

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT *Africa's Snow White,* **JEALOUS WINTER** *(The 2nd novel in this series)*

"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**, Ambassador from South Africa to Panamá, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Perú

"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, Alb, Canada

"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, Canada

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

"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 Cilliers**, Librarian & Book Reviewer (*Rootz mag*)

"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 ...” **Safely Anonymous**

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.

ADDITIONAL NOTE TO THE READER:

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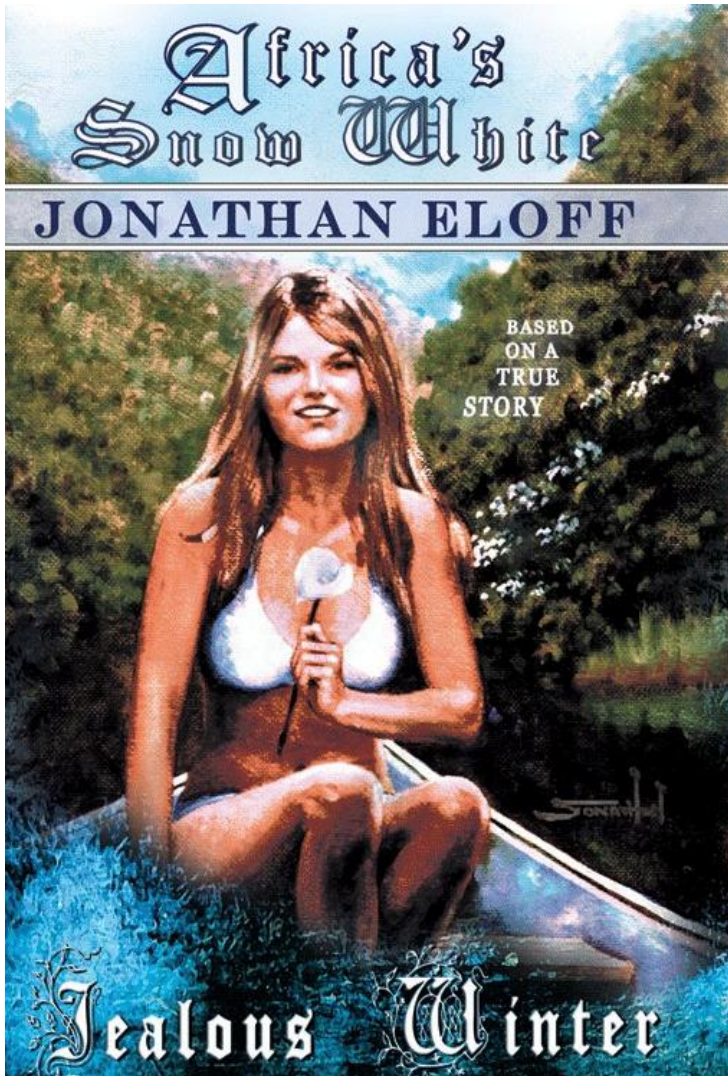
Where you will find all sorts of added content— photos and other intriguing tidbits not found in these novels—as well as interact with the author and some of the books real-life characters. You’ll even be able to solve mysteries using the clues hidden there. Last but not least, please don’t forget to “Like” our page—that’s really appreciated!

Africa's Snow White v2

Jealous Winter (Kindle version)

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

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*Elizabeth (Christmas 1972, age 17) ... who of us ever plans to fall in love then?
Normally summer romances end up as fond memories – not as life long affairs.*

Vol-2: Jealous Winter (Paperback)

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

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Because the "Africa's Snow-White" series of novels have a fairytale feel about them, people assume that they are works of fiction, but places, characters, as well as almost all of the incidents, are quite real. The specific dialogues, however, are a product of my imagination. Names have been changed to protect the identities of all characters — the guilty ... and their innocent victims.



For some, tender teenage love blossoms and grows, then ends up overwhelming them with fond memories of summers past ... then it matures, strives and survives against all the odds. Why would anyone want to work so hard to destroy something so beautiful? Well ... some do!

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 it also picks-up from a tearful farewell of their direct French Huguenot ancestors 15y old Genevieve & 16y old Charl, on the dockside in 1700's France. Both love-stories finally having a happy ending, in South Africa, 7y+7m after their serendipitous 1971 reunion in 1979, or we can imagine, 2 1/2 centuries after that 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 substantial, making it 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. We were 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 Huguenote 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 Dr's and nurses and missionaries who give up so much to help people in many remote parts of our world - in this case, in rural Africa.



