need to worry.”

Kathleen arched an eyebrow at him. “Wouldn’t you be sorry if I listened to you and then one showed up.”

Johann gave a snort of laughter and shook his head.

Kathleen narrowed her eyes in irritation, but said nothing. He was altogether too sublimely self-assured. *Doctors, she thought disgustedly, so desensitized by crises that they can't bring themselves to worry about anything.*

She looked back out at the water.

Johann closed his eyes, then opened one a minute later to see if Kathleen was relaxing yet. Far from it, now she was sitting up and scanning the horizon with binoculars.

He sighed. "You know, Kate—"

She gasped and quickly lowered the binoculars. "Sharks!" she exclaimed, jumping up, and running down toward the water, waving her arms in the air and screaming as she went. "Sharks! Sharks! Sharks!"

Johann frowned at the sudden flutter in his stomach, and for a moment he was confused. *No . . .*

Then it sank in and he bolted to his feet and ran after his wife.

* * *

"Hey, what's happening on the beach?" Elizabeth asked, a note of concern in her voice as she studied the growing numbers of people along the shore. Some of them were waving their arms in the air, others doing the same, but also jumping up and down to be better seen, and still others had their hands cupped to their mouths and were yelling. But the sound of the waves crashing between them and the shore drowned out the yelling.

"See what?" Nicholas replied, then turned and followed her gaze to the beach. When he saw what was happening, he felt a sudden spike of adrenaline course through him. "Uh oh . . ." He cast a quick glance behind him, back out to sea, jumping over a large swell as he did so. Using the altitude that gave him, he managed to get a good look.

In the distance, silhouetted against the pale blue sky, he saw three fins cresting above the water. Nicholas responded promptly, turning to Elizabeth with a hard look of fear. "Sharks!" he exclaimed. "Get ahead of me, quick!"

* * *

Nicholas and Elizabeth emerged from the water, exhausted from swimming as fast as they could to reach the shore. Adrenaline was still coursing through them, but it was

beginning to fade, making their legs shake. They stumbled up the beach in a daze, and each of them was quickly found and greeted by relieved parents.

By this time the ocean was empty of people, and they were all crowded along the shore, trying to catch a glimpse of the sharks.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to Kathleen, and she looked behind her. "Where's Kristina?" she asked. Not finding her daughter, her head swung frantically the other way.

"She was with Yvette . . ." Johann said, a little anxiety spilling into his voice now, too, as he joined his wife in searching.

"But Yvette's over there—by herself!" Kathleen pointed.

Nicholas cleared his throat.

"Here I am, Mom," Kristina said from behind her parents before Nicholas could announce her arrival.

Kathleen whirled on Kristina and fixed her with an angry look, born more of concern than anything else. "Where have you been?" Kathleen demanded. Johann was facing his daughter now, too, but his own concern was quickly fading, being replaced by a sheepish smile.

Kristina pointed to Yvette. "I was over there," she said. "Someone stepped on our sandcastle . . ."

Now Kathleen noticed that Kristina wasn't even wet and her look softened. "I'm sorry, sweetie," she said. "You can make another one later."

Someone nearby let out a yell, and everyone turned to look. Nicholas's eyes widened. The sharks were jumping out of the water, one after the other. *Jumping?*

Johann laughed. "What did I tell you, Kate? Those are *dolphins*, not sharks."

Kathleen looked chagrined. "Well, they *could* have been sharks."

Elizabeth returned to Nicholas's side. "I guess that means we can go back out," she said, sounding relieved.

"Not so fast, Elizabeth," came Constance's voice as she walked up behind her daughter. "It's almost lunch time, and we'd better be going soon."

Elizabeth turned to her mother. "But I'm not hungry yet."

"Don't be silly. Of course you are."

Kathleen had been listening to the exchange, and she

decided to intervene on her son's behalf. Taking a few steps forward, she stopped in front of Constance and said, "You must be Elizabeth's mother. I'm Kathleen Strauss, Nicholas's mother," she said, and held out her hand.

Constance nodded once and took Kathleen's hand. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Constance Smythe."

"I couldn't help overhearing you talking to your daughter. Elizabeth would be welcome to stay at the beach with us; we have sandwiches and drinks, so she won't go hungry."

Constance felt a flash of irritation at her plans being summarily changed, but she didn't let it show. Smiling, she asked, "Are you sure? I wouldn't want to cause any trouble for you."

"She won't be any trouble," Kathleen replied and was about to dismiss herself when it occurred to her that she didn't know anything about Elizabeth's parents, a situation which she'd been meaning to fix. "In fact, we should be back in just a few hours. Would you and your husband . . ."

"Edwin," Constance filled in.

Kathleen smiled and continued. "Would you and Edwin like to join us for afternoon tea at say . . . three o'clock?"

"Well, that would be lovely, thank you. How will we know to find you?"

Kathleen gave her directions, and Elizabeth and Nicholas took that as their opportunity to leave. They began wading back into the ocean. Most of those who had been swimming were already in the water again, secure in the knowledge that the presence of dolphins usually meant the absence of sharks, since dolphins work in teams to drive sharks away.

Elizabeth glanced back over her shoulder to where Nicholas's mother was still talking with hers. She sent Nicholas a smile. "Remind me to thank your mother later."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows in question, then caught her meaning and nodded. "We can thank her together."

* * *

Constance and Edwin, with Hattie in tow, arrived at the Strauss family's campsite at exactly three o'clock. They stopped at the edge of the campsite and stood there for a moment, their eyes searching. The Strauss family was nowhere to be seen.

Edwin glanced sideways and noticed his wife's annoyance in

the firm set of her lips and the way her nostrils flared.

"I'm certain they'll be along any minute now," he said.

"Yes." There was an edge to her voice, and her eyes narrowed fractionally. "I'm sure they will. In the meantime, however, we had best make ourselves comfortable."

They took their seats in a trio of lawn chairs beneath the shade of a large pine tree, but Hattie soon got up and ventured down to the river.

"May I help you, madam?"

Constance turned to look. There was a thickset black woman peering suspiciously at Constance and Edwin from the entrance of the Strauss family's tent. Constance's mood darkened. *How dare she look at me as though I'm out of place.*

"The Strauss family is expecting us for afternoon tea. They're a bit late, so we're just waiting for them to arrive," Constance explained with false patience.

"Ah," the servant nodded slowly. "Would you like some refreshments while you're waiting?"

"No, thank you," Constance said.

"Very good, madam," the servant said, and disappeared inside the tent.

Ten minutes later, the sound of tires on gravel reached Constance's ears. She turned and saw a white pickup truck rolling up beside the Strauss Family's caravan.

"Finally. It took them long enough." Constance checked her watch and noticed that it was now fifteen minutes past three. She got up from her chair, with Edwin belatedly following, and made her way over to where the truck had stopped.

Kathleen opened the passenger's side door, while Nicholas and Elizabeth hopped out the back. "Oh, hello," Kathleen said, looking abashed when she saw that Constance and Edwin were already there. "I hope you haven't been waiting too long for us. We lost track of the time."

Constance forced a smile. "No, of course we weren't. Your servant girl was a little surprised to see us, however."

"Oh—" Kathleen broke off, her eyebrows elevating slightly as she walked to the back of the truck and retrieved a large, copper-colored bag full of beach accessories. "I probably should have told you about her. Hopefully it wasn't too awkward?" Kathleen asked as she turned to face them again, beach bag now in hand.

Constance shook her head, watching as Kathleen's husband came up beside her.

"Hello there," he said, holding his hand out to Edwin first. "I'm Johann."

"Edwin. It's a pleasure," he said, accepting the handshake.

"And you must be Constance," Johann said, turning to her. She nodded.

Kathleen smiled warmly. "Well, we'd better get out of our *cozzies*.^{*} Please, make yourselves comfortable." Kathleen gestured to the lawn chairs that Constance and Edwin had just been sitting in, and then the Strauss family disappeared inside the tent, going inside their caravan to get changed.

Elizabeth didn't have the luxury of getting changed, since her clothes were at her campsite, but she was at least wearing a shirt over her swimsuit.

Once seated, Constance was the first to speak. "Did you have fun?" she asked Elizabeth.

"Lots," Elizabeth nodded, taking a seat beside her mother.

"He seems like a nice boy," Edwin said.

Elizabeth nodded again, and then silence prevailed. Constance found herself agreeing with Edwin's statement. His father was a doctor, after all.

Hattie returned from the river, realized that all three lawn chairs were occupied, and spent a moment searching for another one. She spotted a stack of folding chairs lying on the grass beneath the awning of the Strauss family's tent, took one of them, and folded it out next to Elizabeth. Once seated, she leaned toward Elizabeth, staring at her older sister with a teasing look. "What?" Elizabeth asked, noticing Hattie's look.

"Lizzie's got a *boy*-friend."

Elizabeth's cheeks flushed. "Shush!" she hissed, and shoved Hattie away. Hattie obliged but looked immensely pleased with the reaction she'd provoked.

"Now, now, girls . . ." Edwin said.

Nicholas was first to emerge from the tent, carrying a foldout table, with Jane following close behind and carrying a large tray of tea and biscuits. Kathleen and Johann emerged a second later, each carrying an extra lawn chair. Kathleen set

* *Cozzies*: swimsuits

her chair down opposite Constance, and Johann set his chair down beside his wife and opposite Edwin. Once Nicholas finished folding the table out between the two sets of parents, Jane placed the tray on top, and Nicholas went in search of a chair for himself. A second later, he took a seat on the other side of Elizabeth.

"Thank you, Jane," Kathleen said, as Jane began pouring the tea.

"How do you like your tea?" Kathleen asked, addressing the question to both Constance and Edwin.

"Black," Constance replied. "Edwin likes his the same."

"No sugar?" Kathleen asked of Edwin.

"Well, now that you mention it, I wouldn't mind a little sugar. One lump, please."

Johann grinned. "Looks like you don't know your husband as well as you thought," he said and winked at Constance.

Constance scowled and sent her husband a sideways look. He appeared not to notice. Seeing the exchange, Johann was taken aback. Looking Edwin up and down, he thought, *She sure has you on a short leash.*

"Well, different strokes for different blokes," Kathleen said, trying to diffuse the tension. Constance quickly covered her annoyance and masked it with a smile that still seemed to Johann to be more like a scowl.

"I've heard from your son that you're a doctor," Constance said, accepting a cup of tea from Jane.

"That's right. A traveling doctor," Johann clarified. "I have a number of different clinics scattered around the mountains where we live. It's very rural there, and the natives can't very well hop in a car to come and see me. I try to decrease the distance for them as much as possible by spending a couple days a week in each clinic."

"It's very noble of you to devote your life to treating people who would just as soon stab you in the back as accept your help. No doubt most of them can't even afford to pay."

Johann raised his eyebrows, both surprised and amused by Constance's ignorance. "They're not as violent as you might think. Mostly farmers. And they *do* pay me, but according to their means."

"How charitable," Constance replied.

Johann smiled knowingly. "Not especially charitable. Since I

see so many patients in a given day, I am, in fact, very well paid for my work.”

“Interesting,” Constance said, taking a sip of her tea. “I used to be a nurse, so I know something of what you must have to do.”

“She was an *excellent* nurse,” Edwin added, nodding. “In fact, we met while she was still in nursing school.”

“Really? And how exactly did you meet?” Kathleen asked, raising her own cup of tea to her lips.

Jane began passing around the plate with the biscuits on it.

“Through the marriage of my uncle and his aunt,” Constance said, pausing to take a biscuit from the plate. “We met sometime after their wedding when one of my cousins invited me to play croquet at his father’s house. It happened that Edwin’s cousins had invited him as well, and we ended up playing on the same team. The rest is, as they say, history.”

Edwin looked like he wanted to add something to that, so Kathleen waited for him, but then Edwin seemed to think better of it and took a sip from his tea instead.

“Well,” Kathleen said, “that was a life-changing game.” Constance nodded, and silence reigned while everyone spent a moment drinking their tea. Kathleen was the first to break that silence. “So, what do you do for a living, Edwin?”

“I work for Western Tanning in Wellington. Nothing as important as what you do, Johann, but the work comes easily to me, and I enjoy it.”

Constance frowned at Edwin’s modesty. “He’s the assistant to the managing director, hardly unimportant. He worked his way up from a lowly leather chemist. And I believe it won’t be long before he’s the managing director rather than just his assistant.”

Now it was Edwin’s turn to frown. “I don’t think that’s going to happen, dear. Lawrence is very good at his job.” Edwin shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He couldn’t very well hope that he might someday take his best friend’s job.

Constance sent her husband a grim look. “Don’t be so sure.” Turning to Kathleen, she said, “The managing director just lost his seven-year-old son to leukemia. It’s unfortunate, but he’s going to have a hard time keeping up with his job and dealing with his grief at the same time.”

Kathleen gasped. “That’s terrible!” Then, after a moment of

silence she said, "I think losing a child must be one of the hardest things that a person can go through. It would be terrible if he lost his job on top of that."

"Yes . . ." Constance nodded gravely. "It would be terrible."

"Well, dear," Edwin began, his face abruptly brightening, "that's why we're just going to have to make extra sure that we're there for him and his family until they get through this."

Constance smiled at Edwin. "Of course. I believe there's a lot we can do to help them."

"So, who's your other daughter?" Kathleen asked, nodding in her direction.

"That's Hattie," Constance said, her tone almost dismissive. "And your daughter? Nicholas mentioned he had a younger sister. Where is she?"

"Oh, we left Kristina at the beach with some of her friends. She should be back later."

"Ah," Constance said absently, suddenly paying more attention to Nicholas and Elizabeth. He'd just whispered something in her ear, and now she was laughing so hard that she felt the need to put her hand to her mouth to stifle her laughter.

"What's so funny, Elizabeth?" Constance asked.

There was an awkward silence.

Elizabeth's eyes darted accusingly to Nicholas, then she shifted uncomfortably in her seat and swallowed visibly. "Nothing. Sorry."

Constance sighed quietly. Elizabeth knew better than to laugh at private jokes in front of others. Slowly, her gaze turned from Elizabeth, and the adults' conversations resumed.

Chapter 13

The following day found Nicholas sitting in the back of a small blue and white canoe, paddling up the Touws River. Elizabeth was facing him from the front of the canoe, smiling radiantly. She was wearing her baby blue bikini again—thoroughly distracting him from the scenery.

They passed the Siestuary, and then another caravan park which was upriver from Siesta, but before long they were alone, winding their way through the dense, tropical green foliage of the mountains. Sheltered on all sides, there wasn't even the slightest breeze, and as such, the water was giving an almost perfect reflection of the leafy green foliage which grew along the ever-steepening banks of the river. Lily pads progressed to reeds at the water's edge. Trees grew thickly, up and out, arching over the water to create shadowy, green-roofed caves. Nicholas guided the canoe through such a cave now, quietly lifting his paddle out of the water to keep from snagging it on a collapsed branch that lay partially submerged beneath the surface of the river.

"Watch your head, Lizzie," Nicholas warned as they glided beneath the canopy. She ducked and the branches passed harmlessly overhead.

"Thanks," she said, straightening up again.

"No problem—hey, look at that!" He pointed over Elizabeth's shoulder. She turned to look. There was a patch of beautiful, white flowers growing at the water's edge. Nicholas pulled up next to them and picked one of the flowers, breaking it off a third of the way down its reedy stem. Turning back to Elizabeth, he handed the flower to her.

She accepted the flower with a smile. "Thank you!" The flower had a thick, yellow, pollen-filled stalk rising from its

center, and was made up of a solitary white petal that hooded the pollen-filled center like the end of a trumpet. "I think it's a lily," she remarked.

"Could be," Nicholas replied, sounding distracted. Elizabeth looked so beautiful. She was facing him, so no matter which way he paddled the boat, he always seemed to be going toward her. He picked up the paddle again and continued up the river.

A flash of color overhead caught Elizabeth's attention and her head panned to follow it. "Wow, look at that bird!" she said, pointing over Nicholas's shoulder. He stopped paddling and turned to look. Sitting on a branch not far behind them, was a bird with bright yellow and green feathers.

"Wow,' is right. I wonder what species it is? It looks very unusual."

Elizabeth shook her head, partly with wonder, partly to indicate that she didn't know. They watched the bird until it flew away, and then Nicholas resumed paddling.

The banks of the river began to close around them as the river grew narrower and deeper. The air seemed close, the setting more intimate. Now far from civilization, enfolded in the mountains' embrace, it seemed as though they were the only two people in the world. Elizabeth found herself wishing that Nicholas was sitting just a little closer, certain that if he was, there wouldn't be enough space left to keep them apart. He would lean in close . . . and then . . .

Abruptly, Elizabeth realized that her eyes were closed. She'd become so carried away with imagining that she'd begun to act it out. She opened her eyes—

And saw Nicholas right in front of her, much closer than she remembered. He must've been thinking the same thing, she realized. When she'd closed her eyes, he'd taken advantage of her inattention to move closer.

His hand traced a line from the nape of her neck up to her cheek and brushed her hair back from the side of her face. She felt a tingling shiver at the back of her neck where he'd disturbed the feather-fine hairs. Her heart was pounding. She watched his lips move closer to hers. A sudden rush of adrenaline made her feel weak all over, and the world began to sway.

Their eyes closing at the same time, he leaned the rest of the way toward her, and their lips met in a dizzying rush. His hand

came back to the nape of her neck and stayed there, softly caressing.

Elizabeth's heart beat faster, self-consciously aware that she was only wearing a bikini, while he was fully clothed.

After a long moment, Nicholas broke away and ran the back of his hand gently across her cheek. Gazing up at him, Elizabeth couldn't help noticing how the green of the foliage around them seemed to pale beside the infinitely deeper green of his eyes . . .

* * *

Constance watched absently as a familiar blue-and-white speck made its way through the inlet, growing in size with every stroke of its paddle. Her gaze traveled down to the water's edge, where Edwin was standing, taking more pictures.

Constance was seated in a folding chair in front of the tent, as she had been for the past half an hour, still preoccupied with her thoughts. Things were starting to snap into place. Kathleen had inadvertently brought something to her attention yesterday while they were having their afternoon tea together. The Stevens family's tragedy could easily become her family's good fortune. *At least something good will come of it*, she thought. *After all, there's no sense in allowing opportunity to pass us by. If a home is burning, can anyone blame me for running in and seizing something from the flames? It would have been lost anyway . . .*

"Hi, Mom," Elizabeth said. Constance's head jerked up. She'd been so preoccupied that she hadn't seen her daughter coming. Her eyes took in Elizabeth's smiling face, peripherally noting Nicholas beside her. "Hello—" Constance began, but quickly cut herself off, a frown creasing her brow. *What is that she's holding?* "Is that an Arum Lily?"

"Well, I don't really know what it is, but isn't it beautiful? Nicholas gave it to me."

Constance skewered Nicholas with an accusing look, then turned back to Elizabeth. "Well, get rid of it. It's unlucky."

Elizabeth's face fell. Looking down at the flower she was holding, she twirled it slowly around, studying it more closely now. Nicholas watched, feeling suddenly like a little kid who'd just witnessed someone pop his balloon. He scowled. *Unlucky? Who cares?*

"I'm sure it's not *that* unlucky," Nicholas said, watching

helplessly as Elizabeth's face continued to fall.

"Don't be. Never bring those flowers indoors. By all means look at them, but do so outside." Elizabeth nodded slowly. "Besides which, every part of that flower is extremely poisonous. It's really more of a weed than a flower."

Elizabeth looked up quickly from studying the flower, an expression of alarm written clearly across her pretty features. "I've been holding it all this time. Is that a problem?"

Constance frowned, but shook her head. "It's only poisonous if you eat it, but why take a chance? Get rid of it."

Elizabeth nodded absently, her eyes returning to the flower. Nicholas was long past annoyed—he was angry. Seething. But he did his best not to let it show. "Come on, Elizabeth," he said, grabbing her hand and turning her away from her mother. "Let's go."

Constance narrowed her eyes at Nicholas as she watched him take her daughter's hand and leave. She hadn't missed the poorly disguised umbrage that he'd taken at her well-meaning advice.

* * *

"You shouldn't let people get to you like that. Even your mother," Nicholas said once they were out of earshot.

Elizabeth sent him a quizzical look. "What do you mean?"

"Your mother told you that flower is unlucky," he said, pointing to it, "and you not only believed her, but allowed her superstition to ruin your appreciation of it."

Elizabeth glanced at the flower. "But if it's unlucky . . ."

Nicholas gave a disdainful snort.

"You don't believe in luck?"

"No. Luck is just a word we use to describe the unexplainable or the unexpected. And besides—" He glanced at the flower. "—I'm not sure that people consider those flowers unlucky."

"Why would my mother lie?"

"I'm not saying she did, but just because *she* thinks they're unlucky, doesn't mean that everybody else does."

Elizabeth smiled. "You're just saying that because you don't believe in luck. Besides, they're also poisonous."

"Yeah . . ."

"You don't believe that either?"

"I'll reserve my judgment, but your mother's certainly right

about one thing: simply handling them wouldn't be enough to poison you."

Elizabeth looked amused. "How do you know?"

"I've seen those flowers used in wedding bouquets."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

Nicholas nodded. "Really."

"Well, then I'll keep it."

"Despite it being unlucky?"

Elizabeth stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "Yes. Despite that." He sent her a look of mingled surprise and admiration, and she flashed him a brilliant smile in return.

Nicholas was about to reply when a voice called down to them from somewhere up ahead, "Hey, you two. How come you're always walking hand-in-hand?" the voice asked. Nicholas turned his head to look. There, sitting and drinking their beers together, were Flippy and a few other men that Nicholas didn't recognize. The voice was Flippy's.

Nicholas smiled in their direction. "Hello, Uncle Flippy."

Flippy nodded imperceptibly, the brim of his gray fisherman's hat dipping with the movement. "So?" he asked again. He mimed with his own hands, experimentally fitting them together every which way, and then, apparently not having discovered the secret of how they might get stuck together, he finished with an open-handed query.

Elizabeth smiled in amusement, and Nicholas simply shrugged. "See you later, Uncle Flippy."

Watching them go, Flippy grinned and raised his beer. "*Tot siens, mense.*"

Chapter 14

The next few days went by in a blur of activity. Going to the beach was a daily rite for the Strauss family, and Elizabeth went with them every day, staying from the early morning until the early afternoon. Having a weaker skin than Nicholas, however, she soon succumbed to painful red sunburns, which made even sitting painful. After that, Elizabeth's mother called a moratorium on further visits to the beach. And so, today Nicholas had opted not to go to the beach with his family, having so far spent the day in Siesta playing cards and table tennis with Elizabeth instead.

After lunch, they'd been planning to go canoeing up the Touws River again, but on the way over to Elizabeth's campsite, a different idea had occurred to him.

"Come on," Nicholas said, grabbing Elizabeth's hand. "Let's go for a walk." He began walking before she could reply, and she hurried to match his pace.

"Where are we going?" she asked, casting a glance over her shoulder just in time to catch a goodbye wave from her father.

"You'll see," Nicholas said.

"I thought we were going to go canoeing again?"

"We can still do that, but this way we'll *both* get some exercise," he said, sending her a grin and a wink. She laughed.

"Besides," he added more seriously now, "I think you're really going to like where we're going."

"Okay, you've convinced me. Lead on."

They hadn't been walking for long when a familiar voice called out, "Hello there, Nicholas."

Nicholas braced himself for the inevitable and gathered his patience. *Here it comes*, he thought.

"I was wondering if you could solve a mystery for me," the voice said.

“What mystery is that, Uncle Flippy?” Nicholas asked, turning his head to give the man his attention. He was tempted to ignore the question, but knew from recent experience that ignoring Flippy would only encourage him further.

“Why is it exactly—” Flippy went on, pausing to savor their reaction. “—that the two of you are always walking hand-in-hand?” Unable to think of a wise retort, Nicholas decided to ignore him after all. Flippy began chuckling. The noise sounded to Nicholas like a staccato burst from a jackhammer.

When the chuckling had faded into the distance, Elizabeth said, “You shouldn’t let people get to you like that.” Her tone was teasing as she copied his words from a few days ago.

Nicholas sent her a sideways glance. “Just wait, one of these days I’m going to have a good answer for him.”

A few minutes later, they reached the entrance of the park, but when Nicholas kept walking, Elizabeth stopped, and her hand slipped from his. He turned around and noticed confusion painted on her face.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“You weren’t kidding about getting some exercise,” she said, nodding to the long, dusty road ahead of them. He smiled. “Getting cold feet?”

“Well,” she began, and started forward again, “if I am, I have a feeling that they won’t be cold for long . . .”

When they came to within sight of the beach, with just a highway between them and it, Elizabeth was sure that that was their destination, but Nicholas made a left and began walking *along* the highway instead of across it.

“Where *are* we going?” Elizabeth asked.

Nicholas just grinned. “You’ll see. We’re almost there.”

Fifteen minutes later, they reached their destination. They crossed the highway now, but when they reached the other side, Elizabeth stopped walking to look up at the tan and brown building with a familiar green sign, which Nicholas was heading toward. “The Holiday Inn?” she asked, even more puzzled for having learned their destination.

Nicholas stopped, turning to face her. “That’s right.” A grin was tugging at the corners of his mouth. “You thirsty?”

“Very,” she replied, some of her confusion evaporating. But surely he hadn’t brought her all that way just to buy her a can of soda? They could have bought that at the *Duka*.

“Good. Let’s go, then.” He held his hand out to her.

She took it, and they walked together up to the Inn’s entrance. Nicholas held the door open for her and ushered her inside with his free hand resting lightly on the small of her back. Once inside, Nicholas led the way through the lobby to a restaurant at the back of the Inn. A waiter there led them to an empty table along a broad bank of windows.

Once they were seated and Elizabeth had a moment to appreciate the view from those windows, she finally understood why Nicholas had wanted to bring her here.

The Inn was built on a high cliff, which overlooked the beach, and as such, it had a magnificent view of the ocean. She watched as the distantly cresting waves rolled a brilliant white over an endless, sparkling blue canvas. Beyond that, was the deep and dimpled blue of wide-open ocean, stretching out to the distant, misty, white line of the horizon, drawn in cotton-puff white by the clouds that hovered there. Seen through slanted ceiling windows overhead, the sky was a clear and brilliant baby blue. The sheer, yawning emptiness of the scene left her feeling like they were flying, held aloft in a floating glass bubble built for two.