Dr. Johann Strauss trained as a Dr. overseas in the Royal College of Surgeons and Physicians, returning in the 1950's to work amongst the Xhosa and Sotho peoples of Southern Africa, in a remote mountainous region similar to Tibet, called Lesotho. Lady Di and her sons often went to lend a hand and worked amongst the orphans of AIDS there. He did that for 4 decades, before returning to civilization – to a teaching hospital in Cape Town. At age 87, his mind is still sharp, and his wit even sharper! Standing next to him on the Wilderness beach, in 1975, is Nicholas Strauss, his son.

rologue

Wellington, South Africa, 1964: Edwin sat listening to Hattie's crying, his hands on the steering wheel, and his eyes on the road. Sitting stoically beside him, staring straight ahead, was his wife, Constance. She was pretending not to hear their four-year-old daughter's latest tantrum. Hattie had spent her first three years in and out of hospital, a very sickly child, and had been miraculously cured at age three and a half, but since then, Hattie had become unmanageable—a real problem child. It had gotten out of control lately, with five or six such tantrums every day. Hattie was all over the place, screaming and crying over the smallest thing which didn't go her way.

Sitting beside Hattie in the back of the car was Elizabeth, his eldest. She'd just turned eight. In all respects she was the exact opposite of Hattie. She was the golden girl, the apple of her parents' eyes. At the moment Elizabeth was trying to quiet her sister's crying by explaining that she was going away for a holiday, which Edwin supposed was partly true: it *would* be a holiday—for he and his wife, not for Hattie. The purpose of this trip was not fun. It was to serve as a lesson.

"Quiet, Hattie!" Constance said.

Maybe she's not so stoic after all, Edwin thought.

"Stop your crying right this second!" Constance went on, turning in her seat to send Hattie a scathing look. "You're going away for a week so you can learn to be a good little girl, and obey your parents as you should, but if you don't behave yourself we're going to leave you there."

Hattie only wailed louder.

Constance turned back to the fore with a huff. She had reached her limit with Hattie's misbehavior. Hattie would learn to do as she was told, to speak only when spoken to, and to not embarrass her parents—or else!

Edwin grimaced and tried to focus on the trip. It wasn't a particularly long drive to Stellenbosch and St. Augustine's Home for Lost Boys and Girls, but it felt much longer with Hattie's crying. This was Constance's solution to Hattie's constant discontent. *Leave her at an orphanage for a week and she'll smarten up!* His wife's words to him that morning still echoed through his thoughts. Edwin wasn't sure if this was the best solution, but his wife had been adamant—*It'll make her miss us and home so much that she'll be more appreciative and less troublesome. You'll see!*

They turned down a tree-lined street and Edwin kept half an eye on the backseat in his rearview mirror. Hattie was sniffing and wiping her tear-stained cheeks, while Elizabeth sat in the back looking out the window. At the end of the tree-lined street, the orphanage was on the right-hand side. Edwin turned into the parking lot. He wasn't sure exactly what story Constance had spun in order to get them to accept Hattie for the week, so he decided he'd let his wife do the talking.

They parked right outside the old brownstone building with peaked red roofs and lattice windows. It looked like a forbidding old castle, or a boarding school. Edwin opened the door and climbed out into a hot, summer sun. He shaded his eyes and squinted up at the façade of the orphanage while his wife climbed out the other side of the car and dragged a screaming Hattie from the back seat. Elizabeth climbed out and came to stand beside him.

"It looks nice," she said. "Can I stay here with Hattie, too?"

Edwin turned to his eldest daughter with a frown. "No, Lizzie," was all he could say.

They walked up to the old wooden doors of the orphanage and Constance knocked with the door knocker. The door was answered a moment later by an old nun with a fat face and waist. The woman's brown eyes skipped between Edwin and Constance before dipping to study Hattie. She was standing in front of her parents with her skinny arms crossed.

"You must be the Smythes," the nun said. "Is this the girl you told us about?"

Constance nodded. "Yes, take her," she replied, and thrust Hattie forward.

"We'll look after her, don't worry," the nun replied with a

warm smile.

"Good. It will be a weight off our minds." Constance smiled thinly back. Hattie turned to look at her mother and screamed; then she began crying once more. She tried to escape the nun's clutches, but the matronly nun held her fast.

"Come on, Edwin," Constance said, and dragged him away by his arm. He went willingly, but with a thoughtful frown.

"Goodbye, Hattie! See you next week!" Elizabeth said as she waved, trying to look and sound cheerful in order to cheer her sister up, but if anything Elizabeth's chipper mood was only upsetting Hattie more.

Edwin walked down the steps and crossed the dusty parking lot to his car. They heard Hattie's wailing all the way there. Edwin forced himself not to turn and look, lest he have any second thoughts. He felt a guilty pang at leaving Hattie here, but things had gotten out of hand, and his wife knew better than he how to discipline children and keep them in line. After all, she had made a deal with him that if they had daughters, she would raise them, and if they had sons, he would. And as fate would have it, they'd had two girls.

A quick glance at Constance revealed no such inner doubts. Her expression was firm, her walk and bearing were resolute, and the look on her face made him feel ill-at-ease.

Once they were sitting back inside the car, Constance nodded and said, "That will teach her. You'll see, she'll behave herself after this."