“Wow . . .” she marveled.

“I thought you’d like it.”

Their waiter came then, and Nicholas accepted a menu from him. Elizabeth didn’t even notice, and the waiter was forced to place her menu in front of her. Seeing their preoccupation, the waiter left, but returned a minute later for their orders.

“So, what would you like to drink?” Nicholas asked Elizabeth, as he looked through the menu’s selection of beverages.

“I’m not sure. What do they have?” Reluctantly, she tore her eyes away from the view to page through her own menu.

Nicholas turned to the waiter—a young man with long blond hair, high cheek bones, and some medium-length stubble around his chin. He was young. *Probably a college student*, Nicholas decided. “What would you recommend?”

The waiter gave him and Elizabeth a measuring look, then his expression flickered into a cryptic smile. “For you two?” He ran his fingers through his rudimentary beard, as if giving the matter some thought. “I know just the thing. How about some sparkling apple cider?” Nicholas raised his eyebrows, and the

waiter clarified, "It's kind of like champagne."

"Really? Sounds good to me." He nodded to Elizabeth. "How about you, Elizabeth? Apple cider?"

"Why not?" she said, closing her menu and handing it to the waiter. Nicholas followed suit.

The waiter accepted their menus, taking that to mean they wouldn't be ordering anything else. "I'll be right back with your drinks," he said, and then left in the direction of the bar.

Elizabeth went back to admiring the view, and Nicholas joined her. A few seconds later, their attention was drawn by a loud *pop!*—like the sound of someone opening a bottle of champagne. Nicholas turned to look and saw what appeared to be exactly that: their waiter was pouring a sparkling golden liquid into two tall glasses from what looked distinctly like a bottle of champagne. He continued watching as the waiter finished pouring the drinks and then returned to their table, carrying one in each hand.

"*Gesondheid*,"* the waiter said, simultaneously depositing the glasses in front of them.

Nicholas watched the waiter go, wondering at the young man's grin and his use of the word "*gesondheid*." One normally didn't drink a toast with soda. Nevertheless, he took a greedy sip of his apple cider and—

His eyes abruptly widened, and he set the drink down to glare suspiciously at it, noticing Elizabeth's similar reaction.

"What's . . . what's *in* this?" she asked, holding her glass up to the light and studying its contents.

They both cast a quick glance back to the bar, where the waiter was now re-corking the bottle. Again, Nicholas noted how similar it was to a champagne bottle.

Lizzie studied her glass intently now. "This isn't . . . is it?"

"Not champagne, no," Nicholas replied, "but it definitely has some alcohol in it. I think it's *hard* cider, which is quite a bit lower in alcohol than regular beer, but it still has some in it."

Elizabeth gaped at him. "He must have mistaken my age, it's still 2 months before I turn 16!"

Nicholas thought for a moment, remembering the waiter's cryptic grin and momentary pause before recommending that

* *Gesondheid*: Afrikaans for *cheers*, but meaning *health*.

they have the cider. He wondered how he could handle the issue tactfully without making her feel like a naughty little girl?

“Well, it’s tough for him to know exactly how old we are. Besides, you look 16, and the law allows for the serving of beer or wine to minors on festive occasions or for Holy sacraments—as long as they’re under the watchful supervision of someone old enough to partake, which luckily for you, I am.”*

Elizabeth smiled mischievously and her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “Well then, I’m in your expert care Nicholas—besides, it’s not like I’m going to get drunk, is it?”

Nicholas laughed. “No, I suppose not.” He raised his glass. “*Gesundheit.*”

“Cheers,” she returned, as they clinked glasses, now acutely aware that she’d soon be turning 16. Putting her glass down, she reaching over and gave his hand a squeeze, before saying, “Nicholas, other boys I’ve dated would have encouraged me to have another glass. Thanks for caring, and thanks for not putting me down in the process—I like feeling a bit older.”

Nicholas winked at her. “Just to be sure Lizzie, let’s not re-order a second glass. I’d hate for your mother to find out and hold it against me!”

Elizabeth winked at him too, hastily adding, “Yes, she always reminds me how she was the head girl at Queenstown Girls High back in 1948, and I think she rather fancies she still is!”

Nicholas laughed nervously, suddenly understanding why Lizzie’s mom always treated him, Lizzie, and Hattie as if they were just children who had to obey her strict rules—or else!

“To next year, Lizzie,” Nicholas said, raising his glass and inviting Lizzie to do the same before he continued. “To next year when you’ll actually be 16. I Promise to bring you back here and let you order another glass of apple cider to celebrate that.”

“I’d love that! To next year, Nicholas,” Lizzie said, raising her glass to meet his, a warm feeling now flooding her chest – not from the cider, but from his suggestion that he’d want there to be a next year for the two of them.

* * *

Flippy and his friends were sitting in a line of lawn chairs,

* The legal drinking age for wine or beer was 16, for strong liquors 18. Now it’s 21.

overlooking the river and drinking their beers, when Flippy happened to notice two familiar figures walking down along the river—hand-in-hand, *again*. They were walking toward him and his friends, apparently oblivious to the world around them. Flippy smiled as they drew near.

Elbowing one of his friends in the ribs, he said quietly, “Watch this.” Now in a much louder voice he called out, “Hey, Nicholas!” Nicholas jumped, and Flippy snickered. Nicholas’s head turned, and he glared in Flippy’s direction. Flippy grinned and muted laughter chorused from his friends. “Tell me, how come you two are always walking hand-in-hand?”

Nicholas studiously ignored the question, and Flippy began chuckling, knowing he’d get no reply. A moment later, however, Nicholas flashed a broad grin at them, and holding up his and Elizabeth’s still-clasped hands, he replied, “Superglue.”

Flippy blinked in shock and his friends broke into hysterical laughter. Recovering belatedly from his shock, Flippy’s grin returned, and he began laughing with his friends.

“Good answer,” the man whom Flippy had elbowed said.

“*Nee*, a bloody *brilliant* answer!” Flippy said. “I wish I’d thought of using some of that when I was his age.”

* * *

When Nicholas and Elizabeth reached her family’s campsite, they parted ways to have dinner with their families, but agreed to meet again afterward to see the movie that the park owner, Mr. Nixon, had announced.

Nicholas returned an hour later to find Elizabeth collecting dirty dishes from a picnic bench and stacking them together.

“Hey, Elizabeth. Your turn to do the dishes?”

She looked up from gathering the next plate and made a sour face at him. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“I could help if you like. It’ll go much faster with two.”

She flashed him a grateful smile, while stooping down to pick up her stack of dishes. Turning slowly from the picnic bench, she handed him her armful of plates. “Thanks,” she said, growing taller even as he shrank beneath the precarious mountain of plates and cutlery.

Nicholas’s eyes goggled at having been summarily handed the bulk of her chore. Elizabeth shrugged. “You offered.”

“I did?”

She smiled up at him and stacked a final plate in his arms.

“Yes, you did, and it was very sweet of you.”

“It must have been,” Nicholas said, nodding slowly, and making his way one careful step at a time toward the *ablution block** and the dish washing area that was behind it.

“I’ll be right back. I’m just going to get the detergent and some towels to wash and dry the dishes.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t get far,” Nicholas replied.

A few seconds later, Elizabeth came running up beside him. “Hello again,” she said, smiling.

Nicholas flicked his eyes in her direction, afraid to even move his neck, lest he disturb the pile of dishes in his arms.

Noticing his exaggerated care, Elizabeth laughed. “Oh, come on, there aren’t *that* many of them.”

Nicholas arched an eyebrow in her direction, but gave no reply. They passed Constance and Hattie sitting outside the tent. Constance noticed the pile of dishes in Nicholas’s arms and gave him an approving smile. Hattie giggled.

When they reached the dishwashing area, Nicholas set the pile of dishes on one end of the countertop, next to an unoccupied sink. He let out a long sigh. He was glad to have made it all the way there without dropping anything. Putting the plug in the sink, he began filling it with water. Elizabeth handed him a dishrag. He smiled wryly, noting that she’d left the easier job of drying the dishes for herself.

“I’ll wash, you dry,” he said, making it sound like his idea.

She smiled sweetly at him, and once the sink was full, he began scrubbing the first plate.

“I can’t believe Christmas is only a few days away,” Elizabeth said as she dried a plate that Nicholas gave her.

“I know. The date never changes, but somehow it always manages to come as a surprise.”

“Tell me about it. What do you think you’re getting?”

“I already know. Two books, some Archie Comics, a new watch, some clothes, some pocket money . . . and that’s about it. How about you?”

Elizabeth was too busy giving him a disbelieving stare to answer. When the silence went on for longer than expected, Nicholas looked up from doing the dishes and saw the look she

* *Ablution block*: a building that contains restrooms and showers

was giving him.

He raised his eyebrows. "What?"

"You already know what you're going to get for Christmas?"

He grinned. "My parents got tired of guessing what they should get us for Christmas, conceding that we were too old for surprises, so now they simply asked us what we'd like."

"That's terrible! The surprise is what makes it fun!"

"Really? How many pairs of socks have you been given for Christmas?" he asked, handing her another plate.

Elizabeth Laughed. "Well . . . a few," she admitted. "But even socks can be exciting if you don't know what they are."

"Until you find out. Better not to get them in the first place."

"You prefer it that way?"

Nicholas shrugged and gave her a sly look. "I haven't been given a pair of socks in *years*."

"Spoilsport," she said, playfully punching his arm; then she teased, "And just like me you enjoy Archie comics, too?" she asked, smiling while stacking a plate. "That's a little unusual for a guy! Can I borrow them when you're done reading them?"

"Sure, I do rather like them, and I've a better idea. Why don't you borrow half of them; I'll read the rest, and then when we're done we can switch and later on discuss them?" Nicholas suggested.

"That's a great idea. I can't wait! We'll have a fun Christmas! So what about Archie and his friends do you like?" Lizzie inquired.

Nicholas shrugged. "They're our ages, all in high school, dating, having fun, so it's easy to relate, though I'd like to think that we'd graduate a little faster than all of them ever did!" Nicholas answered with a chuckle.

Lizzie laughed "You've got a point! What else?"

"What's not to like?" Nicholas replied, then quickly added, "But this year those comics are beginning to feel uncomfortably real." Nicholas replied, pausing and turning to wink at Lizzie.

"Oh, how so?" Lizzie inquired.

"Well, up until I met you, I hadn't thought about it much, but now suddenly Denise and her family look to me to be a lot like Betty and the Cooper family, and you and your family are looking a lot like Veronica and the Lodge family—except . . ." Nicholas looked around to check that Lizzie's mom wasn't in ear shot before continuing. "Your mom's more like Mr. Lodge

than your dad," Nicholas continued in a hushed tone.

Lizzie laughed. "Yes, the comparison kind of fits—it's probably that *I was the head-girl* thing of hers. So, I guess that makes you Moose or Jughead?" she said, winking and bumping her hips against his. Her hands were now occupied with drying the dishes. Before Nicholas could answer, she relented, "Actually, you're a lot like Archie Andrews. Reggie's personality doesn't fit you that well. He's far too pompous."

Nicholas nodded. "And my romantic life's getting about as complicated as Archie's was, too," Nicholas commented with a sigh.

Lizzie had just finished drying the last dish. She stacked it, and then looped the dish towel around Nicholas's neck, pulling him towards her. Moving her body tightly up against him, she looked up into his eyes coyly before saying, "And if I'm to be Veronica, I'm going to make full use of this time I have alone at the beach with you Archie! I'm going to wear my bikini every day, and use every one of my feminine wiles on you before you return to Betty—I hope you don't mind . . ." And before he had a chance to recover, she brushed her lips lightly up against his.

Nicholas, aware that her mother could happen in on them at any moment, resisted the urge to kiss her, and said, "Come on, Lizzie, let's go discuss this on our bench down at the river before the movie starts." Then, taking her by the hand, off they walked, laughing and excitedly talking, much like their characters in their favorite comic books.

* * *

Through a wooden archway with red and purple bougainvillea growing over it, sitting on what had in recent weeks become *their* favorite old, gray wooden bench, Nicholas and Elizabeth could be seen, holding both of each other's hands, and watching the sun light the sky ablaze with golden fire as it sank lower in the sky.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yeah . . ." Nicholas responded absently, noting how the sunset's myriad of red and golden hues were mirrored in the shimmering waters of the Touws and Serpentine Rivers. He couldn't believe that he'd already been in Siesta for almost two weeks. His vacation was already more than half over.

Elizabeth heard a high-pitched buzzing noise come in close

to her ear: *ZLzzzZLL-LZzzzzZLL—T*.

She quickly shook her head, hoping to shake the mosquito loose before it could bite her. The noise returned: *ZzzzzZLL-zzzZLLzzzZLL-zzzzZLLZLL . . .*

She ignored it.

“You seem far away,” Lizzie said. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“Is that your final offer?” he asked.

She laughed. “Two pennies, then?”

Zzzz-zzz-ZLL—T. Elizabeth shook her head again and watched as the mosquito flew off in front of her.

Nicholas grinned. “I suppose that’ll do. I was just thinking that the holiday is already half over. The time has flown.”

“Don’t remind me,” Elizabeth said as she watched a mosquito—possibly the same one that had been buzzing around her ears—settle on her leg. She bounced her knee a couple of times to get rid of it and was satisfied to see it fly off again. She eyed her hands, both of them firmly ensconced in Nicholas’s. It would be nice to have at least one of them free so she could swat the mosquitoes, but seeing that the mosquito appeared to have gone, she gave a sigh and rested her head on Nicholas’s shoulder.

“What movie is Mister Nixon showing tonight?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“I hope it’s not animated . . .”

“Why?”

“I prefer movies with real people in them.”

“Ah.” He raised an eyebrow, glancing curiously at her.

ZLLZ-zzzz-ZLL-zzzzz-ZLLZ—T—ZLLzzzZLL-zzZLL—T

Elizabeth saw two mosquitoes land this time, one on her arm, another on her leg. She shook her entire body to break them loose, and they buzzed off again.

Nicholas felt Elizabeth squiggling beside him and sent her another curious look. “What on earth are you doing?”

“Trying to keep the mosquitoes from biting me.”

Nicholas laughed. “By making yourself a moving target?”

“Something like that. How come they aren’t bothering you?”

He smiled. “And settle for water when they can have wine?”

“Mmmm, good answer.” She sighed; nestled against his shoulder once more; and returned to admiring the fading golden hues of the sunset.

Chapter 15

Hattie and Elizabeth were waiting eagerly by the dying embers of an early morning campfire, impatient to open their Christmas presents. Hattie was literally on the edge of her seat, and Elizabeth was struggling not to fidget with excitement.

Before long, Edwin and Constance emerged from the tent, each carrying an armful of presents. Hattie squealed with delight, drawing a disapproving frown from her mother.

“Well then, girls, who wants to open the first present?” Edwin asked.

“I will!” they said in unison.

Constance smiled. “You’ll just have to each open one at the same time,” she said as she and Edwin set the presents down on the ground.

Each girl took a present from the pile. Hattie hurriedly peeled back the wrapping paper, opening her present first. Her efforts revealed a paperback novel.

Elizabeth peeled back the last layer of wrapping paper on her present, revealing a gold-striped, rectangular apparel box. Overcome with curiosity, she lifted the lid and found an exquisite, shimmering blue dance dress laid carefully inside. She gasped as she stood up with the dress, holding it in front of her. Hattie’s eyes grew wide with sudden awe and envy.

Elizabeth ran her hand appreciatively down the soft, silky length of the dress, feeling somehow that she’d seen it before. Then she remembered: she’d seen the dress when she’d gone shopping with her parents a few months ago. She’d fallen in love with it, but her mother had told her to put it back because it was too expensive.

“Is this?” Elizabeth looked quickly between her father and mother. Her father was grinning smugly, but her mother looked angry.

Edwin began nodding. “It is. When I saw the look on your

face at being told it was too expensive, I knew exactly what to get you for Christmas.” Constance shot Edwin a withering look, but he didn’t seem to notice.

Elizabeth smiled at her father. “Thank you, Dad! Thank you so much!” She had to restrain herself from giving her father a hug. She knew that her mother would disapprove and that the gesture would only make her father uncomfortable. Folding the dress lovingly, Elizabeth put it back in its box.

After all the rest of the presents had been opened, Hattie was left staring at the gold-striped apparel box to one side of Elizabeth. She’d been hoping to find a similar dress in one of the presents with her name on it, but she hadn’t even got a dress, let alone any as beautiful as Elizabeth’s. She reached a hand up to wipe away the tears that were starting to run down her cheeks.

“It’s not fair,” she whispered.

Elizabeth’s smile turned to a frown when she noticed that her sister was crying.

“What isn’t fair?” Constance asked, her eyes narrowing at Hattie’s tears.

Hattie looked between her mother and father. Their scowling faces wore down what little was left of her composure, and she began crying more audibly.

“You’re making a scene, Hattie,” Edwin said.

Without a word, Hattie got up and ran inside the tent. A moment later, they heard the camper door slam.

“What’s with her?” Elizabeth asked, staring after her sister.

Edwin shook his head. “You know your sister—she’s always been like that. Don’t let it get to you, though. I want you to go try on that dress I bought you.”

“She can do that later, Edwin,” Constance said. “Right now she needs to get ready to go to the beach. I don’t want to have to stand around waiting while everyone is getting ready.”

Not seeing what the hurry was, Edwin was insistent. “It would really make my day, Lizzie. I’m sure it won’t take you long, and then you can get ready for the beach.”

“Okay,” Elizabeth said softly. Picking up the gold-striped box, she walked inside the tent and began to undress. Ordinarily she would have changed inside the camper, but she didn’t want to have to confront her sister’s moodiness.

When she was done changing, she went back outside and

was immediately greeted by a long whistle from her father, followed by an exclamation: "Wow! Lizzie, you look gorgeous. Absolutely beautiful. Don't you think so, dear?" Edwin said, turning to his wife. Constance was frowning, but Edwin went on blithely, "Somehow, when we weren't looking, our daughter turned into a stunning young woman. Your little girl is all grown up."

Constance gave a derisive snort. "Well, now that you've tried on the dress, I trust that your father is satisfied. Hurry back into the tent and take it off, Elizabeth. It's very expensive, and you don't want to get it dirty. After all, you may wish to return it."

Elizabeth looked simultaneously crestfallen and confused. "Return it?"

Constance shrugged, and began collecting shreds of wrapping paper from the ground. "If *you* like the dress, then by all means, keep it."

Elizabeth glanced down at herself, expecting to see that the dress was a poor fit, or had some horrible defect. Edwin watched with a heavy frown, wondering what his wife was on about.

* * *

"Kristina, look! It's Santa Claus!" Kathleen said, pointing.

"Where?" Kristina asked, her eyes searching the horizon anxiously. "I can't see him!"

Kathleen bent down and stretched her arm out in front of Kristina, so that she could sight along it. "Over there." Her finger was pointing down the Touws River to where a white boat, decorated with red trim and sleigh bells was speeding slowly toward them. There was a young woman in a green bikini and a red Santa's hat sitting in the front of the boat behind the steering wheel, and in the back, standing next to a bulging red bag of toys, was a man with a flowing white beard and a prodigious waistline. Despite the heat, he was wearing the traditional dress for his part: a woolly red suit with white trim and a thick, gold-buckled black belt.

Santa Claus was waving to the onlookers with one white-gloved hand, and shaking a ring of sleigh bells with the other. Kristina waved back, her arm windmilling with excitement. "Santa!" she called, breaking away from her mother and running along the shore to keep pace with the boat. Before

long, she was joined by a crowd of other children.

Nicholas was standing with Elizabeth in front of her family's campsite, down by the edge of the inlet where Santa's boat was heading. He'd gone to spend part of Christmas morning with Elizabeth over half an hour ago, and now he and Elizabeth were watching the crowd approach from their place along the shore.

When the boat pulled up to the shore, Santa picked up his bag of toys and made his way ponderously out over the prow.

"Ho ho—" Santa was cut off on the third "ho" as an eager crowd of children swarmed him. He was quickly crowded back toward the river. Nicholas watched with a growing smile as one of Santa's feet slipped on the edge of the river bank and he teetered dangerously.

"*Bliksem!*"* Santa exclaimed in very un-Santa-like fashion. His elfin boat driver hurried to his aid and shooed the children away. "Careful, kids," she said. "You wouldn't want to push Santa Claus into the river, now would you?" A hush fell over the crowd, and a number of children began shaking their heads.

Recovering his composure, Santa dug into his bag and pulled out the first toy. He called out the name that was written on the present and waited for the child to come forward.

Nicholas watched the man in the thick, woolly Santa suit and felt real pity. He could see thick beads of sweat forming on the man's brow and running into his eyes.

By about the tenth present Santa pulled out of his bag, he called, "Kristina Strauss?" Nicholas watched his sister weave to the front of the crowd.

"Have you been a good girl this year, Kristina?"

"Yes, Santa, but you already know that, don't you?" she asked, squinting against the sunlight as she looked up at the man in the flowing white beard, somehow not managing to see how loosely it hung on his face.

"Of course, I do. I just wanted to make sure that you knew," Santa said, as he handed Kristina her present.

"Thank you, Santa!" Kristina flashed the man a quick grin

* *Bliksem*: meaning *lightning*; back then, a common Afrikaner exclamation

and then retreated to her parents.

Nicholas shook his head. "Eight years old and she still believes in Santa Claus." He was careful to keep his voice low.

"That's not so old," Elizabeth said. "I was ten before I stopped believing in Santa." Elizabeth wasn't speaking quite softly enough, and one of the adults closest to them turned and gave her a dirty look.

"Sorry," Elizabeth whispered, and the adult looked away.

"When did *you* stop believing in Santa?" Elizabeth asked.

Nicholas thought about that for a moment and then winced at his own hypocrisy. Now that he thought about it, he hadn't been any older than his sister.

"I guess I was the same age as my sister is now."

She gave him a knowing smile and then went back to watching Santa hand out the presents. "How did you find out?"

"I got sent to boarding school when I was eight," he said dryly. "When you live and go to school with a few hundred other guys, most of them older than you, you get to find out pretty quickly that Santa, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, and the baby-delivering stork are all figments of your parents' imaginations."

"Oh . . . I'm sorry to hear that."

He turned to look at her, took her hand in his, and said, "Come on, let's go for a walk." They meandered up along the riverbank, away from the crowd. After a few minutes, Elizabeth appeared to suddenly remember something, and she stopped walking. Nicholas felt the tug on his arm and stopped now, too. He sent her a questioning look.

"I need to go get changed," she explained. "How about I meet you in the Siestuary in a few minutes?"

He cocked his head to one side, wondering why she needed to change. "Okay," he said, letting go of Elizabeth's hand, "but don't take too long. My family will be going to the beach soon."

Elizabeth had already begun to leave, but upon hearing that, she stopped and turned again. "Really?" she asked. "So is mine. That's why I need to get changed."

"Great! Then we can meet up there as well."

She nodded, smiling, happier now that she knew they wouldn't be spending so much of the day apart. "See you soon," she said, and turned again to leave.

* * *

While everyone was crowding around Santa Claus, Constance went over to her husband, where he was busily taking pictures of the scene, and grabbed him by the arm.

“Come, Edwin. I want to have a talk with you,” she said, pulling him toward their caravan.

He shot her a puzzled look, but went without question or complaint. Once they were within the confines of the camper, she rounded on him and said, “Why did you buy that dress for Elizabeth after I had already told her she couldn’t have it?”

Edwin’s eyebrows drew together in confusion. “I saw how much she liked it. I didn’t think you’d object—”

“Why shouldn’t I object?” Constance said, crossing her arms over her chest. “The dress is too expensive, and it’s not even very pretty. What’s more, *I* told Elizabeth she *couldn’t* have it. Now you’ve made a mockery of my authority.”

Edwin was still confused. *The dress wasn’t that expensive, and it certainly looked good on Elizabeth . . .*

Constance grew impatient waiting for his reply and went on, “Do you remember our agreement?”

Edwin frowned. “What agreement?”

“When we had children we agreed that if we had boys, you would raise them, but that if we had girls, *I* would raise them.”

Edwin cast back in time to remember. She was right. They *had* made such an arrangement, but at the time he hadn’t known just how much control he was relinquishing to her—and he’d expected to have at least one son. He sighed and pursed his lips. Finally, he nodded. “I’m sorry, dear.”

“Good.” Constance brushed past him, and a second later he heard the spring-loaded door of the caravan slam shut behind her.

* * *

When Elizabeth had come within sight of her family’s camper, she’d seen her parents disappearing inside the tent—her mother all but dragging her father along by his arm. She had thought nothing of it, but when she’d reached the camper door she’d heard her mother’s raised voice coming from inside. Deciding that it would be a bad idea to interrupt them in the middle of an argument, she’d decided to wait in the tent for one of them to come out. Curiosity getting the better of her, she’d soon pressed her ear to the thin door of the camper, straining to hear what they were saying.

“Why did you buy that dress for Elizabeth after I had already told her she couldn’t have it?”

“. . . didn’t think you’d object—”

“Why shouldn’t I object?”

Elizabeth had continued listening until the conversation was over. She was shocked. They’d been arguing about the dress she’d received! Why should her mother be so upset about that? Elizabeth recalled that she’d sometimes received more expensive things for Christmas. Even more shocking, was her parents’ *arrangement* as to who would do the parenting. She’d never heard of it before, but now that she thought about it, it made a lot of sense. Whenever a decision had needed to be made, or permission had needed to be given, her mother had been the one to ask. She’d never really wondered why; it was just the way her family worked.

Hearing footsteps approaching, Elizabeth quickly hurried out of the tent. She made it just as she heard the camper door slam. Hiding alongside the tent, she watched as her mother stormed out. She held her breath, willing her mother not to look, not to turn around and see her. *Boy, will I be in trouble if my mom finds out I was listening!*

But Constance didn’t turn; she just continued walking purposefully onward, and Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief.

* * *

Weaving through the crowds, Nicholas was jogging down the beach, as much to keep from burning his feet on the hot sand as to find Elizabeth more quickly. He had a rough idea of where her family usually liked to sit, and before long he saw her. She was standing next to her parents, her back turned to him, Hattie by her side, both of them slathering on tanning lotion. He came up behind Elizabeth, put his hands in front of her eyes, and said, “Guess who.”

She whirled around and flashed a happy smile. “Nicholas!”

Hattie turned as well, revealing a sullen face. She didn’t bother to greet him.

Nicholas frowned. “Hello, Hattie. Why so glum?”

She abruptly turned and started down the beach. He stared after her, feeling awkward. “Huh. Well—” Nicholas made a sweeping gesture to take in the ocean. “Shall we?”

“Last one there is a rotten egg!” Elizabeth said, running past him and down toward the water.

“Hey! No fair!”

“Come on, slow poke!” Elizabeth said, casting a quick, beckoning glance over her shoulder as she ran.

“Slow poke?” he echoed. “I’ll show you who’s slow!” And with that, he sprinted after her, quickly catching up.

They reached the water, dove in, and swam past the breakers until they were beyond where they could stand. Once there, they began treading water, bobbing up high when a swell came, then down low again once it passed.

Nicholas glanced at Elizabeth and asked, “What’s up with your sister? Something seemed to be bothering her.”

“I don’t know . . .” Elizabeth paused to swim over the next swell. “She’s been like that all morning, ever since we opened our presents.”

“Huh. Maybe she didn’t get what she wanted?”

“Maybe . . .”

They lapsed into silence, but Nicholas quickly broke it. “So . . .” he began, a sardonic smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, “did you get any socks?”

“No,” she laughed, giving him a long-suffering look. “I didn’t get any socks. I got a—” She hesitated and her voice returned more softly. “—beautiful, blue dress.”

The way she hesitated on the word “beautiful” made Nicholas wonder if that was an accurate way to describe the dress.

“I take it you didn’t think the dress was all that beautiful?”

She frowned. “Well, I don’t know. My dad thinks I look great in it, but my mom . . .” They swam over another swell. “I don’t think she likes it very much.”

“Ah. But what do *you* think of the dress?”

She gave him a blank look. “What do you mean?”

“Why does it matter what other people think if you like it?”

She was silent for a moment as she considered her reply. “Well, first of all, we’re not talking about *other people*, we’re talking about my mother. And besides, it’s others who decide how I look in something. What if I thought I looked good in army fatigues?”

Nicholas laughed. “Well, I doubt very much that you *would* think that, but hey, if it’s what you like to wear . . .” Another swell came and Elizabeth laughed with him as they swam over it. “Besides,” Nicholas added, “you’d look good in anything.”

Elizabeth sent him a shy smile. “Thanks.”

After a few minutes, Nicholas said, "Come on, let's head back. I'm getting tired of treading water out here."

"Race you back!" she replied, turning shoreward and using the next wave's momentum to carry her there faster.

Again, Nicholas found himself watching as she sped away. "Hey! What's the point in racing if you always get a head start?" he asked, launching himself after her, but she was already too far ahead of him to hear.

* * *

Later that day, as the last golden rays of the sun were slipping below the horizon, Nicholas and Elizabeth were walking and talking, hand-in-hand along the Touws River. They'd met up again after Christmas dinner, which as usual, had been a barbecue for both of them.

Before long, they heard a familiar voice call out, "Hey look, there goes *Vas Vat!*"* followed by the sound of chuckling. Nicholas sent a glancing look up from the river to see Flippy and his friends laughing and pointing at them.

Nicholas rolled his eyes, and Elizabeth grinned. "You can't win," she said.

"How can he even see us in this light?"

She shook her head, then called up to them: "I guess all that beer gives you perfect night vision, hey, Uncle Flippy?"

Muted laughter rolled down to them.

"What beer?" came Flippy's innocent reply. "We're drinking soda!" Flippy held a can up to the waning light. "See?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, I don't see, and just because we can't see it, doesn't mean you can fool us."

More laughter.

In spite of his earlier annoyance, Nicholas found himself grinning at the exchange. He turned his head up toward Flippy's darkened silhouette and said, "Merry Christmas, Uncle Flippy."

The laughter stopped.

"Merry Christmas, you two," Flippy replied.

They continued walking until they reached the Siestuary. The sun was gone now, replaced by the moon and stars. Nicholas stopped beneath the Siestuary's arching wooden

* *Vas Vat*: Afrikaans for *superglue*

arbor and turned Elizabeth toward him.

Her eyes were dark and questioning, save for the reflected silver slivers of the moon. Long fronds of red bougainvillea hung down around them, dangling from the archway.

Nicholas caught one of the fronds in his hand and held it up for her to see. "Looks like mistletoe."

She shook her head and smiled. "Nope."

He cocked his head. "How do you know? It's pretty dark . . ."

"Because I can remember." She laughed. "Those are flowers."

"Really?" The way he said it and quickly glanced down at the flowers, as if to get a closer look, he sounded almost genuinely surprised.

He shrugged. "Oh well."

With sudden dismay, Elizabeth realized she'd just undermined his excuse to kiss her. She was about to ask him to do so anyway, when she saw a flash of white—he was grinning.

"It's a good thing I don't need an excuse to kiss you."

Her heart seemed to skip a beat, and Nicholas drew her closer. His smile had faded, replaced by a more serious look that only the darkness could see. But nothing could hide the way he gazed unblinkingly down into her eyes, the way he cupped her chin and brushed the back of his hand across her cheek—raising goosebumps and sending tingles down her spine. Her heart began to pound as she watched the distance between their lips narrow.

Their lips met, and suddenly she felt like a feather caught up in the wind, soaring out over the mountains and the trees, the rivers and the lakes. From up there, even the stars didn't seem out of reach.

They lingered like that for a long moment, silhouetted by the moon's silvery glow, a whispering breeze playing delicately through the bougainvillea, sending the fronds brushing ticklishly through Elizabeth's hair. Carried by the breeze, a rich floral fragrance found her and lingered softly, like the most priceless perfume. Elizabeth smiled.

Feeling her lips tighten, Nicholas broke away. "What is it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing." And then she kissed him again.

Chapter 16

The water shimmered brightly in the sun. It took on hues from the dark, leafy greenery rising all around them, becoming one with the jungle. Elizabeth watched the depths of the jungle, listening to the sounds of the frogs and the birds. In here, nestled between the trees as they slowly wound up the Touws river, the noisy bustle of the caravan park seemed far, far away. Here there were only two sets of eyes and two sets of ears. No one could see or hear them, and it was easy for Elizabeth to pretend that no one else existed.

It was now only a few days before her family was set to leave Siesta, and that fateful day was hanging like a storm cloud over Elizabeth's head. She didn't want to leave. It felt like just yesterday she'd met Nicholas here in this paradise, and now she was going to have to say goodbye. . . . She'd see him again, though—next *year*—when their families returned to Siesta.

Elizabeth sat in the front of the canoe dressed only in her pale blue bikini, feeling exposed and vulnerable beneath the sun and Nicholas's gaze. She pretended not to notice the way he was looking at her from his place in the back of the canoe—his eyes shining bright green, a subtle hint of a smile on his lips. In reality she was acutely aware of his gaze and the way he was staring at her, and she had to distract herself to keep from staring back.

Her gaze dipped to study the white arum lily Nicholas had just picked for her. It was beautiful—one pure white, heart-shaped petal rising around a yellow stalk. She'd grown accustomed to this, to these little romantic gestures of his. She was going to miss that—she was going to miss him.

She looked up to see him smiling at her. She smiled back and began twirling her hair around her fingers. She lost herself for a moment in his green eyes and soon she *was* staring back.

She watched the veins standing out on his biceps and neck as he rowed, his back moving rhythmically with the oars, and she felt a warm stirring inside of her. They were all alone out here. Finally, she had Nicholas all to herself. She imagined him running his hands over her arms and neck, his lips trailing fire across hers. . . .

“What are you thinking about?” Nicholas asked.

“Me?” Elizabeth shook her head. “Nothing,” she said, and looked away, but her cheeks flushed bright red, giving her away.

“Really?” She could hear him smiling. “That’s not what it looked like.”

Elizabeth stared into the green water, watching it drift by the side of the canoe. She caught a glimmer of her reflection and brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes. “What did it look like, then?” she asked as she studied the depths of the river.

“It looked as though you might have been thinking about someone special.”

She looked up with a fresh smile. “Oh, well, I guess I’m guilty of that, yes.”

“Should I be jealous?”

“Hmmm, that depends . . .”

Nicholas quirked an eyebrow. “On?”

“Do you have a twin?”

Nicholas frowned and shook his head. “No.”

“Then I wouldn’t worry about it,” she said with a wry twist of her lips.

Nicholas laughed. “That’s sweet.”

Elizabeth smiled and tore her gaze away from his to stare into the water once more. She noticed the bottom of the river appear, swirling wraithlike out of the depths and rising swiftly beneath their canoe, and she frowned.

“Do you think it’s getting too shallow? Maybe we should turn around.” She looked up to see Nicholas shake his head.

“No, it’ll be fine. Don’t worry. There’s somewhere I want to take you.”

Elizabeth noticed a roaring sound. It was just discernible above the more muted sounds of the jungle, but quickly growing louder. She turned to look and watched as their canoe came around a bend in the river, bringing the sound fully to life. There in the distance she saw a waterfall thundering over

a cliff and into a dark pool below.

“Wow,” she breathed as Nicholas rowed them up to the waterfall. “I didn’t know this was here.”

“I’ve never taken you this far before,” Nicholas replied.

Elizabeth watched the torrent of water growing larger before them. She saw the trees above the waterfall leaning over the cliff, framing the water as it fell. The spray began to dust Elizabeth’s face with a welcome coolness, and she closed her eyes against it, inhaling deeply of the fragrant air. A moment later the sun broke through the tree canopy, kissing her cheeks with its radiance. She opened her eyes slowly. “It’s beautiful!”

She smiled broadly and turned to Nicholas just in time to see him standing up to stretch. She frowned, looking up at him uncertainly as the canoe began to wobble with his shifting weight.

“Careful you don’t fall in,” she said.

He looked down at her with a lopsided grin. “I don’t know. Would falling in be so bad?”

Elizabeth’s frown turned speculative as she considered the question. It was a hot day; the water would be warm; he was probably overheated from rowing them all this way. . . .

And then she realized what was hiding behind his crooked smile, and why he was asking *her* if it would be bad to fall in. Abruptly she held out a warning finger. “Don’t you dare!” But he was already rocking the canoe. “Nicholas!”

It was too late. Elizabeth felt the canoe beginning to capsize beneath her, and she saw the green water rushing up toward her face even as Nicholas fell overboard with a terrific splash. Her own splash came a second later, and suddenly the roaring of the waterfall was cut off as her head dipped below the water. She spent only a few seconds clawing for the surface before she came up splashing and spluttering, and then she heard Nicholas’s laughter over the roaring waterfall, and she wiped the water out of her eyes to see him grinning broadly at her. She noticed that he was standing, and she put her own feet down to feel the pebbly riverbed press against the soles of her feet.

“Hey!” she couldn’t help smiling, too, but she splashed him just to make it clear that he shouldn’t make a habit of dumping her in the water. He only laughed harder and splashed her back. A fresh wave of water engulfed her, and she

began spluttering once more. “You don’t think I’m wet enough?”

“No, you look perfectly dry,” he said, still laughing.

“That’s it!” she said, swimming after him.

He didn’t swim away, so she grabbed on to him. “Now you’re in trouble,” she said. “I’ve got you, and I’m not letting go.” She tried to dunk his head beneath the surface, but he resisted and she felt his arms encircle her waist.

“What makes you think it isn’t me who has you?”

Her eyes met his, and that was when she understood that this was a trap. She felt one hand begin trailing lightly up her back, sending shivers through her, while his other held fast at her waist. “And what are you going to do with me?” she asked, suddenly breathless, looking deep into his eyes—a faint smile quivering at the corners of her mouth, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. Instead of replying, his other hand found the nape of her neck and pulled her lips to his. Elizabeth felt a heady rush of warmth as their lips touched despite the cool water all around her. The sun beat down on their exposed skin and she reached out to hold his face in her hands as they kissed. His lips sought hers greedily, questing, conquering, and quickly overwhelming her. She felt that warm stirring again as she had before, but now she began to recognize it for what it was.

This was a dangerous feeling—simultaneously exciting and terrifying. Her mind was racing, her heart pounding, and her breathing was shallow and fast as her body responded to his touch.

Her feet tentatively touched the riverbed, but it was deeper here where Nicholas was standing, and she floundered for a moment. Nicholas responded by pulling her legs up around his waist. She placed her arms around his neck, their faces now just inches apart, and the sound of the waterfall numbing her senses. She felt dizzy, disoriented, flustered, almost drunk—not that she knew what that felt like—and those strange feelings were not abating, instead they were rising up fast within her, building to a crescendo, heightened by the heart-pounding stab of the forbidden. She was suddenly intensely aware that they were all alone. There were no chaperones and no prying eyes to stop them from going too far—to stop them from giving in. How could something feel so natural, so right,

and yet still be wrong?

Elizabeth tore her lips away, gasping for air, but Nicholas pulled her back to him. He wasn't going to let her go. His touch was electrifying, and she felt suddenly desperate for more. Now her legs were wrapped tightly around his waist, and he didn't have to hold her there, so he freed his hands to run them lightly over her bare arms and neck. One hand found her cheek while the other held her at the small of her back. His lips parted and hers parted, too. She felt herself losing control, surrendering to that spreading feeling of warmth. His hands trailed lower, gliding lightly across her throat and down to her chest. . . .

"Nicholas!" Elizabeth broke away, gasping once again for air. "This is—" She grabbed his hand where it lay, just above her breasts. "We can't. I want to! But we can't. . . ."

He held her gaze for a moment, but his eyes were glazed and distant with a vague kind of shock, and that was when she understood that he hadn't been planning this either. What he was doing wasn't seduction, it was a spilling over of their passion and desire—an unexpected lapse that had surprised them both with its urgency.

Nicholas began nodding slowly, and his hands slowly drifted away from her, letting her go. "You're right. I'm sorry, Lizzie. That's . . ." He took a deep breath and shook his head as if to clear it. "That's never happened to me before. I've never lost control like that, not with anybody—ever!"

Elizabeth unwrapped her legs from his waist and her feet found a precarious footing on the riverbed. She nodded, managed a nervous smile, and then turned to look around her, feeling suddenly embarrassed. He wasn't the only one who'd lost control. "Where's the canoe?" she asked, changing the topic in order to calm herself. She needed to quiet those urgent whispers stirring inside of her before she began listening to them again. "I don't see it anywhere."

"Ummm . . . uh oh . . ."

Elizabeth turned to see Nicholas staring at the waterfall. He nodded to the rushing white torrent of water and they saw the overturned canoe just now drifting under it. The waterfall pelted the bottom of the canoe noisily until it disappeared beneath the surface.

"How are we going to get it back?!" Elizabeth asked.

“Give me a minute,” Nicholas said as he dove after the canoe. “Get the oars!” he called back to her.

Elizabeth cast about for a moment, searching for the oars. A moment later she found them snagged in the reeds along the shore of the river. She made her way over there, and a few minutes later she had both of the oars stacked in her arms. When she turned to find Nicholas, she saw him still busy pulling the canoe out from under the waterfall.

It took him half an hour to finally retrieve the canoe and get the water out of it.

As Nicholas rowed them back down the river, Lizzie’s thoughts kept going back to the waterfall, and to Nicholas’s strong arms and hands holding her, pressing her against him, holding her there—*trapped*—but it was a good kind of trapped, the kind that she hadn’t really wanted to escape from. Elizabeth knew that it was wrong, and she knew better than to surrender to those feelings. They only led to disaster and ruin. Her mother had often warned about such things, and it went without saying that they were too young to get so serious.

Elizabeth sighed and watched Nicholas carefully as he paddled their canoe downstream. Had he been planning to seduce her? Could she trust him? Or was he one of those boys that she’d been warned about long before she’d even begun to date—one of the bad ones. She wasn’t certain anymore. Elizabeth let out another shaky sigh. It was all so confusing! One thing was for sure: she couldn’t let him take her back to that waterfall without knowing the answers to those questions.

Elizabeth plucked up the courage, cleared her throat to get Nicholas’s attention and then she spoke: “Nicholas, how do you feel about my virginity?” She blushed visibly as she asked and quickly averted her eyes from Nicholas’s face to rather look down at the bottom of the canoe.

Seeing her embarrassment, but admiring her bravery to broach the topic first, Nicholas stopped rowing, allowing the canoe to glide gently across the mirrored surface of the river. He smiled reassuringly and replied, “Look at me, Lizzie.”

Elizabeth responded with a wan smile, and looked up to see Nicholas smiling, too. She was still struggling to control the rising redness in her cheeks, but she did make eye contact with Nicholas, and she was immediately reassured by the warmth she found in his eyes.

“Lizzie, when I rowed you up the river to that waterfall, I had no intention to seduce you, and definitely none of taking your virginity. I’ve never done that with any girl, ever—but I’ve also never before felt so overwhelmed by desire. I won’t lie to you, Lizzie; I will only say that in my defense, for a moment, not even I was sure what would happen next between us.”

Lizzie recovered her composure and her cheeks returned to their normal color once more. “It’s okay, Nicholas. I just needed some reassurance. I haven’t known you that long, so I didn’t know what to expect, and I got scared. In some ways I was more scared by my own feelings than any of your possible intentions. I wasn’t sure if I could stop myself if you did try to seduce me or if I even wanted to—and that’s a first for me, too.”

Elizabeth’s cheeks reddened again and Nicholas smiled. “I think we both underestimated our passions, so to be safe, I promise that in the future I’ll assume that even your ‘yes’ means ‘I’d like to, but it’s probably not a good idea.’”

Lizzie laughed nervously, but her eyes remained firmly fixed on Nicholas’s. “Thank you for being so understanding and so caring. I can only lose my virginity once, and I *would* like to wait till I’m married.”

Nicholas nodded. “So would I, Lizzie—and I can only admire your resolve to do so, especially since we both just found out how hard that can be.” Before Elizabeth could reply, he continued, “Now I finally understand what my Grandpa meant.” Before Lizzie could say anything, Nicholas started rowing the canoe again, having noticed it was heading for the reeds and the riverbank.

“What did he say?”

Nicholas chuckled and between paddle strokes he replied, “He said . . . take this tip from your old grandpa, if you ever lie down next to a girl, or find yourself all alone with her in nature—all bets are off! It’s safer not to get into those sorts of situations. And better safe than sorry nine months later!”

Lizzie laughed, a bit louder than usual, and said, “That’s good advice, Nicholas.”

Nicholas’ smile faded as he considered what this would do to their many walks along the beach, their evenings alone on the bench next to the river, and also to their beloved canoe trips. “Tell you what, Lizzie, I have an even better idea. I think we

can manage to control ourselves from now on, but just to make certain, let's agree on a secret code word that either of us can use if we feel things getting out of control."

Lizzie looked up at him. "And what word would that be, Nicholas?"

Nicholas's eyes sparkled as they held hers. "Waterfall," he replied.

Lizzie burst into laughter, and Nicholas laughed with her. Soon Elizabeth was doubled over with laughter, tears streaming down her face. Nicholas grinned. Their laughter died down as they noticed the canoe drawing near to Siesta, but then, abruptly, when either of them would try to speak, they'd burst into laughter once more, unable to control themselves.

Nicholas drew his breath, barely managing to calm himself, and as the bottom of their canoe scraped ground, he said, "Welcome back to solid ground, Lizzie."

Elizabeth drew in a deep breath, sighed, and shook her head to clear it. She stood up, and as she did so, she turned to find Nicholas standing behind her, waiting to get out of the canoe. She smiled and reached out with her left hand to cup the side of his face. "Thank you, Nicholas," she whispered, and then she stepped over the front of the boat and onto the grassy shore.

No more boat rides for her for a while.

"What's so funny, Elizabeth? Edwin asked, startling them both.

They turned to look, and Edwin explained, "I could hear the two of you laughing a mile away!"

"Oh, nothing much, Dad, just something funny Nicholas said that, um, tickled my funny bone at the right moment. I'm just feeling a little giddy, that's all—I'm only 15, in case you forgot, and teenage girls can get a bit silly now and then," Lizzie replied, smiling at her dad, determined to keep her and Nicholas's secret.

"Oh, well, okay. If you won't share the joke with me, you'd better go and get ready for supper—it's almost ready now."

"Sure, Dad," Lizzie replied, looking relieved. She turned to Nicholas and said, "Nicholas, why don't you join us for supper? I'm sure my mom won't mind."

"Sounds great!" He grinned. "Just let me go tell my parents and change. I'll be right back." Nicholas replied, dropping a

quick kiss on her cheek before setting off at a run.

* * *

Elizabeth was sitting inside her family's tent, the morning sun glowing warmly through the thin fabric of the tent. She was trying to read a book, but found she was continually distracted by her thoughts. Today her family would leave Siesta, and she'd have to say goodbye to Nicholas. He was supposed to meet her here after breakfast, so they could spend her last few hours in Siesta together.

Elizabeth heard the camper door open. She looked up from the page to see her mother and father coming out. Her mother was moving to pick up magazines, books, cards—anything lying around inside the tent—and her father was folding chairs and stacking them against the side of the camper. She cast her eyes back to the page she'd been reading, but found herself paying more attention to her parents' conversation.

"I want you to go speak with Mister Nixon," her mother said. "Tell him in no uncertain terms that we won't be coming back to Siesta next year if he doesn't give us a better spot. I simply won't come back to this miserable, sun-baked patch of dirt. What people must think of us! And for an assistant managing director, no less!" She gestured madly at the ceiling of the tent, where the sun could be seen as a bright spot, shining through the thin fabric. "Look at that! We don't have any shade. The sun is streaming right in. It must be a hundred degrees in here!"

Edwin nodded. "Yes, dear."

Constance turned to him, leaving a stack of miscellaneous things on the ground, and put her hands on her hips. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

Edwin stacked another chair against the side of the camper. He grimaced while his back was turned, but when he faced his wife, his expression became a carefully amenable mask.

"Anything else?" he asked.

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't be impertinent."

He sighed and ran a hand across his sweaty brow. "That was not my intention, dear," he said, and moved forward to rest a hand on her rigid arm. He gave it an affectionate squeeze. Her expression softened just a bit, and then he left to speak with Mr. Nixon.

Elizabeth's heart sank; her eyes went out of focus, and she

stared at the page she was ostensibly reading. If her parents didn't come back to Siesta next year, she might never see Nicholas again. Her breath caught in her chest, and she looked over at the zip-lock door flap by which her father had just left. Mr. Nixon had to give her family a better spot! He wouldn't refuse, would he? What would her parents do if he did? Would her mother really never come back again? She watched the door flapping uneasily in the wind and slowly let out her breath.

She wasn't sure.

* * *

Edwin marched up to the entrance of Mr. Nixon's house and rapped twice smartly on the door. After a few moments, he heard footsteps. The door opened to reveal a short woman, with dark brown skin and long black hair. She was wearing a black and white maid's uniform.

"Sir?" she inquired.

"Would you please inform Mister Nixon that Edwin Smythe would like a word with him."

She nodded and opened the door further. "Come in please, Mister Smythe. I will tell Mister Nixon that you're here."

"Thank you," he said, walking past her into the lounge. He took a seat on one of the leather sofas there, and began silently rehearsing what he would say to Mr. Nixon. He heard a door open behind him as the maid hurried off. A few minutes later, Edwin heard the door open again and craned his neck to see the maid returning with the park owner. Edwin got up to greet the man.

"Mister Smythe!" Nixon's stentorian voice boomed out cheerily from a thick-barreled chest as he took long strides to cover the distance between them. "I would've thought you'd have left by now. I trust that everything is well? How is the family?" Nixon asked, stopping in front of Edwin and giving his hand a vigorous shake.

Before he could reply, Nixon reached into the top pocket of his jacket, pulled out two fat cigars, and held one out to him.

"No, thank you," Edwin said.

The big man's head cocked to one side and he raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

Edwin forced a gracious smile. "Quite." His wife gave him a hard enough time for drinking. He shuddered to think of what

she'd do if he took up smoking, too.

Mr. Nixon nodded, stuck one of the cigars back in his pocket, but popped the other into his mouth. He gestured to the sofas where Edwin had been sitting a moment ago. "Come. Take a seat. Would you like anything to drink?"

Edwin shook his head and Mr. Nixon waved his maid away.

Once they were seated, Mr. Nixon bit off the end of his cigar and lit it. He puffed a few clouds of smoke before speaking. "So," he began, taking the cigar from his mouth. "My maid, Nosey—actually her name is Nosizwe or some such, but I can never quite pronounce those local names. Anyway, Nosey tells me that you have something to speak to me about?" He popped the cigar into his mouth again.

Edwin nodded. "We feel that you've been treating us with . . . a lesser degree of courtesy than some of your other patrons."

Mr. Nixon frowned around his cigar, took it from his mouth, and asked, "How so?"

"Every time we come to Siesta, we're given what must be the worst spot in the entire park. We don't even have any shade there, just a tiny little shrub of a tree. Surely you have something better for the assistant managing director of Western Tanning?"

Mr. Nixon's frown flattened, and then turned into an apologetic grin. He gave a lazy, open-handed shrug. "I don't know what to tell you, Mister Smythe. We're fully booked every year, and most everyone has been coming here longer than you. I can't very well take a better spot from one of them and give it to you. It just wouldn't be fair."

"I see. So you're not going to do anything for us?"

Mr. Nixon shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry, but there isn't anything I *can* do. Unless someone cancels their reservation next year, you're just going to have to live with what you've got."

Now it was Edwin's turn to frown. "Well," he said, getting up from the couch and holding out his hand for shaking. "If that's how it is, I'm afraid I can't promise you'll see us here next year."

Mr. Nixon took Edwin's hand, his grin fading into a scowl as he digested Edwin's words. Without releasing Edwin's hand, he gave the smaller man an even stare, and then said, "Of course, that's up to you. But do let me know if you change your mind."

Else *I* can't promise you'll have any spot at all." Nixon released Edwin's hand.

Edwin nodded. "I wouldn't expect otherwise. Thank you for your time, Mister Nixon." With that, Edwin turned and left.

Mr. Nixon sat in his leather chair for a long, dour moment, smoking his cigar. *Who does that man think he is? Assistant managing director—ha! With such a childish attitude, how did he ever make it that far?*

He had a sudden image of Edwin sitting on a patch of dirt, scowling up at a scrappy little tree as the sun beat mercilessly down upon him.