Edwin held his piece. He started the car and reversed out of the parking space. As he began driving away, he saw Elizabeth kneeling on the back seat and waving to Hattie out the back window of the car. *She doesn't understand*, Edwin thought, watching as Elizabeth turned around with a broad smile on her face.

"I think Hattie will like it there!" Elizabeth said. "It's such a nice, *big* house! And they must have a wonderful yard to play in."

"Yes," Edwin said. "I'm sure they must, Lizzie."

Constance remained silent, her eyes narrowed, her jaw firmly set as she stared out the window. It was time for them to go back to Wellington—to resume their lives without all the constant upheaval that Hattie caused.

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Chapter 1

“Elizabeth! There’s a telephone call for you!” Constance yelled from the kitchen, her hand over the receiver, even as she thought to herself: *Elizabeth shouldn’t be getting calls. She has homework and packing to do.* Constance and Edwin had been packing since early in the morning. There was still a lot to do, and they’d need Elizabeth and Hattie to help.

As Elizabeth entered the kitchen, angling for the telephone, she noticed the way her mother looked and nearly burst out laughing. Fortunately, she managed to restrain herself, and her cheeks merely bulged. Her mother’s appearance contrasted so sharply with the sophisticated, upper-class look she’d always cultivated, that Elizabeth almost couldn’t help herself. Constance’s darkly-dyed hair was done up in a bun; sweat was beading on her forehead and running down the nape of her neck; her face was flushed and free of any makeup; and her clothes were old, dusty, and wrinkled.

Elizabeth forced a frown as she took the phone from her mother, trying to hide the smile which was threatening to burst to her lips.

Constance shot Elizabeth a reprimanding look, as if she knew exactly what her daughter was thinking. “It’s Pieter, Elizabeth, but don’t forget, you can’t do anything today. You have homework to do, and I fully expect you to help your father and me with the packing this afternoon.”

“I know, Mom, don’t worry.” She held the phone to her ear. “Hello, Pieter.”

“Hey, Lizzie. I was wondering if you’d like to go see a movie with me sometime today?”

“I’d love to, Piet, but I have an *opstelle* to do for Monday, and I still have to help my parents pack . . .”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. You’re going to be moving pretty soon, huh?”

"Sometime in February, but I'll still be on the same block."

"True."

"Yeah . . ." Elizabeth glanced sideways and noticed the impatient look her mother was giving her. She hadn't realized her mother was still there. "Hey, Pieter, I better get going. I have a lot of work to do."

"Wait—I just had a thought. What if I came over and helped you with your *opstelle*?"

Elizabeth considered his offer. Pieter was much better at *Afrikaans* than she—it was his first language—and he was a university student. "Hmmm . . . that might work. Hold on, let me ask my mom if that's okay." Elizabeth lowered the phone and held her hand over the receiver. She turned to face her mother.

The implacable look on her mother's face seemed to say, *whatever it is, the answer is no*, but Constance asked anyway: "Well, what is it?"

"Would it be okay if Pieter came over to help me with my *opstelle*?"

Constance's lips flattened into a thin line. "So long as he doesn't do it for you. I won't have you cheating."

Elizabeth nodded and returned the phone to her ear. "My mom says that would be fine."

"Great. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Okay, see you soon!" Elizabeth said, and hung up.

* * *

Nicholas was in the classroom on a Saturday morning again, doing his compulsory hour of letter writing, replying to the letters he'd received on Tuesday. He'd been tempted to reply to Elizabeth's letter first, but he'd decided to get the others out of the way and save the best for last. It didn't take him long to get to Elizabeth's letter, though. He only had two others to send—one to his parents, and one to Denise.

Now he turned to the task of writing his reply to Elizabeth. He hesitated, suddenly struck by a guilty pang. He'd just finished writing his reply to Denise and now here he was, replying to Elizabeth. Two different letters, one for each of the two girls in his life, and for the first time, he was starting to feel quite guilty about it. It wasn't in his nature to be unfaithful, but he wasn't going steady with either of them, and both girls *did* know about each other . . .

He thought about it for a moment, gauging the depth of his feelings for each girl. But he soon stopped himself, startled by his discovery. He wouldn't admit it, even to himself. He couldn't. Elizabeth lived so far away, and he wasn't ever going to see her again. He frowned down at the piece of paper in front of him, where he'd begun to write his reply.

No, the most he could ever expect was there right in front of him: the occasional letter, and perhaps with time, when the memories began to fade—not even that.

Chapter 2

From her place at the wooden desk in front of her bedroom window, Elizabeth studied the enticing, aquamarine pool below, sparkling in the sun as the speckling shadows of the trees slowly withdrew from its surface. She was seated to one side of her desk, on her dressing table's stool, absently tapping her pen on the edge of the desk. By contrast, Pieter, who was seated next to her at the desk, was bent over a piece of paper, writing furiously.

Elizabeth sent him a quick glance and felt momentarily guilty. He'd offered to come over and *help* her with her *opstelle*, not write it for her. But after spending half an hour together, brainstorming as to what the story would be about, she felt that she'd done at least some of the work. And besides, he'd insisted that it would be easier and faster if he wrote it. She would rewrite it later in her own handwriting.

"What should we call Willem's best friend?" Pieter asked, not looking up from the page or lifting his pen.

Elizabeth didn't reply. She was lost in her thoughts.

Now Pieter did look up and set his pen down as he sent her a questioning look.

Absently noticing his scrutiny, Elizabeth shook herself out of her reverie. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"We need a name for Willem's friend . . ."

"Oh. Uh . . . I don't know, how about . . . what's a good Afrikaans name?"

"Pieter?" he suggested with a wink.

"How about Lukas?"

"Good enough," Pieter replied and continued writing.

Elizabeth watched him for a moment. He was on the third page now. *Three more to go*, she thought.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked suddenly.

"Ah . . . sure, why not." He flipped over the page he was

writing on and continued writing on the other side. "Water, please."

Elizabeth left to go fetch his water. When she returned, she found him in exactly the same position, hunched over the desk, pen in hand, reading what he'd written so far. He was nodding slowly as he read.

"It's hot in here," Elizabeth commented as she set the glass of water down in front of Pieter and then sat down on the stool beside him again. His only reply was a brief nod. Then he picked up the glass and drank deeply from it. Without even waiting to put the glass down, he began writing again.

An hour and a half later, Elizabeth was thoroughly bored. She felt the walls pressing in around her; there was an ache in her back from sitting so long on her dressing table's stool; and the silence was giving her a headache. She'd studied every spot on the ceiling and every scuff on the floor, every wrinkle in the drapes, and, it seemed, every single blade of grass on the lawn outside.

"How far are you?" she asked, hoping her impatience wasn't audible.

It was a long moment before he replied. But then, with a triumphant stab of his pen, he snatched up his glass of water—which had been diligently refilled by Elizabeth whenever it had begun to look empty—and took a long drink from it. Collecting all the pages together, he handed them to Elizabeth.

"There," he said, setting the glass down on the desk, empty.

She raised her eyebrows. "Finished?"

He nodded slowly, running a hand through his curly blond hair, and then wiping the sweat away from his forehead with the back of the same hand.

She counted the pages, bending back the corner of each as she did so. Her eyes bulged when she reached six and there were still pages left. She finished counting at nine.

"You wrote three more pages than you needed to! Remember, I still have to re-write them in my own handwriting."

He shrugged. "When I reached six pages, the story wasn't over. I'm sure it won't take you long to re-write."

Elizabeth nodded. "You're right. Sorry, I must sound ungrateful. I'm not, though. Thank you." Smiling, she leaned over and gave Pieter a quick kiss on the cheek. Moving away

again, Elizabeth gestured outside to the pool. "Feel like going for a swim? I think we've probably earned a break."

Pieter grinned. "Definitely."

* * *

Lawrence was on his knees on the hard tile floor, assembling another box. He taped it across the seams on the bottom, and once it was assembled, began carefully pulling bottles from the dark wooden liquor cabinet and placing them one by one inside the box. He considered that he would probably only be able to fill it halfway with bottles, or else it would be too heavy to carry, so he spread the bottles out, deciding to pack something soft between them when he was done.

He paused, frowning as he pulled a fourth bottle from the cabinet. Now he could see clear to the back. The cabinet was almost empty, with the few bottles it contained lined abreast in the front and hiding a gulf of space behind them. Somehow he'd thought they'd had more liquor than that. He counted off with his fingers. There were six bottles left inside the cabinet. That made just ten in total—and mostly wine. Stranger still, there wasn't a single bottle of vodka. And he was *sure* that they'd had some.

I guess we must've finished it, he thought, still frowning, and continued packing the bottles into the box. He easily fit all ten bottles inside the box without making it too heavy.

When he was done, he closed the cabinet and considered what he might use for padding between the bottles. He remembered that there were a number of dishcloths in the kitchen cupboard. They would only need to keep one or two of the cloths out to last them until they moved.

Lawrence got up off the floor, rising slowly, and feeling the joints and muscles in his legs complain from kneeling on the hard tiles. Now standing, he headed for the kitchen.

* * *

"Marco!"

". . . Polo," Elizabeth said in a small voice, and as though from a distance. She struggled to walk through the water without making a noise. Pieter was getting closer. His eyes were closed and his hands were stretched in front of him, feeling around blindly.

"Marco," he called again, continuing forward.

She giggled but didn't give the customary reply. He'd just

passed her by, and now she was walking quietly behind him.

"Hey . . . you're supposed to say Polo!" he said, his back still turned to her.

She smiled as she maneuvered even closer. He paused and turned his head from side to side, straining his ears to listen.