The park owner gave a long, bellowing laugh that forced him to remove the cigar from his mouth. Shaking his head with amusement, he popped the cigar back into his mouth. He could almost feel sorry for the man now.

Almost.

* * *

Elizabeth looked up from her book again, this time to see her father storming back into the tent. He strode purposefully past her and went inside the camper. A moment later, Elizabeth could hear her mother's raised voice coming from within, and strained to hear.

"... refused?" Constance asked.

Elizabeth heard her father reply, but couldn't make out his much-softer words.

"... ungrateful wretch. He's deliberately trying to spite us! Don't worry, Edwin. God will punish him. Then he'll be sorry."

Elizabeth's shoulders slumped. She didn't need to hear more. Mr. Nixon had refused, and that meant...

Some movement in the corner of her eye caught Elizabeth's attention. "Hey, Elizabeth," Nicholas said, his head poking around the corner of the tent's door flap, a smile on his face.

She allowed a halfhearted smile of her own. "Hi." She got up from her chair and joined him outside.

"Let's go for a walk," he said, taking her hand in his.

They walked down to the end of the park in silence, neither one of them knowing what to say now that they had so little time left in which to say it. When they reached the Siestuary, they passed beneath its archway and walked on to the river's edge. They watched as a young couple canoed down the river, and Elizabeth wondered if it was the same couple they'd seen

canoeing *up* the river the day she'd first met Nicholas.

Her gaze went out of focus as memory after memory assaulted her: dancing at Fairy Knowe, canoeing up the river, swimming in the ocean, the Holiday Inn . . . the *waterfall*. So many good memories now made painful by her private knowledge that they were both the beginning and end of her relationship with Nicholas. She didn't bother to follow the canoe with her eyes as it passed. "You won't forget to write me, will you?" she asked, turning to Nicholas. He was still staring out into the distance, as though he hadn't heard her at all.

After a moment, he met her gaze and smiled. "I won't forget."

"Good." She flashed him a quick grin that soon faded.

Sensing that something was wrong, Nicholas's brow furrowed. "Elizabeth—" he began, but stopped as his voice caught in his throat. He swallowed and then continued. "Will I ever see you again?"

"I—" she looked down to keep him from seeing the look in her eyes. His heart sank. He had all the answer he needed. He reached over, bringing his hand up under her chin, gently lifting her gaze back to his. She gave him a weak smile.

"It's okay," he said softly, and with a confidence he didn't feel. He clasped his hands behind the nape of her neck, and held her, afraid that if he let go now, she'd vanish before his eyes. Then, their eyes closed and their lips met. In one last, fleeting moment it was over. She felt him pulling her closer again, this time for a quiet embrace—her arms folding up in front of her, her head resting against his chest, his head resting against hers.

The sun was shining fiercely out of a cloudless sky, but it could do nothing to part the clouds in their hearts. Somewhere in the back of Elizabeth's mind she heard the song they'd first danced to begin to play:

*I can see clearly now, the rain is gone,
I can see all obstacles in my way
Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind
It's gonna to be a bright, bright, bright—
Bright sun-shiny day . . .*

She smiled bitterly. Not a single word of that song rang true to her now.

She felt Nicholas holding her a little tighter, and she grabbed a fistful of his shirt—both clinging to the unreasonable hope that if they never let go, they would never have to.

* * *

“Hurry up, Edwin!” Constance called to her husband, who was down by the river, gathering some things from his boat. He would need to come back for the boat on a separate trip once they reached Wellington. “We want to get to Swellendam before dark,” she reminded him.

Constance looked around. “Now where is Elizabeth?”

“I saw her walking off with Nicholas a while ago,” came a small voice from behind Constance.

Constance whirled around to see Hattie standing behind her. Her daughter flinched, and Constance realized she was scowling. She softened her expression. “How long ago?”

Hattie shrugged. “About an hour.”

Constance scowled again, but this time Hattie seemed to realize that the expression wasn’t aimed at her.

“Keep an eye out for them,” Constance said, and hurried toward the camper.

About five minutes after everything was packed and ready to go, Hattie saw Elizabeth and Nicholas approaching. Constance watched with arms crossed and a disapproving frown.

“Where have you been, Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth noticed the look on her mother’s face and paled a little. “I was with Nicholas . . .”

Uh-oh, here it comes, Hattie thought.

But Constance merely narrowed her eyes.

Hattie’s mouth dropped and she blinked. *If that had been me . . .* Sending her sister a bitter smile, she quietly got into the car.

“Now where is your father?” Constance asked of no one in particular as she cast her eyes about impatiently.

A moment later, Edwin emerged from the camper, car keys in hand. Seeing the look on his wife’s face, he gave a shrug and said, “I had to find the car keys.”

Constance turned to Elizabeth. “Well, it’s time to go . . .” she trailed off, watching her daughter turn to Nicholas with a pained expression. Frowning, Constance realized that they were having trouble saying goodbye. *Silly girl, she should know better than to let people get that close to her.*

She grabbed Elizabeth by the shoulders and turned her daughter roughly toward the car. To Nicholas she said, "You'd do well to forget about her, young man. We're not coming back to Siesta. You can thank Mister Nixon for that."

Nicholas's eyes went suddenly wide and his jaw grew slack. Now he knew why Elizabeth had been so uncertain when he'd asked her if they'd ever see each other again. Speechless, he watched as Elizabeth twisted out of her mother's grasp and turned to face him. "I'm so sorry," she said, mouthing the words so her mother wouldn't hear. Nicholas stared blankly back at her, not sure what to say.

Having noted the exchange, Edwin paused alongside the car. When Nicholas glanced his way, Edwin simply shrugged and gestured to the area around him.

"We never get a good spot in Siesta," he explained. "Maybe your father could have a talk with Mister Nixon on our behalf? He seems to have a good relationship with the man."

"Yeah, maybe . . ."

Edwin nodded and got into the car.

"Goodbye, Nicholas," Elizabeth said.

"Goodbye, Lizzie."

He felt like a statue, able only to watch the world go by—just like the day he'd seen Elizabeth in the *Duka*, except that now he was frozen with despair.

Dimly, he was aware of the car engine starting, of Elizabeth waving slowly from behind the glass window of the car, close enough that he should have been able to touch her, but somehow still out of reach. He forced his arm up—it felt like a ton of bricks—and waved to her. He kept it moving, slowly, painfully, even as the car drove off, towing the camper behind and leaving him in a spreading, brown cloud of dust.

Then, just as slowly, his arm fell back to his side. The crimson glow of the camper's tail lights came on, shining through the dust, as the car braked before joining the dirt road which ran through the park.

Nicholas watched as the car and camper retreated into the distance. It all seemed like a dream. All those precious, fleeting moments, where every morning had him leaping out of bed just to see that smile, that face, those eyes—because no dream could compare with the reality of being with her.

Despair settled in, rolling over him in waves, demolishing all his newfound dreams like sandcastles in their path. Swallowing past the lump in his throat, Nicholas turned to leave.

* * * * *

JONATHAN ELOFF

Not far away , sitting unnoticed in his lawn chair beneath the shade of a towering pine tree, Flippy watched Nicholas go. He'd seen and heard almost everything, but this time, he had no teasing remarks, only a heavy frown and a painful ache in his throat. Taking a long swig of his beer, he remembered a summer long ago when he, too, had loved . . . and lost.

Nicholas walked back to his family 's caravan finding his dad , Dr. Strauss , sitting enjoying a beer, under the shade of the trees, overlooking the river and mountains. Sitting next to him in an empty chair, he sighed, looking lost, saying "They're gone and her parents are not returning to Siesta, next year." Prompting his dad to reply "Cheer up son, all is not lost! You'll recall I was separated from mom for a year at the end of my medical training at the Royal college? Love always finds a way!" "Thanks dad, but this looks rather hopeless, Elizabeth and I aren't their priorities." Changing the subject, his dad asked "So what's her family heritage, do you know?" Nicholas replied "Lizzie mentioned that they're mostly English & Scottish, but her dad's mom has French blood. Her family fled religious persecution in the 1700's, to England, and only in 1820 arrived in South Africa, in Port Elizabeth" adding "oddly she goes to Huguenot high school in Wellington, which is hardly an English school, then again, I go to St. Andrews , and that's hardly a school for Afrikaners , like our family!" Then he asked Dr. Strauss "So what's our family heritage? Do you know?" Dr. Strauss replied " From what I know, our forefather came from Germany in the 1700 's - but I'm sure he found no Germans to marry, likely only Dutch and French women . My mom's a Cloete - so she's French ," adding "My brother mentioned the University of Pretoria's researching our family tree, since we are a founding family of the old republics. I'd say we're mostly German, with some French & Dutch - then again your mom's family's French & Swedish, so we're Europeans, but not British!" Nicholas was at least distracted "Please let me know what they find out dad, as I sense something unusual in Elizabeth 's and my meeting , and I just cannot place my finger on whatever it is?" adding "Elizabeth mentioned that as the eldest grand-daughter , her granny told her she'd inherit the antique silver ring that served as her engagement ring and that it has a very romantic story that goes along with it." Dr. Strauss took a sip of beer, remarking "Sounds like there's quite a story there! If you ever see Lizzie again, I'd dig a little deeper!" Nicholas sighed again, then replied "Dad, that's a big if, right now!" As once again his despair took over, prompting Dr. Strauss to remark "Don't ever give up on love, son! If I had, you'd not be here sitting talking to me!" Watching as the truth of what he'd said, sank into his son's thinking.

Chapter 17

It was Sunday afternoon in Sterkspruit. The sun was shining brightly, but to Nicholas the air was unseasonably cold. He was sitting at home in a comfortable armchair, the window beside him open, a cool breeze blowing in. He supposed that he'd become used to the temperature at sea level, but it wasn't just the air that was cold.

Nicholas had spent most of the day lying in bed, alternating between reading and sleeping. Summer holidays weren't over yet, but after saying goodbye to Elizabeth, it felt as though they were.

He sighed. It didn't seem fair. He'd known from the start that it was just a summer romance. After all, he already had a girlfriend at home, but those realities had seemed far away while he was with Elizabeth. Though he'd never admitted it, he'd been secretly hoping to see her in Siesta again the following Christmas. Now, thanks to Mr. Nixon and Elizabeth's parents, that wouldn't be happening.

Nicholas's thoughts turned to Denise and he wondered if he should call her. But how could he resume his relationship with Denise while he was still heartbroken over Elizabeth? Perhaps his arrangement with Denise to date other people while they were apart was not such a good one after all.

He sighed again, and then the phone gave a long trilling ring, interrupting his thoughts. Nicholas stared at it, listening for the subsequent two short rings which would signify his family's particular ringtone. Sure enough, two short rings followed, and he was forced to get out of his chair to answer the phone.

"Hello? Nicholas Strauss speaking," he said as he lifted the earpiece from the hook on the old, wall-mounted phone.

"Nicholas!" came a young, feminine voice.

“Denise?”

“Of course. Who did you think it was?”

He smiled. “No one. So, how was East London?”

“Great! But we’d better not tie up the line talking about it. How soon can you meet me at the clubhouse?”

Nicholas paused, not really sure if he could handle seeing Denise so soon after saying goodbye to Elizabeth.

“Nicholas? Are you still there?”

“Yeah . . . I was just thinking whether I have any other plans today.”

“Cancel them!”

He laughed. “I’ll meet you there in half an hour.”

“Great!”

“Bring your tennis racket, in case we decide to play.”

“Okay. See you soon!” she said, and hung up the phone.

* * *

Elizabeth was standing on the foot bridge overlooking the river, her eyes unfocused as she stared out over the bubbling water. She was barely conscious of the sun beating mercilessly down upon her.

She’d arrived home in Wellington yesterday, but she felt like she’d left a part of her in Siesta. Now it was Sunday, already two days since she’d said goodbye to Nicholas, and the pain was only getting worse.

Pieter had asked her to meet him here in the park, so here she was. Yet her mind was elsewhere, looping back through recent memories. There was nothing she could do. She knew that. Once her mother made up her mind, no one could change it.

Pieter was probably hoping to continue where they’d left off. But where exactly was that? She’d left Wellington wondering if Pieter was becoming more than a friend to her. Now she was wondering if she *wanted* Pieter to be more than a friend. As much as she liked him, she didn’t want to be with *anyone* right now, unless that someone happened to be Nicholas.

“*Goeie dag*,* Lizzie.” Pieter’s cheerful voice broke into her thoughts, and she turned toward the sound. He was approaching from the other side of the bridge.

* *Goeie dag*: good day

“Hello, Pieter.”

“How was Siesta?” he asked, stopping in front of her.

“Good,” she said, smiling to hide the lie. With no hope of ever seeing Nicholas again, she almost wished that they’d never met. Her holiday had been anything but *good*.

Something flickered in Pieter’s expression, and she wondered if he’d seen through her facade, but then he looked away, out over the river.

After a moment, he met her gaze. “I missed you.”

There was an awkward silence as Elizabeth considered how to respond. “I missed you, too,” she said, sparing his feelings from the truth. She’d been having too much fun with Nicholas to miss Pieter.

He smiled.

Drawing closer, he brought his hand up under her chin, gently tilting her head up toward his.

Elizabeth just stood there on the bridge, frozen, her eyes wide with the dawning realization that he was about to kiss her. Part of her was screaming: *it’s too soon!* but the other part of her was so depressed that she just wanted *someone*, anyone, to fill the void that Nicholas had left. Pieter’s lips drew nearer, and their eyes began to close . . .

At the last second, Elizabeth turned her head, and Pieter ended up kissing her cheek instead. He drew sharply back, a frown etching his brow. She smiled wanly up at him, hoping he would understand. But his eyes quickly left hers, as he turned to gaze out over the stream again.

Maybe she’s changed her mind? he wondered. He’d asked her out just before she’d left for Siesta, but maybe now she’d decided that she just wanted to be friends . . .

* * *

Nicholas and Denise were sitting beneath a large willow tree, on a giant slab of rock that jutted partway out into the river. Their shoes and socks were off, and their feet were dangling in the cool, slowly running water. It was their favorite spot, a place where they could go to get away from the chaperoning eyes of their parents and friends.

“So, how was Siesta?” Denise asked, contemplating the placid blue-green depths of the water. “How did things work out with Karen?”

“Not so well actually, and Siesta was . . . Siesta,” Nicholas

finished with a shrug. He was staring out over the water, his brow furrowed.

Something in his voice made her look up, her eyebrows raised in question. Nicholas noticed out of the corner of his eye, but didn't meet her gaze. She waited for a long moment, giving him a chance to elaborate. When he didn't, she prompted, "What do you mean by that?"

Now Nicholas did give her his attention. One corner of his mouth quirked up in an attempt to smile. "I met a girl in Siesta—Elizabeth. We had a great time together, but" Nicholas looked away again, not sure how to continue.

Denise frowned, giving him a few seconds. He kept silent. "But?" she asked.

"Her family isn't going back to Siesta next year."

Denise was silent, leaving only the sound of a gentle breeze rustling through the willow tree and the trickling of the river.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas," she said finally. "But—" She reached out and cupped his cheek, turning his head toward hers. "Summer romances are just that—for the summer. The summer's ending now, and you're with me. It's time to forget about Elizabeth." She said it softly, but the words still made Nicholas wince. He didn't want to forget Elizabeth, painful as it was to remember.

Nicholas gazed into Denise's adoring, green eyes. Something he found there picked him up and shook him. *What am I doing?* he thought. *I'm never going to see Elizabeth again.*

"I'm sorry. Thanks for being so understanding."

She smiled, and they drifted closer. She kissed him lightly on the lips, then said, "What else are friends for?"

Chapter 18

Edwin Smythe and Lawrence Stevens sat side-by-side at the bar counter, atop tall, dark wooden barstools, taking turns sipping their drinks. Cigarette smoke swirled through the room in the low, yellow light, but Edwin was indifferent to the smell.

It had been a long, hard day at work. When Lawrence had asked Edwin to join him afterward for a round of golf, Edwin had jumped at the opportunity, promptly informing his wife via telephone that he would be home late. Edwin thought that Constance had responded unusually well to the news. She had even told him to invite the Stevens family for dinner this week, sometime when it would be convenient for them. That was even more unusual. As far as he could remember, she'd never invited the Stevens family for anything, not even tea. It had always been he who had invited them over, and given his wife's opinion of Lawrence, that had not been very often. He smiled to himself. Constance really *was* trying to be supportive of the Stevens family.

Edwin took another gulp of his beer, reveling in the way it chilled him all the way down. Edwin noted with a frown that Lawrence wasn't drinking beer. He sent a worried glance to the glass of brandy in front of his friend. As long as he'd known Lawrence, beer had always been his drink of choice.

Edwin looked from the brandy to Lawrence. The man was his boss, but over time, he'd also become Edwin's best friend. Perhaps it was because they both enjoyed golf so much, or perhaps it was just a matter of convenience that because they worked together they should also unwind together. In the beginning, Edwin had made overtures of friendship out of gratitude. Lawrence had been the one to recognize his managerial potential. He'd started out as a leather chemist, but Lawrence had been the one to promote him from there to a

position in mid-level management, handling the sales division. Later, Lawrence had promoted him again, this time to his assistant. Now, their friendship had gone far beyond simple gratitude.

Edwin was certainly glad for the company. Sometimes going home could be more stressful than a day at work, and he was glad to know that he wasn't the only one who needed the break from reality. Lately though, Edwin had noticed a flat, purposeless languor in everything Lawrence did and said. They used to sit at the bar laughing and sharing stories, but since returning from Siesta, Edwin hadn't seen Lawrence crack a real smile. Now there was nothing but awkward silence as they sat together. Edwin supposed it was only natural—Lawrence was still grieving for the loss of his son. It hadn't even been a month since the funeral. But he also knew that it would be unhealthy for Lawrence to withdraw too much.

Edwin was just opening his mouth to extend his wife's invitation to dinner, when Lawrence finally spoke. "You wanna know shomeshing, Eddie?" Lawrence finished the glass of brandy in front of him in a quick gulp, then waved his hand unsteadily to catch the bartender's eye.

Edwin blinked in shock. He hadn't realized how drunk Lawrence was getting. He wasn't feeling particularly sober himself, but he wasn't slurring his words.

"What's that?" Edwin asked, his brow furrowing.

Lawrence continued blithely on, his voice taking on a child-like tone. "I think shomeshing needs to be done about these barshtools," he said, swiveling unsteadily on his chair. "They're sho high . . . and wobbly . . ." He leaned over to squint down at the floor.

Edwin noticed Lawrence teetering on the edge of his seat, about to fall off and hurriedly slammed his beer on the counter, splashing some of it over the rim of the mug. "Careful!" he said, and pushed Lawrence back.

"Whoa—" Lawrence turned a glazed look on Edwin. "Thanksh, Eddie," he said, patting his friend on the back, and then turning to the bar counter to grab the fresh drink that the bartender had placed in front of him. Edwin reached out to stop Lawrence from grabbing the drink, but Lawrence missed it anyway, knocking it over with an amber-colored splash.

"Awww . . . that'sh no good . . . Bartender!" Lawrence pointed

to his glass where it was lying on its side in a puddle of brandy. "Refill please," he hiccupped.

The bartender frowned.

Edwin held his hand up and shook his head when the bartender moved reluctantly forward with a bottle of brandy. "I think he's had enough. I'm going to take him home." The bartender nodded slowly, trading the bottle of brandy for a rag to mop up the mess.

"Hey!" Lawrence objected when he realized that Edwin had stopped him from getting his refill.

Edwin got out of his chair and left a twenty *rand* note on the bar counter. Not bothering to wait for the change, he grabbed Lawrence's arm to help him off the stool.

"Come on, Lawrence. It's time to go home."

Lawrence didn't budge. "Already? Well—" He cast a glance to the bartender, eyebrows hopefully raised. The bartender shook his head. Lawrence looked disappointed but turned back to Edwin. "I guess we can go, then."

When Edwin arrived at Lawrence's home, he helped his friend out of the car. Seeing that Lawrence was in no shape to walk, Edwin began struggling up the cobblestone walkway with his friend's arm draped heavily around his neck. As they got close to the doorstep, Lawrence suddenly noticed where they were.

"No! No, I don't want to go in!" he exclaimed, breaking out of Edwin's grasp with newfound strength, but his momentum carried him off his feet, and he landed heavily on the lawn beside the walkway.

"Come on, Lawrence. You'll be more comfortable inside," Edwin held a hand out to his friend.

Lawrence's only reply was to look down at the ground and slowly shake his head. His hands were restlessly clenching and unclenching, grabbing fistfuls of grass, tearing them up by the roots, and then releasing them to flutter back to the ground.

Edwin heard his friend sniffing, and wondered if it was the alcohol or something else. He didn't have long to wonder, because when Lawrence looked up, there were tears running down his cheeks, glistening in the distant amber glow of the streetlights.

"You don't know what it's like, Eddie," Lawrence said softly, sounding strangely sober. "To go home every day, to see one

extra seat standing empty at the dinner table, one extra bed with no one to fill it, and all the while this excruciating silence, the looks in their eyes, all of them looking to *me* to somehow *fix* things, and I—” his gaze dipped to the ground, his head slowly shaking. “I can’t.”

Edwin’s eyebrows drew together. “Well, I . . .”

Lawrence looked up again, his eyes suddenly hard. “He’s *dead*, Eddie. There’s nothing I can do to fix *that*.”

Coming from behind him, Edwin heard a *click*, and then the soft creaking of a wooden door. He turned to see Lawrence’s wife, Rebecca, standing not even 10 feet away, silhouetted at the top of the doorstep. Her arms were wrapped around herself in a hug, her eyes were red and shining, and she didn’t look entirely sober herself.

Lawrence got up now, briefly rested a hand on Edwin’s shoulder, and said, “Thanks for taking me home, Eddie.”

Edwin’s mouth moved, but he only managed to get the words out as the door was creaking shut behind his friend. “You’re welcome,” he finally managed, not sure if anyone had heard him. For a long moment he just stood there. More than anything, he wanted to run away, but he felt unable to move, as though he was stuck in one of those nightmares where he was inexplicably paralyzed.

Maybe Constance was right about trading homes with the Stevens family, Edwin thought. *It would be an act of mercy . . .*

* * *

Bzzt, Bzzt, Bzzt. Edwin fumbled sleepily with the alarm and then got out of bed. By the time he got out of the shower, he noticed that his wife was awake, sitting up in bed, reading a magazine. She looked up.

“Good morning, Edwin.”

“Good morning, dear.”

“Don’t forget to invite Lawrence and his family for dinner today.”

“I won’t forget.”

“The only reason I mention it is because you forgot to invite him yesterday.”

Edwin sighed. “I told you last night, dear, he was far too drunk to have remembered, even if I *had* invited him.”

“That shouldn’t have stopped you from inviting him before he got drunk.”

He nodded agreeably, knowing that pleading his innocence any further wasn't going to help.

Later that morning, as Edwin was sitting down to breakfast, he watched Elizabeth and Hattie, still bleary-eyed with sleep, come shuffling into the kitchen. They sat down at the table. Constance was behind them, at the kitchen counter. Having already put breakfast on the table, she was now preparing lunches for her family.

Edwin took a sip of his coffee. "Good morning, girls."

"Good morning, Dad," they chorused back.

He winced. "Good morning" was almost all he ever heard from his daughters during the week. They had already been in bed by the time he'd arrived home last night. They usually were, since their bedtime was at nine o'clock. He couldn't help feeling guilty about that. Yet, as his wife had pointed out at Christmas, they'd agreed before they'd had children that if they had girls *she* would raise them. So why was he needed?

He winced again, but the expression was masked as he took a sip from his coffee cup. Lowering the cup to the table, he asked, "How was your first day back at school?" That had been yesterday.

"It was okay." Elizabeth smiled at him.

"Just okay?" Edwin pressed.

"Yeah," Hattie agreed, and Elizabeth nodded, directing her attention to her food.

The rest of breakfast was eaten in silence. Did Elizabeth have a new boyfriend? Was she having trouble in school? The questions were on the tip of Edwin's tongue, but he felt reticent to ask, as though he were a stranger who had no right to pry with personal questions.

* * *

Elizabeth was sitting with her best friend, Dilly, at a table in the school cafeteria, frowning down into her brown paper lunch bag.

"So?" Dilly prompted.

Elizabeth looked up from her lunch. "So, what?"

"So, *Nicholas*. All you told me was his name. I want details!"

Elizabeth sighed, not really wanting to elaborate. She was having enough trouble forgetting about him without Dilly reminding her.

"There isn't much to tell," she said.

“*Ek glo jou nie,*” Dilly said. “You can’t fool me, Lizzie. I’ve seen the way you’ve been acting lately.”

Elizabeth grimaced. “It doesn’t matter. We’re not going back to Siesta, and he lives clear across the country.”

Dilly’s smile faded. “Oh. Well, in that case, you’d probably better forget about him.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows, and gave Dilly a sardonic look. “That’s exactly what I’ve been *trying* to do, but it’s easier said than done.”

“Sorry,” Dilly said. “I didn’t know.”

Silence prevailed until Dilly thought of a different topic.

“You know, Lizzie . . . you might not be interested right now, but Jacobus’s brother, Pieter, is really sweet on you.”

“I know,” Elizabeth said.

“You know?” Dilly asked. “How?”

Elizabeth’s face flushed. “Well, on Sunday he kind of . . . ummm . . .”

“Kissed you?” Dilly asked, her mouth dropping open. “Lizzie, you rat! I thought you just said you were heartbroken!”

Elizabeth looked down at her food: a now-half-eaten, ham sandwich on plain, butterless white bread. “Well, I am, but . . . it was just a kiss on the cheek. I turned away at the last second. And besides, *he* kissed *me*.”

Dilly’s mouth closed into a grin. “But you could have stopped him.”

“I could have.”

“So, why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know.” Elizabeth looked up from her food, unable to hide a burgeoning smile, but feeling like a traitor to Nicholas for having it. “I guess a part of me wanted him to kiss me.”

“Because he’s just *such* a hunky guy . . .”

“He *is*, isn’t he?”

“And a university student, too, with his own car.” Dilly giggled. “You’ll be the envy of every girl in school!”

“Yeah . . .” Elizabeth trailed off, taking another bite out of her sandwich as she thought of someone whom she thought to be truly enviable—

Nicholas’s girlfriend, Denise.

* *Ek glo jou nie*: I don’t believe you

Chapter 19

It was now Saturday morning and the end of Nicholas's first half week of school. Even though it was a Saturday, he was back in class. Instead of a teacher directing the class, however, there was a prefect, and instead of textbooks, the students had just a pen, some paper, and a few envelopes.

Since most parents wanted to hear from their children at least once a week, and since not all children were that conscientious, Saint Andrew's prescribed an hour of compulsory letter writing on Saturday mornings.

So it was that Nicholas found himself sitting in class on a Saturday, tapping his pen on his desk, wondering what he should write. He'd already finished his letter to his parents, but now he was planning to write to someone else . . .

"*You won't forget to write me, will you?*" Elizabeth's words echoed through his mind.

"*I won't forget,*" he'd said.

But it had taken him a whole week to finally consider it, and then only because he was stuck in class for an hour with nothing else to do. Somehow he couldn't get excited about writing to a girl that he was never going to see again. And right now, writing to her was like tearing the band-aid off of a fresh wound—it only served to remind him that it was there.

But a promise is a promise. And with that, he began writing.

* * *

Constance was rushing around the house, dusting, sweeping, and rearranging things. Normally she kept a clean house, but now she was cleaning obsessively. Edwin knew the reason—they had company coming—but he still didn't understand it. She was going to an unusual amount of trouble.

"Edwin," Constance began, as she dusted the coffee table in front of the couch where he was sitting. "There's a hosepipe

lying on the lawn outside, would you go put it away please?"

Edwin frowned. "You know, dear, you really don't need to go to all this trouble for the Stevens family. They probably won't even notice . . ." he trailed off when he saw the sour look she was giving him. He sighed and got up from the couch.

When he got back, he was immediately given another errand: to fetch the fancy china and the real silverware from the garage. Something told him that he ought to understand why Constance was making such a big deal over the Stevens family coming for dinner, but like a prize apple, hanging on a branch just out of reach, he couldn't for the life of him pluck the reason from his thoughts.

* * *

The doorbell rang.

"That'll be them, Edwin," Constance called from the kitchen.

Edwin went to the door and opened it to reveal Lawrence, his wife, Rebecca, and their two daughters, Julia and Lydia.

Edwin smiled. "Good afternoon." He stood aside to usher them in.

"Hello, Eddie," Lawrence said, motioning for his wife and children to go in first.

Edwin tried to make eye contact with Rebecca as she came through the door. "It's good to see you, Rebecca," he ventured, but she merely nodded.

Edwin frowned inwardly, but kept his smile in place.

"Let me guess," Edwin said, looking down at Lawrence's daughters as they came in. "You must be Lydia," he said, speaking to the shorter and smaller of the two.

"Yup," she replied, smiling broadly, and nodding, her long, golden-brown curls bobbing with the movement.

"And you must be Julia."

Like her mother, Julia simply nodded. Edwin continued smiling as though he hadn't noticed. Turning to Lawrence and his wife, he asked, "Would you like to join me in the living room for a drink and some appetizers while we wait for dinner?"

"Sounds like a fine idea to me," Lawrence said, and Edwin led the way. As they walked, Lawrence caught a whiff of some heavenly smells drifting out of the kitchen. "Smells good."

"The way my wife's been cooking today, it ought to be."

On their way to the living room, they met Hattie and

Elizabeth as they were coming down the stairs. Edwin stopped to make introductions.

"You remember my daughters, Elizabeth and Hattie," Edwin said, gesturing to each of them as they reached the bottom of the stairs. Lawrence said that he did and stepped forward to shake hands. Once introductions were over, they all continued on to the living room. Edwin motioned the Stevens family over to the long sofa in front of the coffee table and then went behind the bar counter, which stood in one corner of the room. Elizabeth and Hattie took a seat on the smaller sofa, leaving the chair for their father.

"Now then, what will you two be drinking?" Edwin asked from the bar counter, directing his question to Lawrence and Rebecca.

"A glass of brandy for me, Eddie," Lawrence said.

"Vodka martini, please," Rebecca added.

Edwin raised his eyebrows and whistled softly. "Stiff drinks," he commented, bending down behind the counter. He straightened up with two bottles and began fixing the drinks. He poured a glass of the golden-brown brandy for himself to keep up with Lawrence.

"Elizabeth," Edwin began, looking up from pouring the brandy. "Would you find out from Lydia and Julia what they would like to drink?"

Elizabeth stood up from the couch and then got down on her haunches in front of the two girls. "What would you like to drink, Lydia?"

"Ummm . . ." Lydia appeared to think about it for a moment. "What do you have, pwease?"

Elizabeth smiled at Lydia's lisp. "We have orange juice, grape juice—"

"That one," Lydia interrupted.

"Orange juice?"

Lydia shook her head. "Gwape juice."

"Okay," Elizabeth said. She turned to Julia.

"I'll have the same," Julia said before Elizabeth could ask.

Elizabeth nodded and went to fetch the drinks. She already knew what her sister wanted. Hattie would be happy to drink *anything* so long as it wasn't water. Elizabeth couldn't agree more. They were rarely allowed fruit juice, and soda was almost unheard-of.

Elizabeth returned with a tray of drinks, her mother coming behind her with a plate of appetizers. She noted that her father had finished pouring drinks and was now seated in the armchair opposite the Stevens family.

"Sorry I couldn't say hello when you arrived," Constance said, setting the plate of appetizers on the coffee table. "I've been terribly busy preparing supper."

Lawrence waved a hand. "Don't worry about it, Connie."

Constance froze for a half a second, then abruptly busied herself with handing out napkins and coasters. Edwin grimaced around a sip of his brandy. His wife wouldn't even let *him* refer to her as "Connie."

Lawrence caught Edwin's look and remembered a conversation they'd once had. "Oh, sorry, I forgot that you don't like to be called Connie."

"What ever made you think that?" Constance asked.

Lawrence looked stumped. He glanced to Edwin for support, but found Edwin looking equally baffled.

"Well . . . I seem to recall Edwin saying something about it once."

"I think what he meant to say is that I only allow my *friends* to call me Connie," Constance replied, smiling thinly at Lawrence. "Please, help yourselves," she said, and gestured to the appetizers. With that, she turned around and headed back to the kitchen.

"Well," Lawrence began, once Constance was back in the kitchen, "it looks like you don't know your wife quite as well as you thought, Eddie."

"Looks like," Edwin agreed, nodding absently and taking another sip of his brandy.

When dinner was ready, Constance directed them to the dining room. As Lawrence took his seat, he balked at the china and silverware. "Wow, Eddie, you sure rolled out the red carpet for this one. Is this *real* silver?" he asked, holding up his knife.

Edwin nodded and grabbed a bottle of wine from the table. "Red or white?" he asked, addressing Lawrence.

"Red, please," Lawrence replied. Edwin took a corkscrew from the table and uncorked the bottle. Lawrence held his glass out to Edwin.

"Rebecca?" Edwin asked, turning to her now.

"I'll have white," she replied.

Edwin repeated the process with the other bottle of wine. Then, as Edwin was pouring a glass of red wine for himself and his wife, Constance brought out the first course—soup—and set a bowl in front of Lawrence and Rebecca. Constance motioned for Elizabeth to help her with bringing out the rest.

Edwin took his seat, and those at the table busied themselves by tucking napkins into their shirt collars, or spreading them across their laps. They waited in silence until Constance and Elizabeth returned with the rest of the soup. Once everyone was seated, Edwin said grace.

When grace was over, Lawrence said, “This looks absolutely delicious, Connie.” Then, with exaggerated care, he took his soup spoon from the table, making sure he gave Constance enough time to start eating first.

Elizabeth heard Lydia begin slurping her soup and stifled a laugh. The slurping lasted as long as the child’s appetite for the soup, and Elizabeth saw her mother suppress a grimace each time she heard it. Table manners, particularly for formal dinner occasions such as this one, were strictly enforced in her family. If it had been either her or Hattie . . . Elizabeth doubted her mother would have endured the breach of etiquette so gracefully. In fact, despite Lydia being someone else’s child, Elizabeth found it strange that her mother hadn’t found a way to say something about it.

After the soup, the main course swiftly followed. Elizabeth had already known what her mother had made, but she still marveled at it. Roasted rack of lamb, marinated in a lemon, honey, and garlic sauce. The dish was topped with finely-chopped pecans and accompanied by sweet potatoes, salad, and rice. She couldn’t remember the last time her mother had cooked such a spectacular meal—she hadn’t even known her mother was capable of it.

Lawrence said, “Wow, Connie. This looks like a feast fit for a king . . .” he trailed off as he recognized the dish. “Is that rack of *lamb*?”

Constance smiled as she placed the rack of lamb in the middle of the table. “Yes, it is. I hope you enjoy it.”

“Well, no doubt there! Rack of lamb is my favorite meal. I can’t even remember the last time I had it.”

Rebecca looked away from the food, taking up her wine glass and half emptying it in a long gulp.

“What’s wack of wamb?” Lydia asked.

“You remember Little Bo Peep?” Julia whispered. “That’s one of her baby sheep,” Julia said, pointing to the steaming platter in the center of the table.

Lydia’s eyes went wide, and she looked to her father. “That’s not twue, is it, Daddy?”

Lawrence gave his older daughter a hard look. “Julia, don’t bother your sister.”

Julia’s expression grew sullen and she looked away.

Upon finishing his second helping, Lawrence said, “Connie, that was positively the best meal I’ve had since . . . well, suffice to say, it’s been a very long time.”

Constance just smiled and began collecting plates from the table. Elizabeth got up to help her mother. They disappeared into the kitchen and Constance returned with dessert in one hand and a pot of tea in the other.

When Constance set the dessert on the table and began slicing it, Lawrence’s eyes lit up. “Apple crumble!” he exclaimed, and then he saw Elizabeth returning from the kitchen, carrying a bucket of ice cream. “À la mode!” Lawrence shot Edwin a suspicious look. “I don’t suppose you had anything to do with this, Eddie?”

Edwin smiled and shrugged. “I may have let something slip about your preferences.”

“You sure do know how to treat your guests, Connie.” Lawrence watched eagerly as Constance sliced the dessert. Rebecca was watching, too, but she was frowning and drinking greedily from her glass of wine.

After dessert, everyone made their way to the living room again. This time, since Constance was joining them, Hattie was forced to find an extra chair for herself.

Elizabeth noticed that Lydia’s eyes were blinking slowly and heavily as she sat leaning against her mother on the living room couch. Sitting beside her sister, Julia also appeared tired, but not as noticeably.

“So,” Constance began, “how have you been doing at work, Lawrence?”

“Well, it’s stressful, but I’m getting by.”

Constance nodded. “Of course, I wouldn’t know, but Edwin sometimes tells me about the sorts of things he has to deal with at work, and I can only imagine your job must be even

more difficult.”

Lawrence shrugged. “If it weren’t for Edwin helping me . . .” he trailed off, casting an appreciative glance to his friend.

Rebecca was silent, much as she’d been all night, her faculties barely present for the conversation. She’d poured herself another glass of wine before leaving the dinner table, and had brought it with her to the living room. Constance wondered how many glasses Rebecca had had and lost count at four. She’d been the only one drinking white wine, and the last time Constance had looked, the bottle had been nearly empty.

“You know, Lawrence,” Constance began, “Edwin and I have been thinking that there might be something we could do to help your family.”

Lawrence swallowed visibly, but cocked his head to one side and raised his eyebrows.

“It’s occurred to us that you might like to distance yourselves from your . . . painful memories. One way of doing that would be for you to move out of your house.”

Edwin shot his wife a look, his face registering surprise. He’d forgotten all about her plan to trade homes with the Stevens family, and now, suddenly, the puzzle pieces were clicking into place. It all made sense now: the good china, the real silverware, the furious cleaning . . . and why she had taken the trouble to cook all of Lawrence’s favorite dishes.

Lawrence began nodding slowly, but soon he was shaking his head. “I’ll admit, it’s occurred to me, but—” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “—there’s no way we could handle moving right now. And besides, where would we go? There isn’t a nicer house in all of Wellington than ours, and there aren’t many people here who could afford to buy it.”

Constance smiled thinly. “Actually, that’s where Edwin and I thought we might be able to help.”

Rebecca, who until now had been paying most of her attention to the dwindling supply of wine in her glass, now gave her full attention to Constance, and her eyes narrowed fractionally. Elizabeth and Hattie were also looking at their mother, confusion registering on their faces.

“What if we traded homes with you?” Constance said. Shock travelled around the room, making itself known with the ensuing silence. “Our home has a bigger pool, more levels, it’s

about the same size as yours, and most importantly—” She paused, affecting a sympathetic tone. “—there won’t be anything here to remind you of Benjamin.”

More silence.

And then Rebecca gave a soft snort and returned her attention to her wine. Some of what Constance had said was true: the Smythe family did have a bigger pool, but their grounds were by far inferior, and their home—both inside and out—was equally so. Moreover, to say that the two houses were a similar size was an enormous stretch of the imagination. Rebecca drained her glass and then fixed Constance with a narrow-eyed glare. Constance pretended not to notice, devoting her full attention to Lawrence, waiting for *his* reaction. She already knew whose decision would carry the most weight.

Lawrence was not nearly as opposed to the suggestion as his wife. Once he had recovered from his initial shock, possibilities began to whirl through his mind.

Elizabeth and Hattie were still staring at their mother, too stunned to move. Lydia had completely missed the conversation, having fallen asleep, but Julia’s brow was pinched in a thoughtful frown.

“Of course, please do take some time to consider the offer before committing to it one way or the other,” Constance said.

Lawrence was nodding slowly, his eyes unfocused. “We’ll give the matter some serious thought. But—” He paused, looking around him, taking in the details of the living room as if they were representative of the house. He met Constance’s unblinking, blue eyes. “I feel certain that we’ll be more than happy to accept your offer.”

Edwin almost choked on his own saliva. He cleared his throat noisily, and Constance scowled briefly in his direction.

Rebecca was also scowling at her husband. After a moment, she turned to face Constance, who was all but smiling. “I think what my husband means to say is that we’ll need to *talk* about it.”

“Of course,” Constance replied.

* * *

“I feel *certain* that we’d be happy to accept,” Rebecca parroted Lawrence’s words back to him. “What were you thinking? Were you even planning to ask me what I thought?”

Lawrence was frowning at his wife. Almost as soon as they’d

arrived home, she'd flown into him. Now they were in their bedroom, his wife pacing unsteadily about the room. Lawrence just stood by the bed, watching her. *She's drunk*, he thought.

"*Becky*," Lawrence said, his voice coming out more harshly than he'd intended. She stopped pacing and turned a scathing look on him. "Settle down," he finished, his voice softer now. "You'll wake the kids."

She began shaking her head slowly and continued pacing. He wondered if those were tears he saw glinting in her eyes. And if so, were they from anger or sadness?

"No, Lawrence, I *won't* settle down," she said, but lowered her voice anyway.

"What would you rather have us do? If we put our home up for sale, who will buy it? Wellington is a small town, and no one here has the money to buy our home. If we have to go through an estate agent we might never get rid of this place."

Rebecca stopped pacing. "Get *rid* of this place? This place is our *home!* Why should we want to get rid of it?"

His eyes grew suddenly damp. "I just thought . . ." he swallowed. "That maybe, if we could get away, go someplace else . . . then . . ."

Rebecca was incredulous. "What? You think that will somehow *change* things? You can't run away from *yourself*, Lawrence. This *place*," Rebecca gestured to the walls around her, "has nothing to do with what happened."

He scowled. "No, but it sure does a good job of reminding me."

She met his scowl and tapped her head. "Your *memories* are what remind you, not these walls."

He shook his head. "No, you're wrong, Becky. And I'm not going to let you hold on to death in a dying home. We're moving and that's that."

Rebecca was silent for a long moment, studying the thick, white carpet of their bedroom. Her sniffing periodically broke the silence and Lawrence was suddenly tempted to cover the distance between them and give her a fierce hug—to say he was sorry, and to tell her that everything was going to be all right. Just as he was taking a lurching step forward, she broke the silence and stopped him cold with what she said next. "You don't want to be reminded of him . . ." Looking up from the carpet, she met his gaze, tears streaming down her face. "But I

don't ever want to forget."

He looked away, unable to stand it any longer. "I'm going for a walk," he said, heading for the bedroom door.

She stared after him, unable to move or speak, needing desperately for him to understand, but instead seeing him disappear through the door, leaving her all alone.

* * *

"Can you believe her?" Constance asked of Edwin. Hands planted on her hips, she was facing him from the entrance of the master bathroom. "She all but rejected the proposal. Out of hand! She might as well have spat in my face."

Edwin had affected a sympathetic frown and nodded gravely. Inwardly, however, he was smiling. He had predicted this. But after Lawrence's reluctance to go home on Tuesday night, he had also known that Constance would receive strong support from his friend. Now, Edwin frowned inwardly, too, wondering who would ultimately get their way.

"Are you even listening to me?" Constance demanded.

"Of course I am, dear," Edwin replied. He almost sighed. "Perhaps you simply read her wrong. After all, it is a big decision. She was probably just shocked by the proposal."

Constance shook her head, scowling. "No, that's not it. I caught the look she was giving me. I heard the tone of voice she used. She was being *deliberately* difficult."

Edwin felt suddenly tired of standing in front of his wife, of being the only breakwater in this storm. He went to the armchair in one corner of their bedroom and took a seat. Feeling starved of air, he loosened his tie.

"And can you believe the way she didn't even notice her daughter slurping her soup?" Constance continued, her eyes still finding Edwin in his chair. "Probably because she was too *drunk* to care. Did you see the way she was drinking tonight? It was disgraceful." Constance crossed her arms over her chest as she waited for Edwin's reply.

"Lawrence didn't stop Lydia from slurping her soup, either," he pointed out, choosing just one part of his wife's tirade, hoping to deflect her attention from Rebecca.

"He shouldn't have to. That sort of thing is a mother's responsibility."

Edwin's frown deepened. "And just what is the father's responsibility, then?"

Constance narrowed her eyes, sensing more than idle curiosity behind his question. “To work, to pay the bills, to provide for his family, and to have the *sense* to hold his tongue in everything else.”

“In other words—to work,” Edwin replied.

“From each according to his ability,” Constance said.

Edwin raised his eyebrows, recognizing the words as belonging to Karl Marx and wondering briefly if his wife knew whom she was quoting. He also noted how she conveniently forgot the other half of the quotation—*to each according to his needs*.

He watched his wife start pacing, and heard her start ranting again. This time he just tuned her out, falling back on absent nods, and noncommittal replies. There was no reasoning with her when she was in one of these moods. He should have known better than to try.

Chapter 20

Now Sunday morning, Edwin was sitting in church with his wife and kids, paying a modicum of attention to the sermon. They were across the aisle from the Stevens family, and Edwin found himself periodically glancing their way. As he did so now, he wondered what had been said in private between Lawrence and Rebecca the night before, and allowed himself to hope that their response to Constance's proposal hadn't been favorable.

Edwin tuned back into the sermon.

“. . . the Devil can take many forms. In Genesis we see that he takes the form of a snake, tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, and in Matthew sixteen, twenty-three, Jesus even saw the Devil in Saint Peter.” The reverend looked down at his lectern to read the verse from his Bible. “But he turned, and said unto Peter, ‘Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.’”

The reverend looked up, his eyes scanning the congregation. “So it is that we must always be on our guard, never knowing when, or in whose form, the Devil might appear.”

Edwin tuned out again.

Lawrence Stevens, however, found himself paying an unusual amount of attention to the sermon, though he wasn't sure why. Normally, it was hard enough just to stay awake in church, let alone actually listen. He considered the cup of coffee he'd had a few hours ago and decided that it had probably been stronger than usual.

“Perhaps you will never encounter the Devil working through another person. Perhaps for you, it's not a matter of who, but what. Anger, pride, jealousy, and despair; alcohol, cigarettes, and money—these are all forms that the Devil could be taking

in your life right now.”

Lawrence cringed, wanting suddenly to be somewhere else. The reverend had neatly hit upon many of the vices in his own life. *Anger . . . alcohol . . . despair*. The reverend’s words repeated inside his head, and somehow he only remembered the ones that applied to him. He felt a pang in his chest, and his eyes grew hot, but he clamped down on the feelings before they overcame his defenses. He endured the rest of the sermon with an anxious wish for it to end as soon as possible.

* * *

“Hey, Beaver!” On his way out of the chapel, Nicholas stopped and turned to look. He saw Jamie Beckett shuffling toward him with great speed and purpose, several times almost tripping over his ankle-length black cassock. Nicholas had to smile. After getting confirmed near the end of last year, Jamie had developed a newfound sense of piety and had become a sacristan. His brothers had matched his zeal by becoming servers. Nicholas could never quite get used to the idea. The Beckett brothers—sacristans and servers! It was ludicrous. If there was a den of iniquity in the school, then they were the secret masters of it.

Jamie drew to within arm’s length, then stopped and spent a moment panting. “Father Wilson . . . would like to speak with you.”

Nicholas frowned. “Oh? What about?”

Jamie shook his head. “He didn’t say.”

Someone bumped shoulders with Nicholas. He turned to look, realized that he was blocking the aisle, and stepped to one side. “Well . . .” Nicholas’s frown deepened. He considered refusal, but knew that would just get him into trouble. Instead, he sighed and scanned the pulpit for any sign of the Father. Nicholas spotted him pottering around behind the altar. “I guess I better go see what he wants.”

Jamie Beckett watched Nicholas go, and the beginnings of a smile touched his lips. Truthfully, he knew exactly what the reverend father wanted. After all, he’d instigated it. But if he’d told Nicholas that Father Wilson wanted to talk him into getting confirmed, Nicholas would have refused, and Jamie needed the reverend out of the way.

Watching carefully, Jamie waited until he saw Nicholas engage the reverend in conversation, then waited still longer

until he saw them leave the sanctuary together. The reverend would want to talk to Nicholas in his office. As soon as they were gone, Jamie went to find his brothers. Upon finding them, the trio scurried up past the pulpit and made a pretense of going about their duties—collecting basins, cruets, bowls, and chalices for cleansing.

Once the chapel was empty, Billie Beckett turned to Jamie. “You have the keys to the vestry?”

Jamie put a hand to his chest. “What kind of sacristan would I be if I didn’t?”

“Well, hurry up and open it before someone comes.”

Jamie was already fumbling with the keys as he crossed the sanctuary to the vestry door. A quick turn of the key in the lock and the vestry door swung wide. The vestry was a small room. A plain wooden desk stood to one side, with books scattered across it, and arrayed on wooden shelves along the back wall, were all the sacred vessels and vestments . . . including the sacramental wine.

“Jackpot!” Jamie said.

* * *

Nicholas sat in front of the reverend’s desk, looking and feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

The reverend’s face was grim. “You realize that you are one of only three boys in Twells house who refused to get confirmed last year?”

Nicholas said nothing.

“The other two are Jews, and I know you aren’t. So what’s the matter? Don’t you believe in God?”

Nicholas felt a sigh forming in his chest. Somehow, he managed to hold it in. “Of course, I do. I told you that last year, Father.”

The reverend’s expression softened. “Then why don’t you want to get confirmed?”

Now Nicholas did sigh. “Look—Father—if all there is to it is taking some classes and a test, how can that possibly mean anything? Last year, I watched all my friends get confirmed and saw absolutely no change in their lives. There has to be more to it. Anyone can study a book and take a test. They don’t have to believe what they’re studying, and they certainly don’t have to apply it to their lives.”

The reverend was shaking his head. “Knowing the truth is

the first step toward applying it. How can you apply what you've never known? Look at your friends, Jamie, Billie, and Harry—even they got confirmed, and now they're sacristans and servers. How can you say there's no change? That was certainly a change in their lives. I could give you many more such examples."

Nicholas shrugged. "I'm sorry, but I'm just not convinced."

The reverend frowned, and his expression turned grim again. "I think you'd better refresh your memory as to what it is exactly that you're rejecting." Reverend Wilson opened a drawer in his desk and handed something to Nicholas. It was a pamphlet, which explained what confirmation was, why it was important, and how he could get confirmed. Nicholas tentatively accepted the pamphlet. His eyes flicked to the reverend's, wondering what was expected of him. The reverend nodded and said, "Go on, read it."

What, now? Nicholas wondered.

"I'll just sit here quietly," the reverend went on. "I want to hear what you have to say after that."

Nicholas grimaced, and he began paging through the pamphlet. Even skimming the familiar text, it took him five minutes to finish reading.

Nicholas shook his head and handed the pamphlet back.

The reverend's frown deepened. "You realize this means you can't take part in communion."

Nicholas offered a thin smile. "I'll take my chances."

"You can't take chances with your soul, Nicholas. You've only got one."

Nicholas rose from his chair and acknowledged that with a nod. "I'll keep that in mind."

The reverend watched Nicholas go, his face lined with worry. He'd known Nicholas since he was eight years old, and he couldn't help feeling partly responsible for the boy's indifference to his faith. Through the years, he'd learned the whole story behind Nicholas's views about God and religion.

With the birth of his sister, he'd been sent to Saint Andrew's along with his brother, Philip, but he'd been four years younger than his brother at the time—only eight years old. He'd spent every night at boarding school praying that God would take him home, at least until he was his brother's age. But years passed with no result, and eventually he had given up on that

particular prayer.

At that point he'd switched to praying that something would happen to close the bar in the Hilltop Hotel, so that the men in his town would stop drinking and fighting with their wives when they came home late almost every night. A few more years had passed, with again, no result. From then on, he'd lost his faith in prayer, having decided that God was either too busy or didn't care enough to answer. Now, his refusal to get confirmed was just an extension of that bitterness.

Reverend Wilson sighed. *Another one lost.*

* * *

Nicholas descended the steps of the chapel, silently irritated by his conversation with the reverend. He'd made his reasons for not going through confirmation abundantly clear last year; did the reverend think he'd had a sudden change of heart?

As Nicholas reached the bottom of the steps, a curious sight drew his attention. Some 50 feet distant, all three Beckett brothers were sprawled out on the grass beneath the shade of a tall oak tree. On an impulse, Nicholas went over to them.

"Oh, heey, Beeever," Jamie slurred when he saw Nicholas looming over him.

Nicholas frowned. There was a giddy little smile on Jamie's face. Nicholas's gaze flicked to Billie and Harry. Billie appeared to be asleep, and Harry's eyelids were opening and closing with lazy regularity.