"Lizzie?"

Now she was barely a foot away. She brought her lips up close to his ear and whispered, "Polo."

He whirled around, opening his eyes as he did so. Elizabeth ducked beneath his arms as they swung through the space where her head had been.

Pieter smiled triumphantly and caught one of her hands in his. "Got you," he said.

She raised her eyebrows. "Your eyes are open."

"Good point."

Without another word, he drew her closer to him, tilted his head down to hers, and closed his eyes. His lips stopped an inch from hers. "Better?" he breathed.

Elizabeth tilted her head the other way and closed her eyes now, too.

"Much better."

Their lips brushed lightly, then met, and they kissed—long and deeply. After a breathless handful of seconds, Pieter drew slowly away again, his eyes opening. A sudden, warm breeze blew in from behind Elizabeth, picking up the still-dry strands of her hair and blowing them into her face. Pieter brushed the strands away, leaving a trail of water running down her cheek.

* * *

"Becky!" Lawrence had his hand on the cupboard door and was staring hard at the contents.

"Yes?" Rebecca said, her voice distant, but accompanied by her approaching footsteps as she walked to the kitchen from the dining room. She stopped in the entrance of the kitchen, and a stab of adrenaline lanced through her. Her heart was pounding. *He's looking in the cupboard!* she thought.

"What's this doing here?" Lawrence asked, turning from the cupboard to his wife, and holding something up for her to see.

Her eyes focused on the object, and she felt a dizzying spike of adrenaline. "A glass," she said calmly.

"I know that, but what's it doing behind the dishcloths?"

She shrugged, hoping he wouldn't notice that her legs were

shaking.

Lawrence frowned and studied the glass for a long moment. "I almost knocked it out of the cupboard."

"I must have absentmindedly placed it there. Sorry."

Still frowning, Lawrence set the glass down beside the kitchen sink. "Well, anyway, how are you doing with your packing?"

Rebecca bit her lower lip, her eyes still on the glass, and silently thanked God that she'd recently emptied and disposed of the bottle of vodka that she'd hidden beside it.

"Oh—it's going well," she said, looking up from the glass with a pleasant smile.

Lawrence nodded, then walked past her with a bundle of dishcloths. "Glad to hear it."

* * *

The following week came with unwelcome speed, leaving the weekend in a haze of packing and homework. Elizabeth had sheepishly handed in her *opstelle* on Monday, and now, three days later, she was sitting in class, awaiting the results.

Elizabeth was worrying her lip nervously. During the week, she had allowed herself to forget all about the fact that Pieter had written the *opstelle* for her, but now she found herself suddenly anxious that Mrs. Hendrik had somehow managed to discover the truth. Yet how could Mrs. Hendrik know? She'd rewritten the *opstelle* in her own handwriting . . .

Mrs. Hendrik had her back turned to the class and appeared to be thoroughly occupied with looking through the large, green canvas bag that she used to carry her students' assignments. She withdrew one of the assignments from the bag and turned to the class.

"As usual, I will be announcing the highest grade and informing you all as to whose it is." The teacher paused, eyes scanning her students. Elizabeth sent Norman Olaf a glance. She knew who had received the highest grade, who *always* had the highest grades—not only in Afrikaans, but in English and German as well. The teacher continued, "But, I have to say, this time I was pleasantly surprised by whose it was."

Surprised? Elizabeth thought wonderingly. She saw Mrs. Hendrik send Olaf an apologetic look before continuing. "I've even decided to break up the usual monotony of handing out your assignments by reading this—" She held up the

assignment she'd fished from her bag. "*—outstanding opstelle to all of you.*"

Elizabeth's curiosity grew. Who but Olaf could have written something that had so impressed their teacher?

"This is the first *opstelle* I have ever given a mark of one hundred percent, owing to the fact that it is surely the best I have ever read." She paused again, eyes scanning her students once more. Elizabeth watched as Mrs. Hendrik's gaze panned over to her and then stopped there for a long, uncomfortable moment.

Then, Mrs. Hendrik dropped her gaze to the paper she was holding and began to read: "*The Opal Forest*, by Elizabeth Smythe."

Elizabeth's jaw dropped. Olaf spun around in his seat and sent her a wide-eyed, slack-jawed look that seemed to say: *I was beaten by her?* Olaf's disbelieving look lingered, joined now by a few of the other students'. Elizabeth felt her cheeks turning red. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that Dilly was also staring at her, but unlike the others, she was trying very hard not to laugh. Of all of them, Dilly was the only one who actually *knew*.

As Mrs. Hendrik continued reading, Olaf's jaw only grew slacker and his eyes only got wider. With every too-big word and every too-eloquent sentence, he cast Elizabeth a look of mingled suspicion and awe.

Dilly's cheeks were puffing out with barely swallowed laughter. When the teacher finished reading the story, she looked up, met Elizabeth's eyes for a long, nerve-wracking moment, and then said, "Let's give Elizabeth a round of applause."

Elizabeth listened to the applause, the whistles, and the shouts of approval—all the while trying to avoid Olaf's disbelieving look, Dilly's knowing look, and worst of all—Mrs. Hendrik's faintly *disappointed* look. Elizabeth was sure that her face couldn't possibly get any redder. She felt herself sinking lower in her chair. She wanted so badly to disappear and felt as though Mrs. Hendrik's steady gaze was boring right through her. Mrs. Hendrik *knew*.

That's why she read my opstelle to the entire class, because she knows, and she wants my conscience do the work of reprimanding me. She couldn't have punished me more if she'd

given me a failing grade, Elizabeth thought, sinking still lower in her chair as the applause went on.

And on.

After what seemed like an eternity, the applause died away, and Mrs. Hendrik spoke again. "Good work, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth worked some moisture into her mouth. "Thanks," she replied, smiling weakly.

* * *

Lawrence sighed as he closed the door. It was a sigh of relief more than fatigue. He *was* tired from spending the whole weekend moving furniture and boxes with Edwin, but overall, he was feeling more energetic, more optimistic, and more enthusiastic than he had in a very long time.

He turned from the door and surveyed the scene behind him. Boxes were piled high and scattered everywhere, with furniture peeking out from in-between. The place was familiar, but strange—strange to think of it as his home.

This was *Edwin's* house.

Lawrence looked over to the staircase, then across to the dining room, and then peered down the hallway to the slice of the living room that he could see at the end.

Nothing but boxes stared back at him.

He walked down the hallway, through the living room, and over to the back door of the house. He opened it and continued out onto the porch. His eyes ran down the gently sloping lawn and to the darkly rippling waters of his new and bigger pool.

Still no one.

He looked up to the night sky and scanned the glinting multitude of stars. A cool, evening breeze blew across his smiling face, filling his nostrils with the sweet smell of chrysanthemums, hyacinths, and jasmine. He closed his eyes and whispered thanks to God.

He couldn't find Benjamin anywhere here.

* * *

Rebecca paused at the top of the staircase, looking down upon a disorderly scene: boxes and furniture everywhere she looked, scattered across a pale, dusty tile floor.

For some reason, she couldn't make her legs move. She had been on her way to the kitchen to get a drink of water, but now, looking down on the unfamiliar scene, it had finally struck her—

This wasn't her house.

Slowly, one step at a time, she descended the staircase.

As she did so, her eyes traveled from the floor, to the walls, to the windows flanking the front door, to the landing at the bottom of the stairs—and as she reached that landing, she just stood there, feeling miserable and out of place.

After a long moment, she willed herself to move again, finally heading for the kitchen to get a drink of . . .

She stopped once more, her brow wrinkling in thought. She'd told herself that she was just going to the kitchen to get a glass of water, but . . . she wasn't thirsty. Still stopped in the middle of the floor, she warred with herself: *I shouldn't. But it's been a long, stressful day . . .* She began nodding. *I deserve a little something to ease my nerves.*

And before she knew it, she was in the kitchen, bending down and opening a particular cupboard next to and below the kitchen sink. She'd unpacked her housecleaning supplies into that cupboard earlier in the day. Hidden amongst those supplies was an unmarked glass bottle, its contents golden brown. She withdrew the bottle and turned to find the box with the glasses in it. Pulling one out, she began to pour—

And heard the back door open. Her head came up sharply. *Lawrence!* Her heart began to pound and she spun around, bending down and quickly putting the bottle back behind the cleaning supplies.

"Becky?"

She still had the glass of brandy in her hand, but it was hidden from Lawrence behind the open door of the cupboard. Thinking quickly, she set it down beside the bottle at the back of the cupboard, and withdrew a bottle of glass cleaner. Closing the cupboard, she stood up and faced her husband.

"Yes?"

Lawrence's eyes flicked to the bottle of blue cleaning fluid in her hands, and he frowned. "Haven't you done enough cleaning for today?"

"There's still a lot that needs to be done," she said, sounding defensive. "Who else is going to do it? You?"

Lawrence sighed. "Listen, Becky, I know this hasn't been exactly easy for you, but—" He broke off, looking down at the floor. A moment later, his head came up again. "—things are going to get better. I promise."

She nodded just to be agreeable, hoping he would be satisfied with that and leave. But instead of leaving, Lawrence covered the distance between them in three quick steps and took her in his arms. He held her there for a long moment, his chin resting on her head.

Rebecca stifled a flash of irritation. *Come on, Lawrence—go. Just leave me alone.* But then Lawrence whispered, “I love you,” and all the ice around her heart suddenly melted. All the emotions she’d been washing down bubbled back up again, and cascaded down her cheeks. She buried her head against his shoulder, realizing with a sob that she couldn’t even tell him why she was crying. The one person she should have been able to talk to was also the one who had made her feel this way—and he was so happy to be out of their old home.