"What's wrong with you guys?"

"Wrong?" Jamie giggled. "Nothing's wrong with *us*. Maaybee there's something wr—" Jamie hiccuped. "—ong with yooo."

Slurred speech, hiccups—Nicholas's eyes flicked to Billie's recumbent form—sleepiness . . . it all pointed to a strange conclusion. But that wasn't possible, was it? Nicholas's eyes leapt with sudden shock and comprehension back to Jamie's blissfully smiling face. "You're drunk."

Jamie's grin widened and he giggled again. "Now, now, let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

Nicholas was incredulous. "How?"

"Shhh . . . it's a secret."

Nicholas waited. "Well, are you going to tell me?"

Jamie looked infinitely pleased with himself as he shook his head and said, "Nope."

Harry managed: "Don' tell fm, Shorty."

Billie began snoring.

Nicholas's eyes narrowed. Where could they possibly have found alcohol? A sudden breeze came up and he caught a whiff of a familiar smell. It was a sweet, tangy, fruity smell that reminded him of . . .

Communion.

Sacristans. Servers. The pieces fell into place and suddenly Nicholas knew exactly how they'd become drunk. He snorted, realizing what was really behind his friends' apparent piety.

"Well," Nicholas began, "if you won't tell me, how about I start jumping to conclusions?" He began ticking points off on his fingers. "You, Shorty Beckett, the sacristan, possess the keys for the vestry and the sacramental wine locked within, so you wait until no one is watching, unlock the vestry door, pour a drink for Harry, Billie, and yourself, and then top up the flask with water. Sound familiar?"

"Conjec—" Jamie hiccupped. "—ture."

"Besides, the law allows for the serving of beer or wine to minors on festive occasions or for Holy sacraments—as long as they're under the watchful supervision of someone old enough to partake, and your younger brother is not quite 16 yet!" Nicholas said triumphantly, quite sure he'd cornered Shorty on this point.

"Well I'm 16, and Billie's 17!" Shorty replied cheekily.

"And you call that watchful supervision?" Nicholas snickered derisively, pointing to Billie lying snoring under the tree.

"Well . . . *hic* . . . he was watch—*hic*—ful earlier on," Shorty shrugged. "And I'm still awake and—*hic*—watchful . . ." Shorty continued.

"How about the fact that you can't put a sentence together without a hiccup? Come on, Shorty, admit it—it doesn't take a genius to put those clues together."

Jamie shrugged and snickered. "The hard part was finding a way to distract Father Wilson."

Nicholas's eyes lit with anger as he realized what Jamie meant. "So *you're* responsible for that little talk I just had with the reverend?"

"Yeah, thanks, Beaver. I owe you one."

Nicholas's hands balled into fists. Disgusted, he turned on his heel and left. Jamie called out behind him, something about not telling the reverend. Nicholas wasn't listening, but

he wasn't headed back to the chapel. *Let Shorty have his fun; that just proves I was right. Cling to your rituals if that gives you comfort, Reverend, but as for myself, I'm not buying it.*

* * *

Pieter was driving Elizabeth up through the Limiet Mountains, barely ten kilometers from Wellington, to an area known as Bain's Kloof Pass. Elizabeth watched through the passenger's side window, seeing the wildflowers rushing past in bursts of yellow and white, dotting the craggy landscape in a kaleidoscope of color. Steep cliffs rose up to their left and down to their right. Just now they drove beneath a large, jutting overhang of rock that reached ponderously out over the road, almost spanning both lanes, and threatening—as it had since the pass had been built in 1853—to fall on the road and anyone who traveled it.

Along the cliff side of the mountain, giant slabs of stone stood on end, roughly shaped, but lining the road as a barrier to prevent wayward cars from tumbling down the cliff.

Elizabeth glanced over at Pieter, watching the hard set of his jaw, his eyes slightly narrowed as they took in every detail of the road. He wasn't taking their safety for granted on the dangerous mountain road.

They rounded a corner, and Elizabeth felt the heat on her arm as the sun found a new angle by which to enter the car. She smiled and looked back out the window. Their destination was the Witte River, a beautiful mountain stream with thundering waterfalls and deep, leafy green pools that were great for swimming—but very cold, Elizabeth remembered with a sudden shiver. They'd packed a picnic for the trip, and were wearing their swimsuits underneath their clothes.

It was another ten minutes before they reached the Witte River, and a few more before Pieter found a parking spot.

"Well, here we are," Pieter said, turning off the engine and getting out. He opened the back door, retrieving the picnic basket and their towels. He slung the towels over his shoulder. Elizabeth joined him and relieved him of her towel.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Ja, let's go," Pieter replied. He closed the car door and turned to head for a rough-hewn footpath, which wound down into a ravine. Elizabeth heard a waterfall thundering in the background and guessed that that was where the path led. As

Pieter walked beside Elizabeth, his hand unfortunately tied up with carrying the picnic basket, he found himself wishing that she'd chosen to walk on the other side of him, so he could hold her hand.

He settled for stealing glances at her instead. He noticed her short, loose-fitting, white skirt. It was meant to cover the blue bikini underneath, but there was a pale blue shadow showing through. He wondered if Elizabeth had noticed that when she'd chosen the outfit, or if it was a detail that only the sunlight could reveal. His eyes traveled down, taking in the length of her long, milk-white legs. His gaze stopped at her feet and her silly little sandals. He shook his head, smiling. Only Elizabeth would wear those sandals: matching-white, but gripless, delicate, and with an inch of heel—utterly impractical. She'd clearly chosen them for the way they looked with her outfit rather than for how they'd handle the rough terrain in the mountains.

As he watched, he saw one sandaled foot abruptly slide forward, rolling on gravel. She lost her balance, and he heard her gasp as she began to fall.

He quickly dropped the picnic basket and reached out, catching Elizabeth in his arms.

"Careful," he said, smiling down at her.

She blushed. "Thanks."

* * *

Lawrence Stevens was sitting on his back porch, staring out over his yard and pool, back through the years, remembering. As clearly as if it were yesterday, he saw Benjamin there—jumping through that sprinkler on the lawn. He smiled at the memory, but his smile quickly faded. The sprinkler wasn't even on, and Benjamin . . .

He turned away and refocused his gaze, this time nearer to the pool, but now he saw a slightly older Benjamin hauling himself out of the pool to rest on his knees. A puddle was forming around him as he climbed unsteadily to his feet; he was complaining of dizziness and fatigue. Lawrence saw himself there, too, in the pool. He was staring fixedly at the blue-black bruises that dotted Benjamin's otherwise pale, white skin. Leukemia. The scene grew blurry, and he closed his eyes to shut it out completely.

Rebecca stood by the cherry-brown, wood-framed windows

with the curtains drawn back just far enough for her to watch as the tears rolled slowly down her husband's cheeks. A part of her wanted to rush out onto the porch, to sit there with him and tell him that everything was going to be okay, but she knew just how hollow that would sound. And she wasn't sure that she could take seeing in his eyes the same sorrow that was threatening to tear her apart. So she turned away, letting the curtain fall back into place.

She walked purposefully through the living room and on to the kitchen, the distance between them ever widening. She paused by the kitchen cupboard. Her hand moved up of its own accord to the handle. She bit her lip, realizing now what she was doing. She fought it, warring over what she *should* do and what she so desperately *wanted* to do.

She lost the battle—again.

Opening the cupboard, she reached behind the stack of kitchen rags and dishcloths. She pulled out the bottle of vodka she'd hidden there during the week, along with her glass. Taking a quick look around to make sure that no one was watching, she unscrewed the cap of the vodka bottle and hastily poured until her glass was half full. Quickly, she re-screwed the cap and re-hid the bottle. Now she allowed herself a deep sigh of relief and, gripping the glass in both hands, she began to gulp her pain away. It flowed like liquid fire down her throat, but was still less painful than her tears.

A few seconds later, when she set the glass down again, empty, she was crying anyway. The alcohol had burned so much on the way down that she hadn't been able to hold back the tears.

She wiped them away with the back of a shaking hand and washed out her glass to disguise its use. Then, digging around in her pocket for a few seconds, she fished a stick of mint gum from her pocket and popped it into her mouth to mask the astringent smell of alcohol on her breath.

* * *

Elizabeth and Pieter sat in the shade of a big rock, on a checkered red and white picnic blanket which they had spread over a relatively flat, sandy patch of ground. Elizabeth wore her hallmark blue bikini, but had a rather large, loose short-sleeved cotton shirt on which covered most of her body—though her legs and arms were bare. She was looking out over

a cold, shady, green pool of water nestled in the mountains above Wellington, along Bainskloof Pass. Pieter had just been for a swim. He had beckoned to her to join him in the pool, but Elizabeth hadn't been able to bring herself to join him. Instead, she'd watched him swim under the clean white torrent of the waterfall which was plunging thunderously down into the pool below.

Now, abruptly, the wind kicked up and surrounded them with a fine, misty spray. The sun shone down on them from above and painted the spray with a rainbow. For a moment, Elizabeth became lost in her thoughts, and she was transported back to another waterfall—one that was now far, far away.

Elizabeth turned to Pieter with a faraway look in her eyes. "I love it here," she said, smiling wanly. Her absent tone and expression were the only clues that she was really speaking about another waterfall which was someplace other than *here*.

Pieter smiled back. "I thought you would. Here—" he turned to the picnic basket beside him, opened it, and began looking through its contents. He removed a sandwich and a bottle of Coke a moment later and handed them to Elizabeth. "You must be hungry—I sure am after swimming in that cold water!"

"Thank you," she said, forcing herself back to the here and now. "It looked *cold!*"

Pieter laughed. "It was."

"Now you know why I didn't want to swim with you," she said—but that wasn't the only reason. She was subtly trying to keep her distance from Pieter. It was hard to be around him with memories of her and Nicholas still so fresh in her mind.

Elizabeth set her sandwich down on the blanket beside her and waited with the bottle of Coke pressing coldly into her hand while Pieter searched for the bottle opener.

Having found it, Pieter reached out and popped the cap on her bottle with a quick flick of his wrist. Elizabeth took a long sip and suppressed another shiver as a river of fizzing Coke flowed icily down her throat.

Pieter reached for his camera, a Kodak Instamatic. Standing up, he took a few steps back and said, "Lizzie, do you mind if I take a photo of you? It's only a black and white film, but it would be nice to capture this moment."

Lizzie smiled, not answering right away, but then she replied,

“Sure, Piet, just as long as I get a copy, too!”

She set down the bottle, and reached for her sandwich as Pieter fiddled with the camera. A moment later, he called out to her, “Elizabeth—smile!”

Elizabeth looked up and did exactly that. Her long brown hair was flowing in a river over her shoulders, almost to the small of her back.

Click.

Pieter sat down next to her and withdrew another sandwich and a Coke for himself from the picnic basket. He regarded his sandwich for a moment, even as Elizabeth took a bite of hers, but before doing the same, he looked up and over at her. His gaze was steady, curious, measuring—in a way that belied his nervousness. He’d decided to ask the question that had been on his mind since last Sunday. “So, Lizzie . . . how have you been?” He frowned. That wasn’t the question he’d meant to ask.

Elizabeth looked up from taking a bite of her sandwich. She noted the look on Pieter’s face, and wondered what he was really asking. She swallowed, smiled, and replied, “I’m fine, and you?”

“Ah. That’s good.” Pieter’s gaze dipped to his sandwich. “I’m fine, too.”

Elizabeth watched him curiously, feeling certain that she hadn’t actually answered his question. “Piet, what are you really trying to say?”

His head came up, surprise registering on his face. “What do you mean?” He couldn’t believe that she’d seen through him so easily.

“We’ve known each other a long time—too long for you to fool me. I know when you’re not telling me something.” She paused, and then gently asked, “What is it?”

He sighed. “You remember last Sunday? When we met again after you came back from Siesta?”

She nodded.

“Well . . . when I tried to kiss you, you turned away. Why?”

She took a deep breath and held it, wondering how honestly she should answer him. Pieter didn’t give her a chance to let that breath out again.

“Am I out to lunch here? If you’d rather we just be friends . . .” His eyes were earnestly searching hers.

She let out the breath she was holding and smiled mischievously. “Well, actually, you *are* ‘out to lunch.’ ” She nodded to his sandwich.

He frowned. “That’s not what I meant, Elizabeth.”

He didn’t even laugh. That’s not good. Elizabeth bit her bottom lip. She knew he was being serious, but at least for her, it was an uncomfortable topic. A little mutual laughter might have gone a long way to making it easier to discuss. At length, she stopped biting her lip. “I *do* want to be more than friends, Piet. It’s just that . . .” She looked down at the picnic blanket and idly plucked at its wooly, red and white surface. “I need a little time to adjust, that’s all.” She looked up again, hoping to see understanding in his eyes.

To her relief, he nodded. “Okay, we’ll take it slow, then.”

Reaching over to cup his gold-stubbled cheek with her hand, Elizabeth smiled and gazed up into his dark green eyes. “Thank you,” she said.

Chapter 21

“Okay, Elizabeth, let’s get a picture of you sitting on the front of the sports car,” Edwin said.

Elizabeth walked over to the car—a compact, red, two-seater convertible that Edwin had bought for his wife a year ago—and took a seat on the hood.

As Edwin sighted through the lens of his camera, he admired the car for a moment. It was shining magnificently in the sun, its gleaming red paint reflecting bits and pieces of the surrounding scenery. The top was down, and he imagined how hot the black leather seats must be getting in the afternoon sun . . .

“Dad! Are you planning to make me your new hood ornament, or are you going to take that picture?”

Edwin smiled. “Well, you *would* make a pretty hood ornament . . .” He lowered his camera and pretended to consider the possibility.

“Dad!”

He grinned. “Just getting a feel for the scene before I take the picture, dear.” Peering through the lens of his camera once more, he now found himself admiring his beautiful daughter more than the car. She was still wearing her silky blue drum majorette’s uniform with white cape, hat, gloves, and boots. He, his wife, and Hattie had all attended her school’s Saturday afternoon rugby game to watch Elizabeth’s halftime performance in the school marching band. After the game, Edwin hadn’t been able to resist the temptation to take a few pictures of her. After all, a father needed something which would allow him to brag about his children. He would put one of these photos on his desk at work.

Elizabeth was idly twirling her baton as she waited for him to take the picture. Edwin grinned. “Say cheese!”

Elizabeth smiled and stopped twirling her baton.

Click.

* * *

Constance was watching Edwin through the second-story window of the house, peeking out from behind the curtains. She was frowning. Edwin had insisted on taking pictures of Elizabeth before she changed out of her drum majorette's uniform. Constance's eyes traveled over to where her daughter was sitting on the hood of her car. She couldn't see what her husband was always remarking about. *She's really not that pretty*, Constance thought, watching for just a moment longer before turning from the window and letting the curtain fall back into place.

* * *

Lawrence approached the pair of glass doors which opened out onto his back porch. When he reached them, he paused, noticing that his wife was already out there, sitting all alone on the swing bench, swinging slowly, looking down at her lap, paging absently through the family album and slowly sipping a glass of water. He remembered how they'd used to sit on that bench together, looking up at the stars, talking for hours—long after the kids had already been put to bed. He smiled weakly. Things were different now.

Everything was different now.

Where had those happy days gone? Had it all been a dream? Now he felt like he was stuck inside a nightmare, but no matter what he did, he couldn't wake up. Suddenly, Lawrence found himself remembering one night in particular.

It had been late; the stars were out and he and Rebecca were sitting outside on that bench, gazing up at them. They'd heard the door open, had turned to look and seen Benjamin coming outside. Benjamin had come to sit beside him on the bench. He'd said that he was feeling bad and couldn't sleep. Lawrence had put his arm around his son, saying that everything would be okay, hoping that Benjamin couldn't see the truth shining in his father's eyes.

Lawrence shook himself, and the memory faded. *This stops now*, he thought. He opened the door and walked outside. Rebecca didn't look up from the album to see who it was.

Lawrence went over to the swing bench and sat down beside his wife. He spent a moment staring at her until she looked up

from the album and met his gaze. But her eyes seemed unfocused, as if she was looking through him rather than actually seeing him. She blinked a few times, then appeared to focus. Suddenly realizing who had sat down beside her, she jumped with fright.

Lawrence saw her put a glass of water on the ground beside her and withdraw a stick of gum from her pocket. She popped the gum into her mouth and began chewing. Lawrence sat there for a moment, gathering his words. He and his wife hadn't talked much for the past week. Ever since arguing over Constance's suggestion that their families could trade homes, there had been an uneasy silence between them.

"Becky . . ." Lawrence began hoarsely. She continued to look at him, her face blank as she chewed her gum. He cleared his throat. "I've been thinking about the fight we had last Saturday." He shook his head slowly and looked down to avoid her gaze. His eyes lit upon the photos that his wife had been paging through in the family album.

They were photos of Benjamin.

Lawrence recoiled, and his head abruptly came back up. "I'm sorry I was so unreasonable," he said, then paused to look out over the yard and pool. "I just can't deal with this anymore. I see him everywhere. It's like he's haunting me."

Rebecca's expression softened, and her eyes grew moist, but she didn't say anything. Lawrence rejoined his wife's gaze. "Are you really so attached to this house that you can't bear to move? There's no way we'll get a better opportunity than this. We may have the best house in Wellington, but the Smythe family certainly has the second best . . ." he trailed off, his voice cracking dangerously. He swallowed his pain and continued: "There's no better home we could choose. And we could make it work, Becky. I know we could. What's so special about a pile of bricks?"

Rebecca just sat there, thinking. She didn't want to move. She loved her house, its garden, its view—the soaring mountains in the distance, the deep, rolling green of the vineyards which covered the foothills. When she thought about the boxy little yard that the Smythe family had, their nearly barren garden, and their home's hot, stuffy, two-level design—it made her want to cry.

What she *wanted* was for things to return to normal—for her

husband to come straight home after work instead of going out golfing and drinking only to return in the dead of the night, for him to lean on her, and in turn be a pillar of support for her to lean on. She knew that they had to pull together if they were going to get through this, but neither one of them seemed to have the courage to turn to the other for help. Was this one of the sacrifices she would have to make for that to happen? Her home?

She tore her gaze away from Lawrence's pleading eyes and looked around the yard for a long moment, committing every pebble and blade of grass to memory as if for the last time. She took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh.

"Okay, Lawrence," she said, her voice sounding small. Lawrence smiled, a sad and bitter smile, but a smile nonetheless. "But—" She held up a finger and met her husband's eyes again. "—make sure they don't take advantage of us. I don't trust Constance. She spent too much effort trying to make us feel at home last Saturday. There's no way our homes are of equal value, whether she'd like you to think they are or not."

Lawrence nodded. "Don't worry, Becky. Eddie and I are good friends; he wouldn't try to take advantage of me."

His arms opened, and before she knew what was happening, she felt herself enfolded in a fierce embrace.

"Thank you," he breathed. A moment later, he broke the embrace. Staying close, he lightly brushed her lips with his and kissed her.

Yet somehow as he kissed her all she could think about was the glass of vodka that she'd been drinking, and whether or not Lawrence could detect its lingering, astringent heat through the cool, minty taste of her gum. But when he pulled away a second later, his eyes were shining with warmth, not shock, or accusal. She smiled weakly at him.

* * *

"Hello, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Hattie," Thandiwe said, smiling as she opened the door. It was Monday afternoon, and Elizabeth and Hattie had just returned home from school.

"Hello, Thandi," the girls chorused as they walked through the door.

"A letter arrived for you today, Miss Elizabeth."

Hattie walked past Thandiwe and on toward her room, but

Elizabeth stopped and turned to Thandiwe, her face a picture of puzzlement. "Oh?"

"Yes. One moment, miss. I'll get it for you." Thandiwe left for the kitchen, where the mail was kept. Thandiwe returned a minute later with an envelope in her hands.

"It appears to be from . . ." Thandiwe trailed off as she read the return address. "Bloemfontein."

Elizabeth's eyes lit up, and she hurriedly took the letter from Thandiwe to verify the address on the envelope. One quick look was all it took.

"Thank you, Thandi!" Elizabeth said and in her excitement rushed forward to give Thandiwe a hug. Thandiwe went rigid, momentarily frozen with shock. She checked over her shoulder to make sure that Constance wasn't watching.

"You're welcome, miss," Thandiwe said, relaxing slightly.

Suddenly remembering where she was and who she was hugging, Elizabeth broke the hug, looking chagrined, her face coloring red. She smiled sheepishly and then hurried off to her room, Thandiwe watching as she went.

* * *

Edwin had just delivered a report to Lawrence's secretary, Martha. She smiled up at him and set the report to one side of her desk. Ordinarily he might have delivered the report to Lawrence personally, along with his comments, but the cherry wood door of Lawrence's office was open, and he could see that his friend was busy on the telephone. So, Edwin turned and began walking back to his office.

"Wait—Edwin, I need to speak with you." Lawrence's voice brought him up short, and Edwin turned on his heel. As he did so, he saw that Lawrence was no longer on the phone.

"Certainly," Edwin replied and began walking toward his friend. He stopped in front of Lawrence's desk.

"Take a seat, Edwin." Lawrence gestured to the chair in front of his black, leather-topped desk, and Edwin sat down. "Since we're on company time here, I'm going to make this quick. My wife and I have considered your offer to trade homes, and—" He hesitated, remembering his wife's reluctance. "—we've both agreed that it would be for the best."

Edwin's heart sank. "I'm happy to hear that," he lied. *At least my wife will be . . .*

Lawrence nodded. "If it's okay with you, I'd like to come by

this afternoon to formalize the arrangement and discuss the terms of the deal.”

Edwin felt a spark of hope upon hearing those words: “*The terms of the deal . . .*” He knew better than anyone that his wife was a poor negotiator—the art of compromise was completely lost on her. *That alone might be enough to prevent any sort of deal from going through.* Edwin smiled. “Of course, it’s fine by me, but I’d better let my wife know you’ll be coming.”

Lawrence picked up his phone and held it out to Edwin. “Start dialing.”

* * *

Elizabeth was sitting in her room, at her desk, a pen in hand, a paper before her, an envelope to one side. She set the pen down with a sigh. Turning in her chair, she retrieved Nicholas’s letter from her bed, and began re-reading it.

Dearest Elizabeth,

How have you been? I’ve been as good as can be expected, adapting to my routine again. I’m sure you know it’s always hard to go back to school after the holidays—this time it’s been much harder! What have you been doing lately? Has anything interesting happened at school? Over here it’s been the usual drudgery, but amidst that there have been a few amusing incidents . . .

Elizabeth read again about the schoolboy pranks Nicholas had detailed in his letter and found herself laughing for the second time. The letter went on:

I’ve missed you Elizabeth. I keep thinking about the time we spent together in Siesta. Maybe you can convince your parents to go back again at the end of this year? It’s probably a long shot, but you never know. Keep trying!

You know that I’m, by nature, a very optimistic person, so I will not let myself admit that something as special as our summer romance is over forever. I cannot do that!

The problem is that we are still at an age where we are entirely at the mercy of our parents and their plans for their own lives—our dreams don’t really feature. I mean, look at me—I was shipped off to boarding school at age eight, and I’ve never lived at home again! Both of us are still in high school, and we’ll

still be there for two to three years—at the opposite ends of the country from each other. Neither of us have enough money to visit each other, and I doubt our parents will let us anyway. Maybe one day, after high school and my two years of military service, we'll meet again—maybe at university?

We should at least plan for that. For now, however, we are left with only one option—to write letters to each other. . . since even one long-distance phone call will use up my entire boarding school allowance.

Well, you see, I didn't forget to write to you, Lizzie. It took me a week, but I didn't forget! Hope to hear from you soon!

Love, Nicholas.

Elizabeth considered Nicholas's words. What should she write in her reply? She'd missed him terribly, but how could she convey that to him? She began tapping her pen on the desk, and then she stopped abruptly as a thought occurred to her. She got up from her desk, left her room, and headed for her father's study. At the bottom of the stairs she encountered an out-of-breath Thandiwe, energetically sweeping the floor.

"Hello, Thandi . . . What's the hurry?"

Thandiwe looked up from her sweeping. She was sweating from exertion. "Hello, miss." The maid took a moment to catch her breath before continuing. "Your father and Mister Stevens are coming over, and madam wants the house to be very clean when they arrive."

"I thought it was already clean."

Thandiwe shook her head wordlessly and returned to sweeping. Taking that as her cue, Elizabeth continued on to her father's study. When she got there, she opened one of the drawers in his desk and dug through it. After a moment, she found and withdrew the color photo of her sitting on the front of her mother's red convertible MG, dressed in her blue and white drum majorette's uniform.

Photo in hand, she headed back to her room. When she reached her desk, she opened the drawer, searched through it, found what she wanted—a second photo of her, a small black and white Kodak—and then she placed both photos next to each other. Studying first one photo and then the other, suddenly a smile appeared on Elizabeth's face as she picked up the smaller of the two photos and wrote on the back:

*With all my love,
Elizabeth*

She picked up the empty envelope that was lying on her desk and placed the photo inside. She'd keep the other photo in reserve for now and send it to him later—if it should ever happen that they were to meet again. That done, she sat down at her desk once more. *What to write? What to write?*

She resumed absently tapping her pen on the desk.

* * *

Lawrence and Edwin stood at the front door, waiting. Edwin frowned and rang the doorbell again. He turned to Lawrence and gave a shrug, but was soon gratified to hear the sound of footsteps approaching.

The door opened to reveal Thandiwe's cherubic face.

"Please come in." She opened the door wider. "Madam will be with you shortly."

"Thank you, Thandi," Edwin said, and led the way inside.

Thandiwe turned to Lawrence. "Can I take your jacket, Mister Stevens?"

"Of course." He slipped out of his suit jacket and handed it to the maid. Edwin did likewise, not waiting to be asked. Lawrence watched as Thandiwe went to the coat closet to hang up their jackets.

"Well—" Edwin turned to Lawrence. "—would you like to take a tour of the house before we discuss the terms?"

"Yes, that would be a good idea, I think."

Just as they were about to start their tour, Constance appeared at the top of the stairs. "Hello, Lawrence," she said, starting down the stairs toward them.

Edwin turned to look and his eyes widened. His wife was looking unusually radiant for a Monday afternoon.

"Oh—hello, Connie," Lawrence said.