She grimaced and pulled away, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands as she began turning from her husband. He’d traded homes with the Smythe family even though he’d known she hadn’t wanted to. She had agreed to the trade in the end, but only because he’d worn her down and made her feel guilty with his pathetic moping. And now, it felt like the last piece of solid ground she’d had to stand on had been ripped out from under her feet.

Lawrence caught Rebecca’s shoulder as she turned away, and he turned her to face him again. “What’s wrong?” he asked, his eyes trying to find hers.

She could tell him, but what would that accomplish? They weren’t going to move back. *No*, she reflected bitterly, *there’s no going back now*. She smiled up at him. “Nothing. I guess I’m just tired.”

He nodded and rubbed her back reassuringly with one hand. “Understandable. We should probably get some sleep.”

She sniffed. “You can go and get ready. I’ve got a few things I want to finish up in here first.”

He cocked his head to the side. “What things? Surely they can wait until tomorrow.”

She looked away. “No. No, they can’t. I’d really like to get them out of the way while I’m thinking about it.”

“Well, okay. But don’t take too long.”

“I won’t.”

With that, he turned and walked away. And as soon as she heard that his footsteps had faded into the distance, she

turned back to the cupboard and pulled out her glass.

* * *

“Look at this Edwin—high, *wooden ceilings!*”

“Yes, it’s very nice, dear.”

She continued parading through the house. Coming to the glass sliding doors that led out into the backyard, she opened them and then turned around and beckoned to Edwin.

“Come on,” she said, noticing that he’d stopped following her some distance from the doors.

He sighed. He was tired, and he’d seen it all before. Nevertheless, he continued out onto the porch.

“Look.” She pointed. “See how big the yard is? You can barely even see our neighbors!”

“Mmhmm.”

She turned to regard him. “You’re not even listening.”

“I am,” he quickly reassured, “but I *have* seen all of this before, and I’m quite exhausted from all the moving we did today.”

Her lips compressed into a thin line, and she turned back to look out over the yard. “Well, go to bed, then,” she said, and waved him away with a shooing gesture.

“I—” He’d been about to apologize, but he was too tired to be conciliatory. “Goodnight, Constance.”

She heard the door slide shut behind her, and then nothing but the crickets chirping, and the soft rustle of the breeze. *Sometimes*, she thought, shaking her head, *he can be so irritating.*

Chapter 3

It was midday on Tuesday, the last day of February. Nicholas was seated in Champion Hall, waiting for lunch to be served. He found himself tuning out the usual chatter at the table to focus on his thoughts instead. He'd sent a letter to Elizabeth a month ago and he hadn't received a reply yet.

Maybe none was coming.

Perhaps it's for the best, he thought. Now he could focus on relationships that had a better chance of success. He sighed, running a hand through his thick, chestnut-brown hair as looked up to stare at the ceiling.

It was a very high ceiling.

"Hey, Beaver—hello, anybody home?" Jamie said, waving his hand in front of Nicholas's face.

Nicholas blinked and turned from staring at the ceiling to regard Jamie with an inquiring look.

"We were just discussing our strategy for the rugby game today," Billie filled in for his brother.

"And?" Nicholas prompted.

"Well—" Billie was interrupted as they heard the head boy announce that the mail had arrived.

"Hey, Beaver." Jamie elbowed him in the ribs. "Maybe your girlfriend sent you another photo, huh?" Nicholas frowned. "Awww . . . come on, don't be like that," Jamie said. "It's not my fault that Stimple passed it around to all of the prefects in the school."

Nicholas raised an eyebrow at Jamie and was about to tell him why it definitely was his fault, but Nathan Stimple beat him to it. "Well it's not my fault, either," Nathan began. Nicholas turned to regard his prefect. "I only passed it to a couple of people. After that—" Nathan shrugged. "—it was out of my hands."

"Listening to you lot, you'd think it was my fault," Nicholas

said.

"Well . . ." Jamie trailed off. "It was *your* photo."

Nicholas shook his head, a smile spreading across his face, and delivered a half-friendly punch to Jamie's arm.

"Hah!" Jamie grinned. "Didn't even make it past the fat!"

* * *

Elizabeth had just come home from school and was headed down the hallway to her room—her *new* room, now on the first and only floor of her sprawling new house—when she heard the phone start ringing.

She paused, wondering if she should get it. Just as she was turning around, however; it stopped ringing.

She continued on to her room.

"Elizabeth! Phone for you!" came her mother's voice.

She sighed and turned around again, now heading for the kitchen. Her school bag was still weighing heavily on her shoulder, and she shifted it to a more comfortable position.

A thought occurred to her: maybe it was Pieter calling? She dropped her school bag on top of a box in the hallway and picked up her pace. When she reached the kitchen, she took the phone from her mother, and put it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hello, Lizzie."

"Pieter!"

Constance busied herself in the kitchen, listening in as the conversation wore on.