Edwin winced again at the overly familiar use of his wife's name. She hadn't said anything to him in private about it, but he was sure from past experience that it bothered her. Strangely, however, there was no sign of irritation on her face. In fact, she was smiling broadly.

Upon reaching the landing, she held her hand out to Lawrence. Lawrence took her hand and shook it once.

Constance opened her mouth to say something, but before she could, Lawrence turned to Edwin again. "Shall we?" he asked.

He's eager, Edwin thought. "Of course."

Constance looked from Lawrence to her husband and back again. "Am I missing something?" she asked, still smiling.

She really must be in a good mood, Edwin thought. It was no small thing for his wife to still be smiling after being treated so dismissively.

"We're going to take a tour of the house before we work out the details of the trade," Edwin said.

"Oh. Well, I'll join you, then," she said.

Lawrence just nodded, and Edwin led the way. As they made their way through the house, Constance drew attention to all of its best features, but Lawrence remained silent, quietly taking in the details, giving nothing away. He responded only when a response was called for, and then only with a nod.

When they were finished touring the inside of the house, Edwin led the way to the backyard. Constance was quick to point out how much bigger their pool was. Lawrence was pleasantly surprised. He'd already known about that, but it was nice to remind himself that not everything about the house would be a step down for his family. He imagined that Lydia and Julia would appreciate the larger pool.

Lawrence turned to Edwin. "Well, I'm satisfied with what I've seen. Shall we go inside to discuss the terms?"

"Let's," Edwin replied.

* * *

Elizabeth and Hattie were sitting at the top of the stairs, straining to hear the conversation going on in the living room. "We're really going to move?" Hattie whispered.

"Shhh, I don't know yet," Elizabeth whispered back.

". . . I'm sorry, Lawrence," came Constance's voice, "but our family is a little strapped for money right now. When you think about it, though, our homes really are very similar. You have the bigger yard, we have the bigger pool. You have one level, we have two—and I probably don't have to mention the extra privacy that will give you.

"Besides, even if you somehow managed to accomplish the impossible and sell your home through an estate agent, you'd lose seven percent. And then, where would you go? What home would you buy? When one thinks about it, you're really coming

out ahead.”

* * *

Lawrence sat listening as Constance explained exactly why her family wouldn't be able to provide compensation for the difference in value of their two homes, and why he shouldn't see that as a loss. When she finished, he looked over to Edwin for support, but got a blank look in return. Clearly, Edwin wasn't the one he was dealing with here. Lawrence frowned. He'd been sure that his friendship with Edwin would guarantee a fair deal, but if Edwin wasn't even going to participate in the discussion, what good would that do?

“I appreciate your family's situation, Connie, but my wife is expecting more than just a straight trade.”

The corners of Constance's mouth tightened, drawing her lips into a thin line. “Then I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for you. You're just going to have to stay where you are.”

Edwin shot his wife a shocked look. While he'd expected his wife to be hard-nosed about bargaining, he'd also expected considerably more tact from her. He began to open his mouth to say something, but she turned to glare at him through dangerously narrowed eyes, and he shut his mouth again.

Lawrence caught the exchange, and his heart sank. So this was it. Edwin wasn't going to make things any easier. If he wanted to get away from his pain, he was going to have to sacrifice some of his wealth to do it. And that was to say nothing of how angry Rebecca would be when she found out.

Silence reigned as Lawrence considered his options. If he didn't accept the deal . . .

As if on cue, Constance's expression softened and she said, “Lawrence, think of your family. If you don't take this chance, who knows if you'll ever get another? We're offering you an easy way out.”

Lawrence's gaze went out of focus as he met Constance's pale blue eyes. He sat there on the couch, stiff, unmoving, his mind running in agonizing circles.

Edwin held his breath.

Chapter 22

“I accept,” Lawrence said.

“Excellent!” Constance replied.

Edwin let out his breath. So that was it. They were going to move.

“Would you like to stay for dinner, Lawrence?” Constance asked.

He shook his head. “No, thank you. Rebecca will have dinner ready by now and I should spend tonight with my family.”

“I understand,” Constance said.

“As for furniture—I’m not going to haggle,” Lawrence said, his expression resigned. He knew better than to expect generosity now. He glanced at Edwin, feeling betrayed, but by the defeated look on Edwin’s face, Lawrence realized that his friend had had no say in the matter—regardless of whether or not he’d wanted one. Lawrence stood up from the couch and continued: “If you want to leave something behind, go ahead. We will do likewise. Also, please keep in mind that we would like to move in as quickly as possible.”

“Of course. How about we tentatively set the date a month from today?” Constance suggested.

“That will be . . . February seventeenth,” Lawrence said, nodding slowly.

“Yes,” Constance replied.

“That should be fine. We’ll do our best to be ready by then. I’ll arrange the title transfer with Edwin next week.”

Constance and Edwin stood up now, too.

“Here, I’ll show you to the door,” Constance said, starting forward.

“Don’t trouble yourself, Connie. I’ll show myself out.” And with that, Lawrence turned and left the living room. Constance watched him go, outwardly smiling but inwardly scowling at

his suddenly abrupt manner. *What an insufferable man*, she thought.

* * *

Elizabeth watched with her sister from the top of the stairs as Lawrence went to the coat closet and withdrew his suit jacket. Not even taking the time to put it on, he strode to the door, opened it, and left, almost slamming the door behind him.

"I guess we really are moving," Elizabeth said.

"Uncle Lawrence doesn't seem very happy about it," Hattie added.

Elizabeth's eyebrows knitted together. "Perhaps not."

They heard footsteps approaching from the living room and quickly retreated around the corner and into the hallway. Then they heard their mother's voice. "Girls! Come downstairs. We have some good news to share with you."

* * *

When Lawrence got home, he opened the front door as quietly as possible so as not to be noticed. He needn't have bothered. Rebecca was standing in the foyer, arms crossed, waiting for him. She must have heard his car pull into the driveway.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well . . . it's all settled," he replied, his back turned to her as he closed the door.

"How much did we get?"

He didn't turn around, nor did he reply.

"Lawrence?"

He sighed and slowly turned to face his wife. "We got the house."

"That's it?"

He nodded, looking down to avoid her flashing eyes.

Silence.

He risked meeting her gaze, but was immediately sorry that he had. She was shaking her head very slowly, her eyes narrowed to slits, her arms still crossed.

"They wouldn't budge," he said. "I tried to get them to make up the difference in value, but—"

"And you accepted?" she scowled. "Why?"

"Why not?" Lawrence returned her scowl. He was still angry from dealing with Constance, and he really didn't need his wife to berate him at the moment.

Rebecca gave a derisive snort for a reply, as if the answer to

his question should have been obvious.

“Where else would we get a better deal? This is the only way that we’ll be able to move. Anything else and we’d have to deal with estate agents and settle for moving to a lesser home anyway.”

“Did it occur to you that we might just be better off where we are, then?”

Lawrence sighed and shook his head. He brushed past his wife and started down the hallway.

She pivoted on one foot to follow her husband with her eyes. “Don’t you dare run away.” He kept walking. “Lawrence! I’m talking to you!”

“I’ve already told you how I feel. We’re not staying here,” he called back to her as he disappeared into the living room. “And that’s final!”

Her eyes were stinging. She knew there was only one way to relieve her frustration. It was calling to her. It had been all day, but she’d resisted. What choice did she have now?

She strode down the hallway that Lawrence had just taken, passed through the living room on her way there, and noted that Lawrence was conveniently absent. She angled for the kitchen, wiping her eyes as she went.

Once there, she paused with her hand resting on the handle of the cupboard, thinking. She’d told herself she wasn’t going to do it again, but she could afford to yield now and then, couldn’t she? So long as she limited those times to when her need was the greatest.

There was an agonizing moment of indecision, and then she glanced around to see if anybody was looking, opened the cupboard, and reached behind the dishtowels. She pulled out the bottle with one hand and her glass with the other.

* * *

“Hey, Shorty, cut that out, would you?” Nathan Stimple, now prefect as of the start of the new school year, called behind him from the front of the boat—taking an educated guess as to who was rocking it.

“Sir?” Jamie Beckett returned, his voice dripping with innocence.

“Stop goofing around back there. I can feel the boat rocking. We’re supposed to be doing cadet training—not seeing how close we can get to capsizing the boat.”

“Yes, sir!” Since Nathan’s back was turned, he didn’t see the exaggerated mock salute that Jamie gave, but the chorus of laughter which rippled out behind him gave him a good idea of Jamie’s insolence.

They continued rowing the boat, all dressed in their blue and white sailor’s uniforms with white berets. Despite being an inland school, St. Andrew’s did naval cadet training on Monday afternoons. Amongst other things, that training included taking the school’s long rowboat out onto the Bloemfontein city dam for *maneuvers*. Nicholas couldn’t see why naval cadets had to train with rowboats, but he considered that, if nothing else, it was at least good exercise.

It wasn’t long after Jamie Beckett had stopped rocking the boat that Nathan saw their course deflecting to the left. Nathan stopped rowing and turned swiftly in his seat to glare at Jamie. As he suspected, all three Beckett brothers were dragging their oars in the water. Upon seeing him turn, however, they quickly resumed rowing.

“Is something the matter, sir?” Jamie asked, somehow still managing to look and sound innocent. His brothers, however, couldn’t help smiling and chuckling.

Nathan sighed, realizing belatedly that he shouldn’t have stuck the Beckett brothers together on the same side of the boat. “That’s it,” he said, “stop rowing!”

Now all the boys stopped rowing, and the rowboat drifted in a lazy arc with its momentum. Nathan turned his gaze upon Nicholas. “Beaver, switch places with Shorty, please.”

“Yes, sir,” Nicholas replied. Shaking his head with irritation, he set his oar down, and carefully stood up. Jamie stood up, too, rocking the boat dangerously as he did so. He grabbed onto Nicholas for support, but only succeeded in rocking the boat even more.

“*Jislaaik*, careful!” Nicholas yelled, fighting against Jamie’s sudden weight. He felt himself losing balance—

And then the boat rocked back the other way.

“*Aaaheeee!*” Jamie overbalanced. There was no time for either of them to correct.

Spla-splash! the water echoed.

A wave of raucous laughter issued from the boat, followed by someone yelling, “Man overboard!”

Nathan was smiling now and shaking his head. Nicholas

came up spluttering, and Jamie bobbed up to the surface a second later.

“Shorty!” Nicholas roared, furiously swiping the water from his eyes. “*Ach nee*, man!”

Jamie was laughing mercilessly and pointing at Nicholas.

“That’s it!” Nicholas lunged through the water and dunked Jamie beneath the surface.

* * *

The following day, after work, Edwin and Lawrence were in the bar, cooling off after a round of golf. Edwin noted that this time Lawrence was eschewing hard liquor in favor of his more usual beer. He was glad about that, not relishing the thought of having to drive Lawrence home again.

Lawrence sipped his beer, then set it down and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. The two of them were still dressed in their work clothes—suits and ties with matching long pants. Their jackets were off, hung up in a coat closet at the door of the clubhouse; their ties hung loosely about their necks; and the top buttons of their long-sleeved, white button-up shirts were undone. Lawrence ran a hand through his thick, wavy, black hair and untwisted one of his red suspenders. He studied his blurry reflection in the heavily-lacquered surface of the dark mahogany bar counter.

Edwin watched, noticing how distracted Lawrence seemed. “What’s on your mind, Lawrence?” he asked.

“What isn’t?” the other returned, still studying his reflection in the counter top.

“For example?”

Lawrence sighed. “For example, Becky isn’t very happy about our arrangement—trading homes, that is—she thinks we got the short end of the deal.”

Edwin wasn’t sure what to say to that. He paused, trying to put the words together in his head.

Lawrence turned to face him. “What happened yesterday, Eddie? When we were discussing terms for the trade, you didn’t say a word.”

“I figured my wife could handle it,” Edwin said, fiddling idly with his tie and trying to loosen it some more.

Lawrence snorted and looked away. “What doesn’t she handle?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Edwin replied.

Lawrence raised his eyebrows and cast Edwin a sideways glance. "Don't I?"

Edwin scowled. "If you didn't like the arrangement, then why did you accept it?"

"What choice did I have, Eddie? If I didn't accept, where else was I going to get another chance to move out of that damned house? I can't stand it there. It's like the place is haunted. Whenever I'm home, he's there, everywhere I look."

Edwin was tempted to ask who Lawrence was speaking about, but he already knew the answer. His expression softened.

"I don't know what to say, Lawrence. I'm sorry."

Lawrence shook his head. "Forget about it." He sighed and took a long sip of his beer. Setting it down, he set his gaze on a distant bottle of scotch and began nodding to himself with a faraway look in his eyes. "You remember when it was you here, talking about how sick *your* child was, wondering if she was going to live or die?"

Edwin hesitated, not sure where his friend was headed with the change of topics. "Yes—though I'd rather not talk about that."

"Then the tables turned and it was me with the sick child," Lawrence went on, "but my child *did* die, and yours was miraculously cured. I used to pity you back then, Edwin. Now I realize you were the lucky one; I just didn't know it. You and Constance should be very grateful."

Edwin felt his heart rate kick up a notch. Just the mention of Hattie's illness made him feel uncomfortable. It was a forbidden topic in his family. "We don't talk about that," Edwin said, straightening his tie.

"Maybe you should talk about it. If it had been my Benjamin who had been miraculously cured, my wife and I wouldn't be able to shut up. We'd be screaming it from the rooftops!" Lawrence turned to him with a speculative gaze. "Why aren't you?"

Edwin shook his head. "That was a long time ago."

"Not that long."

"Over a decade! You want me to crow about that now? And after your son just died?"

"No, Eddie, I don't expect you to be insensitive. You wouldn't ruffle a chicken's feathers even to pluck it. But what puzzles

me is that I've never heard you or your wife speak of Hattie's being cured of *her* illness. Not for any reason, ever, but I heard plenty about her being sick."

"What's your point, Lawrence?" Edwin asked, sounding defensive.

"My point is you should be grateful."

"We are, but my wife doesn't like to talk about it."

Lawrence snorted. "Ah, yes, your wife . . ." Almost as an afterthought, he turned to Edwin and said, "You need to keep an eye on that *wife* of yours. If you let her run your life for you, she might just run it into the ground."

Edwin's eyes narrowed. "That was uncalled for."

Lawrence said nothing and looked away. He took up his drink from the counter and gulped noisily from it.

"I realize you're under a lot of strain right now, so I'm going to take that comment in its proper context," Edwin went on, "but take care who you're lashing out at."

Lawrence sighed again as he set his beer mug down. "I'm sorry if it seems like I'm lashing out and maybe I am, but I think you misunderstood me. I'm concerned for you, Eddie. You worry too much about what your wife thinks. Maybe I'm completely off base, but if I'm even partially right . . ." He fixed Edwin with a penetrating look. "Every good marriage has its give and take. It's like a tug of war. Without that balance, everyone falls flat in the mud."

Edwin frowned. His anger was building. He wanted to make Lawrence eat those words. Letting out a long breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding, Edwin looked away. Taking up his own drink now, he drank through a grimace. But in spite of his indignation, all he could think about as he drained the glass was *what if Lawrence is right?*

* * *

When Edwin got home, Constance was waiting up for him in the living room of their home—soon to be the Stevens family's home.

"What were you doing out so late?" Constance demanded, her hands on her hips.

Edwin walked up to her with a sheepish smile and tried to kiss her on the lips, but she turned her head, so he kissed her cheek instead. "I was out with Lawrence."

"What for?" Constance demanded.

Edwin walked around his wife with a sigh and set his briefcase down on the living room couch while he continued on to the kitchen to get himself a drink of water. "He needed some cheering up," Edwin explained on his way to the kitchen.

Constance let out a snort as she followed him. "When does he ever not need cheering up? You should spend a whole day with him sometime."

Edwin began nodding. "Yes, I'm sure that would help."

"And maybe while you're at it, you could stay at his house, too. That way you won't have to come back here in between visits. It'll be more convenient for you, don't you think?"

Edwin turned to Constance with patiently raised eyebrows. "Constance . . ."

"I don't want to hear it."

Edwin walked up to her and placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. "Dear."

Constance pursed her lips into a thin, stubborn line. "Your dear wife has been home all day, waiting for you to come home to spend a few precious hours with you, but look what you do, you go and waste them at the bar with Lawrence! You know he'd do well to be at home with his wife, too. After their son died, they need to pull together, not apart, and you're not helping."

Edwin felt a twitch of guilt and he winced at the accusation. "Well, I didn't think about that. . . ."

"Of course you didn't!" Constance threw up her hands. "You're a man, so what do you know?"

Edwin watched his wife turn and stalk into the living room. He followed meekly at her heels. She stopped in front of the living room doors, looking out at the shadowy porch and backyard. Edwin walked up behind her and encircled her waist with his arms. He kissed her cheek and then her neck, hoping for her rigid posture to ease.

"I'm sorry, dear," he said.

"You should be."

"You know, I was thinking we should go a little easier on the Stevens family. Help them make this transition more easily. Maybe give them a few concessions."

Constance turned to him, her brow furrowed and her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean? Where is this coming from?"

Edwin straightened. "Well, the shoe could have easily been on the other foot, you know. Once upon a time it was our daughter who was deathly ill and we were the ones constantly going to the hospital, wondering if she was going to survive. But then our little Hattie was miraculously cured!

"Watching Lawrence, and remembering what we went through, I can only begin to imagine what it must be like to lose one's child. We should be very grateful that didn't happen to us."

Constance looked shocked. Her eyes had glazed over and she was now staring past her husband to the far wall of the living room.

Edwin frowned, noticing her catatonic look. "Constance? Dear?"

Constance didn't reply for a long moment, but then abruptly she started and said, "Why would you bring that up, Edwin? You know that I don't like to remember those things!"

"Well, I was just trying to mention the positive, dear. Hattie was cured! We shouldn't be sad to talk about that; we should be shouting it from the roof tops!"

Constance shook her head and brushed past him. "No, no, you don't know what I went through. You can't! No one knows. They don't understand, Edwin. Not even you understand!"

Edwin's eyes narrowed at his wife's hysterics. "Dear, we can't bury our heads in the sand and pretend it never happened. Besides which, it looks a bit strange that we're not more effusive about Hattie's recovery. She was such a sickly child, but now she's better, and we can't just take that for granted! Imagine what God must think of us? He answered our prayers, but now we just want to shut up about it and we can't even bring ourselves to say how grateful we are." Edwin shook his head. "That's not right, Constance."

His wife turned to him then, and peered at him very carefully in the wan gold light of the solitary lamp which was on in the living room. "Did Lawrence tell you that?" she asked, her head canting to one side.

"So what if he did?"

Constance snorted once more and let out a high-pitched laugh. "Well! I knew for certain that my husband was easily led, but not even I knew the extent of that fault until now! I'm going to bed, Edwin. You may sleep here on the sofa if you

wish. Or perhaps you'd rather go sleep on Lawrence's sofa. It's all the same to me." And with that, Constance turned and left the living room, leaving Edwin to gape at her retreating form as she made her way down the hall to the stairs.

* * *

Constance was furious. *How dare he!* she thought. Lawrence had crossed far too many lines. Here he was putting silly ideas in her husband's head. He was a bad influence! What right did he have to pry into their past? What business was it of his if Hattie had once been sick? Why should he care?

No, this couldn't be allowed to continue.

And even now, after Lawrence's son had died and his family *needed* him to be at home, he was still the one dragging *her* husband out to the bar every night. He didn't have a right to do that either.

Constance began climbing the stairs with a scowl. She would make Lawrence pay. First he would give her his home. Then he would help further Edwin's career. And finally he would get what was coming to him. She wouldn't allow him to be a thorn in her side forever.

No, not even for very long.

Constance's hand closed on the doorknob and she opened the door to her bedroom with a burgeoning smile. *Edwin's little jaunt on the sofa tonight will bring him back into line until then.*

Chapter 23

Elizabeth and Pieter were sitting in his car, watching a movie. They had decided to spend Saturday evening at the drive-in theater. Elizabeth wasn't really watching the movie, though. She was far more interested in Pieter. He'd put his arm around her at some point, and she'd responded by scooting closer to him and leaning her head on his shoulder. Now they were sitting huddled together in the front of his car.

It had been nearly a week since Elizabeth had sent her reply to Nicholas's letter, and now their time together in Siesta seemed like a distant memory. She still missed him, but in some way, writing her reply to Nicholas had allowed her to make peace with their situation. She knew it was time for her to move on—what other choice was there? Pieter could be there for her every day. He lived in the same neighborhood, and—she glanced sideways at him, taking in his curly golden hair, his strong jaw, the stubble growing in on his cheeks—he was no boy. Far from the 16-year-old she'd met in Siesta, Pieter was 19, almost 20; he was a second year university student, and he had a car.

Elizabeth's best friend, Dilly, was so envious. All the girls at school were. But Pieter wasn't just a reason for her to brag. She really cared for him. They'd grown up together; he was her friend. And now—she smiled up at him; he caught the look and smiled back—and now, something more.

Pieter looked away and returned his attention to the movie. He wasn't really seeing it either. He was just sitting there in the front of his car, wondering at his luck. Elizabeth, the prettiest girl in school—his old high school—was his girlfriend. He frowned. Or was she?

Very little had changed between them since she'd returned from Siesta. They'd been going out for almost three weeks, and

they hadn't even kissed yet. Well, that wasn't technically true. He'd kissed her on the cheek, but he'd *meant* to kiss her on the lips . . .

Three weeks! The fact echoed absurdly through his head. What couple had ever dated for three weeks without a single kiss? Elizabeth had asked that they take it slow, but how much time did she need? She'd had three weeks in Siesta to get over Thomas, and now it had been another three. She should have been over him by now! He hadn't thought that she and Thomas were that serious about each other.

He shook his head, confused, and stole another glance away from the movie to look down at Elizabeth. He took in the features of her adorable face: tiny button nose, little dimples that showed whenever she was smiling—as she was now—and oh, what a beautiful smile.

Elizabeth noticed Pieter staring at her. “What?” she asked, releasing a nervous laugh.

He didn't reply, allowing the silence to stretch between them. That silence said everything he needed to. Elizabeth's expression grew more serious, and she became acutely aware that the space between their lips had somehow narrowed to mere inches when she wasn't looking. Pieter was drawing steadily closer. Her heart began to pound. He gave her every chance she needed, but this time she didn't turn away.

She felt his breath landing in a steady rhythm upon her lips. It was warm and minty from the gum he'd bought during intermission. His arm was still wrapped around her shoulders, and now he used it to draw her closer to him. Bringing his other arm up, he gently stroked her cheek. But he waited there, not drawing her any closer. With an inch still left between them, she realized that he was waiting for her to close the gap. She began to do so, but found her head suddenly filled with images of her and Nicholas. She stopped, hesitating to go any further.

Her resistance lasted for only a second, though, before she brushed those thoughts aside. *That's over now*, she told herself. With that, she forced herself to close the rest of the space between them and allowed Pieter to kiss her softly on the lips. Then she kissed him back, and his arm drew tight around her shoulders, pressing them even closer together. This time she didn't resist. His other hand held her gently at the back of

her neck, his fingers working their way through her hair, sending shivers down her spine—

The drive-in's speakers suddenly blared, threatening to draw their attention back to the movie, and Elizabeth was glad for the excuse to break the embrace. It wasn't easy kissing Pieter, with all the images of her and Nicholas rushing through her mind to make her feel guilty and conflicted. After all this time she found it was still too easy to remember . . .

She remembered walking with Nicholas amidst the sand dunes along the ocean, their daily canoe trips up the Touws, the white lilies he would pick for her, and most of all . . . their *waterfall*. These scenes and more danced through her head day and night, torturing her. She had to force herself to get on with life—to fake it until her heart had actually healed.

Pieter was nice; he clearly liked her a lot, and most of all, he was real! She had to keep reminding herself of that fact. Nicholas was now only a treasured memory, a welcome part of her daydreams, and a phantom who haunted her at night. She had to get over him! Just as he would have to get over her.

They had no other choice.

* * *

Friday morning found Nicholas sitting in Champion Hall, waiting for lunch to be served. The head boy had come in just a moment ago to announce from the entrance of the hall that the mail had arrived.

Nicholas watched with anticipation as it was delivered by the *skivvies*—the official errand boys of the prefects. Nathan Stimple, the prefect of Nicholas's dormitory, received the mail from his skivy and dismissed the boy with a nod.

Nicholas waited, listening as Nathan called out each boy's last name before passing the indicated bundle down the table to the boy to whom it belonged.

"Beckett—Shorty, Beckett—Checkers, Baker, Agliotti, Lazarus, Strauss . . ."

Nicholas tuned out after he heard his name called, waiting in anticipation for his mail to get to him. When his letters arrived, he briefly fumbled with the string which held them together and skipped through the pile of envelopes until he found the one he was looking for.

It was addressed from Wellington.

He opened the envelope and looked inside. There was a

neatly folded letter and . . . he looked more closely, his brow furrowing. It had the right size and texture to be a photograph, but it was lying face down inside the envelope, so it was hard to tell. There was, however, some writing on the back.

His curiosity got the better of him and he pulled it out, being careful not to touch more than just the corners. He read the words:

*With all my love,
Elizabeth*

He smiled and turned the photo over.

Wow! he thought. He was so transfixed by the photo that he didn't notice Jamie Beckett gawking over his shoulder.

Suddenly, Jamie snatched the picture out of Nicholas's hands. He gawked at it for another moment, then quickly passed it down the table to his brother, Billie.

"*Oi!* Check out Beaver's girlfriend!" Jamie said.

"Hey! Give it back, Shorty!"

Jamie turned to Nicholas with an open-handed shrug. "I don't have it," he said innocently.

Nicholas's eyes narrowed. There were exclamations of surprise and appreciation going around the table as the photo was passed from one person to the next.

"Ooooo, listen to this," Brian Lazarus said, having thought to turn the photo over. "*With all my love, Elizabeth.*"

There was a chorus of laughter from the others at the table. Before long the photo made its way around to Nathan Stimple. The prefect let out a long, appreciative whistle.

"Wow, Beaver—so this is the girl you met in Siesta?" He shook his head in disbelief and abruptly stood up from his chair, photo in hand.

He headed to the neighboring table and stopped beside the prefect there—a friend of his. Nicholas heard another exclamation of surprise. After a moment, they looked his way, Nathan pointing to him to show the other prefect whose girlfriend was in the photo.

The two prefects were grinning broadly. They talked for a moment longer, and then Nicholas watched as Nathan dismissed himself. Nicholas sighed, thinking that now Nathan would come over to him and give him his photo back.

He was wrong.

Nathan headed over to the next table in line to show yet another one of his friends. This time the show-and-tell didn't stop with the prefect. Nicholas watched with growing dismay as his photo was passed all the way around that table and from that table to the next.

It was fully five minutes before Nicholas got his photo back, and then only because lunch was about to be served. He studied the picture: smudged and slightly creased at the corners, but at least not torn.

He shook his head wearily and wiped the smudges away with his sleeve. Carefully tucking the little black and white photo back into its envelope, he regretted that he'd been too impatient to wait for a more private moment to open his mail.

* * *

Elizabeth was sitting in Afrikaans class, counting the minutes until it would be over and she could take her lunch break. She was eager to be done with school for the week. Her thoughts turned to Pieter. They would probably go see another movie on the weekend. Or maybe they would go up to Bain's Kloof again.

“. . . and remember your *opstelle* are due on Monday,” Mrs. Hendrik's voice broke into her thoughts. Afrikaans wasn't her first language, and it took a moment for her to recognize the words and translate them into English.

When she did recognize what her teacher had said, Elizabeth's heart sank. She'd forgotten all about her *opstel*! Now she had just two days to finish a short story in Afrikaans, and she still had to help her family start packing for the move. She wasn't going to have *any* time to go out with Pieter.

“And I want to see some creativity. No, ‘and they lived happily ever after,’ or ‘once upon a time.’ Have fun with it, but be original,” Mrs. Hendrik continued. Elizabeth went on fretting, absently watching as the teacher turned around to check the clock on the wall behind her. Seeing that it was now almost noon, Mrs. Hendrik turned back to her class and said, “You're dismissed.”

Elizabeth snatched up her notes, textbook, and pen and piled them into her book bag. Swinging the bag over her shoulder, she turned to Dilly, who had been sitting at the desk beside her, and waited for her friend to finish packing her things away.

“Ready?” Elizabeth asked.

“Let’s go,” Dilly replied, and they started for the door.

When they reached the lunch room, they went to their usual table, in the corner and by the windows, and sat down together.

“So?” Dilly asked, staring expectantly at Elizabeth.

Elizabeth opened her brown paper lunch bag and peered suspiciously inside. She wrinkled her nose when she saw what was in it. Having momentarily lost interest in her lunch, she set the bag aside and gave Dilly her attention. She noticed the silly grin spreading across Dilly’s face. “What?”

“Isn’t there something you’ve been meaning to tell me?”

Elizabeth frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Oh come on, Lizzie, Jacobus told me all about it.”

“About what?”

“About you and Pieter! About you and him kissing at the drive-in . . .”

Elizabeth couldn’t keep the smile from her face. “Oh, that. Well—” She looked down at her lunch bag again, considered it briefly, then thought better of it and rejoined Dilly’s gaze. Elizabeth painted a picture of the kiss for Dilly, going into some detail. Dilly was mesmerized.

“Well, it’s about time,” Dilly said. “The two of you have known each other almost forever and have been dating for what—three weeks already?”

“This will be the fourth.”

Dilly shook her head. “What took you two so long?”

“Well . . .” Elizabeth looked down at her lunch once more. This time she decided that she’d better eat at least some of it, and withdrew a sandwich from the bag.

“Ah,” Dilly said, having filled in the blanks for herself. “The boy you met in Siesta.”

Elizabeth nodded absently.

“Well, it’s time you got over him. You said it yourself: your family isn’t going back to Siesta this year, and probably never again, so why waste your time thinking about what could have been? He was a summer romance. Nice as it might have been . . . those things never last, Lizzie. They’re not *real*.”

Elizabeth nodded again and began unwrapping the sandwich she’d pulled from her lunch bag. If it wasn’t real, then why did it hurt so much?

* * *

After lunch Nicholas headed straight to his biology class along with a number of others from his dormitory. When they arrived, Jamie Beckett froze in the entrance of the classroom and brought a hand up to his chest, as if feeling that his heart had stopped. He reached out desperately with his other hand, grabbing the arm of the boy nearest him.

Nicholas felt Jamie's hand on his arm, but he was too stunned to give Jamie his attention. Nicholas was also frozen in the doorway.

"Someone pinch me," Jamie said. "Either I'm sleeping or I'm dead, and I'd really like to know which."

"I think it's the latter, Shorty," came Brian Lazarus's voice from behind them. "Because I'm seeing it, too, and that can only mean one thing—we've all died and gone to heaven!"

Jamie nodded absently.

"A real crying shame . . ." Billie Beckett added.

They were attracting attention to themselves now. Their biology teacher, Mrs. Crawford, turned to them with a frown. "Come now, boys, you act as though you've never seen girls before," she said. Saint Andrew's was an all *boys* boarding school, but already seated in the classroom were at least a dozen *girls*. The teacher cleared her throat and gestured to a row of empty seats. "Well, don't just stand there gawking in the doorway." A few girls giggled at the teacher's remark.

Jamie was the first to come back to his senses. "You heard the teacher," Jamie said, and promptly headed for the prettiest girl in the classroom, a girl with long, blond hair and a stunningly smooth complexion that makeup—were she allowed to wear it at school—might have even detracted from.

Nicholas followed Jamie and took a seat on the other side of the girl. Her back was turned to him, her attention on Jamie as he tried to ingratiate himself with her. Focusing more carefully on the girl, Nicholas realized that he recognized her. She was Claire, otherwise known as Bog Rat. He cast about the room, his eyes settling on several more girls. He recognized a number of them. From the school crest on their uniforms he realized that they were all from Saint Michael's, the neighboring girls' boarding school. What were they doing at Saint Andrew's?

Nicholas shook his head and set the question aside for the moment. Noticing that the teacher was busy and Jamie was

safely occupied flirting with Claire, Nicholas fished around in his book bag and pulled out the letter he'd received from Elizabeth during lunch. He discreetly withdrew the letter from its envelope to begin reading it on his lap.

Dearest Nicholas,

Ever since we said goodbye to each other, I've been feeling lost and empty inside. I did not fully understand just how much I'd grown accustomed to being with you in those three short weeks of summer, until now that you're so far away from me. I want so much ...

Nicholas continued reading until the end of the letter. He was shaken—stunned—and he understood the implications of what she'd written immediately. He sat gaping, staring wide-eyed at the piece of paper in his hands and he sighed. Not one mention of the word “love” in the entire letter—not even at the end! Even so, he couldn't help smiling. Elizabeth's words had been confirmation enough of her feelings for him.

“Hey, Beaver!” Nicholas looked up to see Jamie waving for his attention. “Have you noticed who's sitting beside you? It's Bog Rat!”

The girl between them turned to Nicholas with a wry smile. “Beaver, huh? I seem to remember you introducing yourself at the school dance last year as *Nicholas*.”

Nicholas folded Elizabeth's letter in his lap and slid it back inside his book bag before turning with a smile to the blonde girl sitting beside him. “And I recall you introducing yourself as Claire,” he said.

“I tend to prefer my given name. Bog Rat is not the most flattering nickname.”

Nicholas laughed and shook his head. “True. How did you get that name, anyway?”

“Okay . . .” the teacher interrupted them as she began a head count. A minute later she went on, “Good, it looks like we're all here. For those of you who are joining us for the first time—I'm Mrs. Crawford and I'm going to be taking over as your new biology teacher. For those of you who are wondering why there are girls in our classroom—Saint Michael's just lost its biology teacher, and so for the next year, until they find a replacement,

the girls of St. Michael's will be joining us for biology." At this, a chorus of cheering and whistling erupted from the boys in the classroom.

Mrs. Crawford smiled. "Let's harness all that enthusiasm and get started, shall we? Please open your textbooks to page one hundred and forty."

Jamie did nothing of the sort. "Hey, Bog Rat," he whispered.

She glanced over at him as she opened her textbook to the prescribed page.

Jamie nodded to Nicholas. "You won't believe the girl Nicholas met on holiday in the Wilderness."

Claire raised her eyebrows and turned to Nicholas. "Oh? I didn't know you went there," Claire said. "That's where my family is planning to go this summer."

Jamie made a show of opening his textbook and then he whispered to Nicholas, "Beaver!"

Nicholas looked up from his textbook.

"Show Bog Rat that photo of your girlfriend."

"What—now?" Nicholas whispered back. "We're in class, Shorty. We'll get into trouble."

Jamie's response was to reach over behind Claire, to the book bag sitting on the floor beside Nicholas's chair. He grabbed it and dragged it over to him.

"Hey!" Nicholas whispered.

The teacher cleared her throat and sent a pointed look in their direction. Nicholas snapped his attention back to the fore. Jamie did likewise, but surreptitiously lifted the bag onto his lap. As the teacher looked away again, Jamie opened the bag and searched through it. He fished out the envelope he was looking for and withdrew the photo. Nicholas watched the letter fall out, unnoticed, onto Jamie's lap while he slid the picture across the desk to Claire. Nicholas eyed the letter, his mind racing to find a way to snatch it away from Jamie before he noticed it and read it.

Diverting her attention from her textbook, Claire studied the small black and white photo for a moment. "Wow, she's really beautiful!"

"I'll say!" Jamie exclaimed, whispering as loudly as he could. "Who would've thought our ol' Beaver could get so lucky?"

Claire turned to Nicholas just as he was about to lunge across her lap to get the letter from Shorty. She looked

Nicholas up and down and shrugged. "I'm not surprised. Any girl would be lucky to have a guy like Nicholas."

Jamie did a double take, and he peered at Nicholas through narrowed eyes. After a moment, he shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I don't see it. My eyes are offended by masculine features."

Claire laughed at that. "Perhaps you've just seen too much of them."

Jamie nodded sagely. "Enough to last a lifetime."

Nicholas smiled, his eyes still on the letter. "Can I have my things back, please, Shorty?" he whispered. "We're going to get into trouble."

"Sure, sure," Jamie replied, waving his hand dismissively as he turned to pass Nicholas's bag back to him.

Claire slid the photo across the desk to Nicholas and smiled. "Congratulations."

"Thank—"

"Oi! What's this?" Jamie asked, finally noticing the letter on his lap. He quickly unfolded it and began reading.

Nicholas gritted his teeth and now he did reach across Claire's lap to grab the letter Jamie was holding. "Give it back, Shorty . . ." Nicholas said in a warning tone. His hand seized the bottom edge of the letter, but Shorty wasn't letting go, and Nicholas didn't want to tear it, so they stayed like that for a drawn-out moment—Shorty reading, Nicholas reaching, and Claire trying vainly to lean back in her chair so she could stay out of it.

"Give me a second, Beaves, I'm busy," Jamie replied, trying to swat away Nicholas's hand.

"Shorty!"

"Ahem!" the teacher said, and Shorty abruptly released the letter to look up with an innocent smile, leaving Nicholas holding the piece of paper and leaning awkwardly over Claire's seat in order to get it. It looked like Shorty had just passed a note to him. The teacher's gaze narrowed in on Nicholas and she nodded to him. "Strauss, would you come up here please?"

Nicholas grimaced as all eyes turned to him. He stopped leaning across Claire's lap and carefully folded his letter on the desk while holding the teacher's gaze. "Yes, of course, Mrs. Crawford."

Nicholas stood up from his chair and left his letter on the desk beside the photo of Elizabeth that Claire had passed back

to him. The teacher saw this and shook her head. "Please bring the note with you—and that photo on the desk."

Nicholas's eyebrows shot up. How had Mrs. Crawford seen the photo all the way from the front of the class? Apparently, she missed nothing.

"But it's not a—"

"Bring it, please."

Resigned, Nicholas turned and snatched up both the note and the photo. He managed to send Jamie an icy look just before marching up to the front of the class. Once there, the teacher nodded to the piece of paper in his hands. "Would you please read aloud for us whatever it was that you and your schoolmate found so urgent that it couldn't wait until after class?"

"Ahh . . . Mrs. Crawford, it's a letter, not a note, and I'd really rather not read it."

The teacher inclined her head and raised an eyebrow. "A letter? You've had time to strike up a correspondence in my classroom? I'm not sure if I should be impressed or insulted. Go on, give it to me—I'll read the letter if you won't."

With mounting trepidation, Nicholas handed over the letter. He gulped and turned to look down at his feet as Mrs. Crawford began to read. "*Dear Nicholas, ever since we said goodbye to each other, I've been feeling lost and empty inside.*"

At that, the classroom burst into laughter, and the teacher had to wait for it to subside. Thanks to the teacher's teasing, the class had falsely assumed that Shorty had written this letter to Nicholas, and as a result, it was even more embarrassing than it should have been—which was saying a lot!

Mrs. Crawford cleared her throat and went on, "*I did not fully understand just how much I'd grown accustomed to being with you in those three short weeks of summer, until now that you're so far away from me.*"

By this point the class seemed to realize the note wasn't from Shorty, and their snickering quieted somewhat.

"I want so much for my family to go back to Siesta at the end of this year, so that I can be with you again—but it's looking like that will not happen. I'm doing everything I can to try and change their minds, but to them I'm still just a silly, little girl, just turned 16, with no right to any serious feelings of my own.

They're preoccupied with their own things at the moment. It looks like we'll be moving to a new home soon—the best home in Wellington—and it's all they can talk about! I stand no chance.

I just wanted to say, Nicholas, for what it's worth, that I've thought about you every day since we said goodbye. I don't know if you've thought of me too, but just in case I've enclosed a photo to help you remember me better."

Mrs. Crawford looked up from reading and asked, "Nicholas, can I please see the photo?"

Nicholas, now resigned to his fate, handed her the photo. She looked at it for a while before turning it over to read Elizabeth's words on the back. Then she turned it back to study the person who had written the letter she was reading. The photo was a black and white Kodak Instamatic of a girl sitting in front of a rock, her head turned to face the camera, still holding the sandwich she had just retrieved from a picnic basket beside her. Dressed in only a loose, short-sleeved, cotton shirt, her arms and legs were bare, her long, brown hair flowing over her back and shoulders, almost to her waist. The girl was smiling alluringly at the camera. Mrs. Crawford made eye contact with Nicholas, and with a smile, she said, "This is a beautiful young girl, Nicholas; there's no doubt about that. I would like everyone in the class to take a look at this photo while I read the rest of the letter to them—it makes it all much more real when they can mentally picture you both. Would you mind terribly, Nicholas?"

Nicholas turned red, but most of the boys had seen the photo during lunch anyway, so there was no point to saying no. "I suppose that's fine, Mrs. Crawford, but tell them to be careful with it—it's the only one I have."

Mrs. Crawford turned to the class and said, "Please take a look at this photo while I read, but do be careful not to damage it. Hold it on the outside edges, and then pass it on to the next person." With that, the teacher stepped up to the girl seated in front of her and handed her the photo; then she went on reading Elizabeth's letter.

"Nicholas, I often find myself daydreaming, in class, at home . . . everywhere really, remembering our summer romance. Always I'm transported back to a special time and place—to our waterfall, and I'm there with you again, all alone. I even feel those same feelings—so much so that I find myself quietly

saying our secret word!"

This last part silenced the few lingering snickers, and the classroom grew deadly quiet as everyone tried to understand what the letter meant.

The teacher spoke first, "What's this about a waterfall and a secret word, Nicholas? Was this photo of her taken at that waterfall?"

Nicholas flushed bright red and turned to the teacher with a helpless smile. "No, Mrs. Crawford, I just got to see that photo today, for the first time, and as for the rest of your question, you know a gentleman doesn't kiss and tell."

She laughed. "I suppose that's a good policy, especially considering that your girlfriend—your other girlfriend—who comes to visit you here when she's in the city with her parents—what was her name? A pretty blonde girl I thought."

Nicholas nodded. "Denise."

There wasn't a lot of privacy in boarding school, and since Mrs. Crawford was the Twells Housemaster's wife, and that was Nicholas's boarding house, she knew almost everything there was to know about anyone who stayed there.

"Does she know about this Elizabeth?"

Nicholas nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Crawford."

"Hmmm, well, beware Nicholas—you're just about to discover how complicated life can get when you have—what seems to me anyway—to be a love affair. You'll end up with two women fighting over you. You know, we don't give up easily, and there's nothing we like better than eliminating our competition." Muted laughter bubbled up from the class, and Mrs. Crawford flashed Nicholas a smile before her eyes dipped to the letter in her hands and she continued reading.

"I'm constantly reminded how we nearly lost control of ourselves there, in that special place. Thank you for being such a gentleman that day! I'm haunted by those strange new feelings that arose in me there with you in that secluded paradise. Worse yet—I often have a recurring dream in which I relive that afternoon with you. It's such a lovely dream, and so real—but it always ends the same way, just as it did then, before anything serious happens. I confess, that as I begin to wake, I try to will that dream to continue—but it never does! I guess my mind just does not know how to end a dream like that . . . not yet."

Now the class was completely silent, all the boys and girls sitting listening, wide-eyed with anticipation. Mrs. Crawford paused to look up at the class and she smiled, saying, "Do you think we should read any more of this letter?"

The girls mostly shook their heads, having already put themselves in Elizabeth's position, imagining if it were their letter being read aloud before the entire class—but all of the boys were nodding and calling out: "Go on, Mrs. Crawford! We want to see how it ends for her and Beaver."

"Can I finish reading it, Nicholas?" Mrs. Crawford inquired, making Nicholas realize that he could say no.

Nicholas looked at her, quite numb now from the embarrassment. Only she could hear his muted reply.

"Sure, Mrs. Crawford. . . . It's all downhill from here anyway." He shrugged.

"Thank you, Nicholas. I'd really like to know how this ends, too!" she replied, smiling much more kindly now. The teacher went on, "*All I'm left with, as I am fully awake, is an empty feeling—a deep sense of loss, of knowing that you're not with me, that it was only a dream, and that we may never ever meet again. I feel tears well up in my eyes and roll down my cheeks onto my pillow—and I feel as if my heart is breaking! It's my worst nightmare now! All that I can do then, is to say a prayer for you, for me, for us, asking God to please, somehow, help things to work out more favorably for us, because I think there's much more to all of this than simply a childhood summer romance. At least—I'd like the chance to find out if there is.*"

Mrs. Crawford paused, looking up from the letter briefly, her eyes now moist, confirming what she suspected: several of the girls were having a difficult time keeping their emotions from spilling over, too—a few of them not very successfully. "Good . . . I'm glad it's not only me!" Then she changed her tone. "Boys, please learn something from this letter. We girls take these kinds of things very seriously! So don't toy with our emotions. We're not objects. We have very real feelings—and we can be very badly hurt by you!"

Not waiting to see their reactions to her short lecture, Mrs. Crawford went on reading. "*Nicholas, I know we have to continue with our separate lives now. We really have no choice. My mother and my friends remind me of that daily—that ours was only a 'summer romance' and that those are never real or*

lasting. They say we were only fifteen and sixteen

“I fully expect that you’re going to see Denise again. She seems like a lovely girl, and I cannot fault you for that. She’s real—I no longer am. I feel so helpless now. Not long ago I held your complete attention, for 3 wonderful weeks . . . but now I’m reduced to just a black and white photo and some words on a page.”

By now Mrs. Crawford could hear muted sobs coming from several of the girls, some of whom were dabbing their eyes with tissues—one girl had to resort to blowing her nose rather loudly. The teacher drew a deep breath, exhaled slowly to regain her composure, and pressed on.

“For the same reason, I’ve started dating Pieter, but Nicholas, I’d far rather that he be you!”

Mrs. Crawford paused, now quite moved from the stress of being the one responsible for channeling Lizzie’s innermost feelings to her entire class. She looked at Nicholas and said, “Young man, this girl may only be 16, but I hope you realize that she is very mature for her age. She is able to convey her feelings honestly and with great passion—it’s plain to see that she’s very serious about you!”

Nicholas raised his head, smiled weakly, and nodded before averting his gaze to look down at his shoes once more.

Mrs. Crawford continued smoothly. She was determined to make it to the end of the letter without traumatizing herself, or the class, anymore than necessary.

“Nicholas, if we never meet again, I want you to know at least this . . . our summer romance, the one that everyone else tells me to forget—was unforgettable! I will never forget it, not for as long as I live, and I hope you feel the same?”

Mrs. Crawford pressed on amidst the many signs and sounds of a very emotion-filled classroom. *“For me, at 15, just two months shy of 16, meeting you in Siesta was my fondest dream come true, but it’s left me with so many unrequited feelings—feelings that may have to stay that way now forever. My fondest wish, my nightly prayer, is to somehow get to live all of my life like those precious three weeks. Nicholas, if we do by some miracle get to meet up at Siesta again for summer holidays, I want you to take me upriver in a canoe again, back to our waterfall. I cannot ever imagine being there and feeling safe with anyone else but you! Sincerely yours, Elizabeth.”*

Breathing in deeply, then slowly out again to regain her composure, Mrs. Crawford folded the letter carefully. She looked up, scanning the class as if for confirmation of something—then she turned to Nicholas and spoke in a calm, measured tone. “Well, Nicholas, you have my respect, and that of many in this class, I’m sure, for having been a gentleman with Elizabeth—at a time when she was clearly very vulnerable. My advice to you, is that if you ever meet Elizabeth again—and I sure hope you do—please don’t ever change your stance on these issues until both of you are good and ready to commit to each other—for life!” She turned to the class. “Every young girl deserves to be treated with at least this much consideration and respect!” she said, and then she handed Nicholas’s letter back to him. Nicholas reached out and reclaimed the letter, not sure what to expect next.

“You may retake your seat, Nicholas Casanova Strauss,” the teacher said with a wry smile and a twinkle in her eye. In her next breath she added, “Oh, and should you have missed it, Nicholas—though this young lady doesn’t directly mention that she loves you, she certainly seems to be saying just that! One must learn to read between the lines with us women.”

Nicholas smiled at Mrs. Crawford’s observation and blushed as he nodded his agreement. Eager to escape, he hurried back down the aisle to his chair, stopping only to retrieve the photo of Lizzie from one of the girls on his way.

Once seated, Claire shot him an arch look. “Two girls?” she whispered. “Someone’s looking for trouble.”

Nicholas frowned. “Denise isn’t like that.”

But Claire just shook her head. “We’re all like that, Nicholas. Some of us just hide it better than others.”

Mrs. Crawford, now paging through her copy of the Biology textbook found what she was looking for, and waited for the class to quiet before speaking. “Class, you’re all around 17 years of age now, and the Elizabeth and Nicholas in that letter could have been any of you. As a result, I cannot think of a better place to start this year’s Biology class, than by discussing consequences of unbridled passions, so please turn to chapter seven—*Human Reproduction*—in your textbooks.”

Nicholas frowned and his eyes drifted out of focus as the teacher began speaking and writing notes on the board. He found himself almost unable to concentrate on what the

teacher was saying. Between Elizabeth's request that he take her back to the waterfall, and everyone else's assertions that he was looking for trouble by pursuing two girls at the same time, Nicholas wasn't sure what to think, but he was sure about one thing—

He had to find a way to see Elizabeth again, and somehow, someday, he would.



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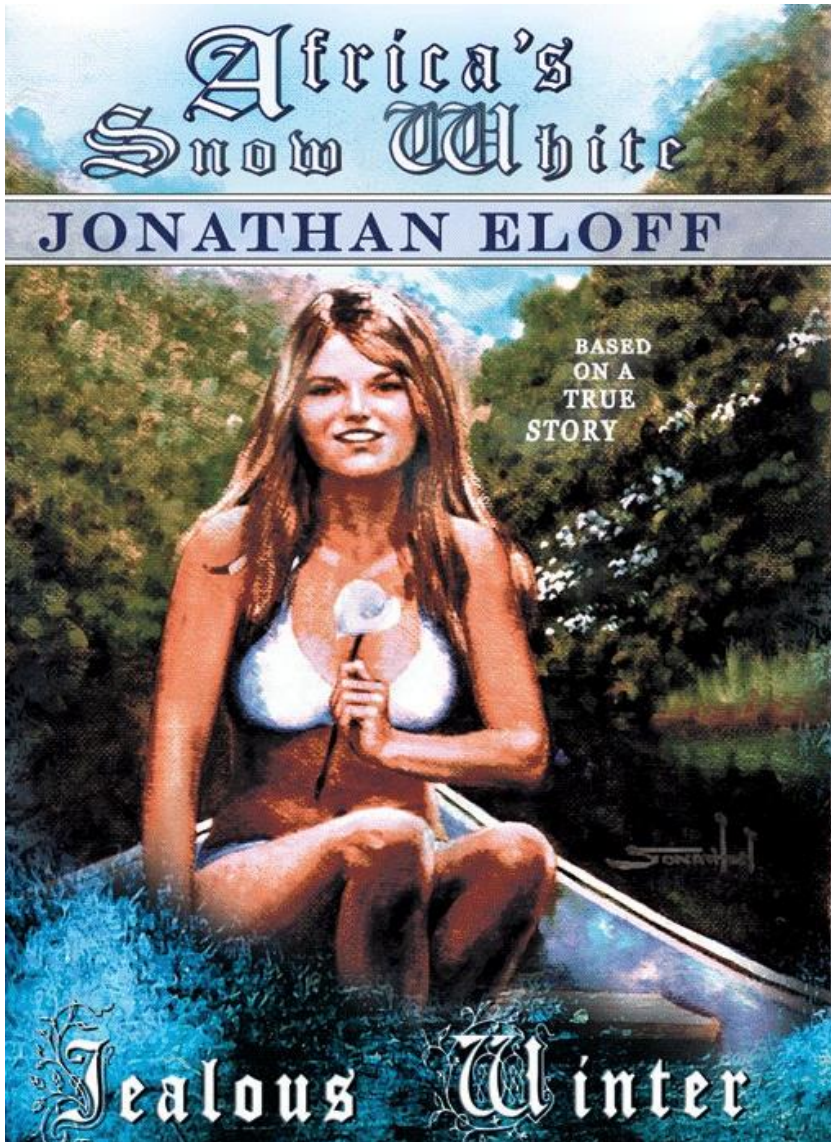
Africa's Snow White

Jealous Winter

By: JONATHAN ELOFF (Some 2nd. Ed. Scenes co-written by Nicholas Strauss)

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