"Mom, would it be okay if Pieter came over?"

Constance turned from the kitchen sink where she was taking dishes from the dish rack and putting them back in the cupboards.

"So long as you don't have too much homework."

Elizabeth nodded and started to tell Pieter—

"Before you hang up the phone, Elizabeth," Constance interrupted. "Ask Pieter if I can speak with his mother."

Elizabeth nodded again, and a moment later, she held the phone out to her mother.

Constance took the phone. "Hello, Milene?" she paused for the other's reply. "If you're not terribly busy, would you like to join me for afternoon tea?"

Elizabeth left the kitchen now, but was unable to help overhearing the conversation as she made her way through the living room.

"Yes, that's right, the big house on the corner . . ."

Elizabeth reached the hallway leading to her bedroom and retrieved her school bag from the top of the box where she'd dropped it. She wondered briefly why her mother was inviting Pieter's mother over—they weren't very good friends.

Then again, her mother didn't really have any *good* friends.

* * *

Constance and Milene were sitting at a table outside, sheltered from the afternoon sun by a colorful umbrella, which rose up from the center of the table. On top of the table were two ornately decorated teacups with a matching teapot and a tray full of biscuits.

Over their shoulders, the Hawequa mountain range could be seen, faded to blue from the distance, but still dominating the horizon with its soaring, rocky peaks. Leading up to the base of the mountains were the green, rolling hills of the winelands, hedged and divided by perimeters of tall trees.

Constance picked up her teacup with one hand, holding a saucer beneath it with the other. She took a careful sip. Milene's tea sat on the table, in exactly the same position as it had been when it had been poured.

Constance eyed the cup. "You haven't touched your tea. Shall I get you something else?"

Milene broke her gaze away from the pool where she'd been watching her son, Pieter, and Elizabeth. They were sitting on a shady corner of the pool with their feet dangling in the water. "Nee, that's okay. I'm not very thirsty."

Constance nodded.

"So," Milene said, "I have to admit I'm curious—how is it that you've moved into the Stevens family's house?"

Constance set her teacup and saucer back down on the table. "Well, for obvious reasons, after their son died, they weren't very happy living here anymore. We simply offered them a way out."

Milene raised her eyebrows. "Oh? And what way was that?"

"We traded homes with them."

"Really?" Milene's eyebrows elevated still further, and she turned to watch Elizabeth and Pieter again.

Constance followed Milene's gaze down to the pool. "It really is a beautiful house, though. I'm surprised the Stevens family gave it up so easily. Did you know that the property is almost a

full acre?"

"Quite big," Milene agreed absently.

"Yes, quite. And if I have to say so myself, it's also the nicest house in Wellington," Constance said, sipping her tea.

Milene smiled, feigning interest, and checked her watch. She'd barely been here for half an hour, but somehow it felt like two. She stifled a sigh. "We're thinking of remodeling our kitchen," Milene said.

"Really? That's nice." Constance nodded, gesturing ahead of her. "Have you seen the view? Look behind you. You can see the mountains, the valley . . . even a bit of the Kromme River."

Milene glanced over her shoulder, but soon looked away again. *Can't this woman talk about anything else?*

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Mmhm . . ." Milene reached for a biscuit and took a bite out of it. "These biscuits are delicious. Did you make them yourself?"

"No, I bought them at Stuttafords," Constance said. Then her eyes lit up, and she spoke again. "You haven't really seen the inside of the house yet, have you?"

Milene's eyes darted from one side to the other as she finished her biscuit. "Well . . ."

"No, of course you haven't. I whisked you right through and out the back door," Constance replied. "Where *are* my manners? Would you like to see the house now?"

No, I wouldn't, Milene thought, but instead she smiled thinly and replied: "That would be wonderful."

* * *

Two short knocks sounded on the door to Lawrence's office. The door was open, and Lawrence was bent over some paperwork at his desk. Hearing the sound, he looked up.

He saw Edwin standing in the doorway, holding a briefcase in one hand, his blazer draped over the other. "Ah, hello, Eddie. Come on in."

Edwin did so, stopping in front of Lawrence's desk. "Would you care for a round of golf this afternoon?"

"Well, nice as that sounds, I think I'd better decline. I'm going to spend the evening with my family instead. Thanks for the invitation, though." Lawrence returned his attention to the paperwork on his desk.

Edwin raised his eyebrows, and felt momentarily guilty that

he wasn't just as eager to go home. "Perhaps tomorrow, then."

"Perhaps," Lawrence agreed, without looking up. Something in his tone told Edwin that Lawrence would be spending *tomorrow* evening with his family as well.

"Well, all right, then . . . see you tomorrow, Lawrence," Edwin said, turning to leave.

"Until then," Lawrence returned, looking up from his desk with a smile and a nod.

* * *

"Becky?" Lawrence called, closing the front door behind him.

No answer.

"Becky?" Lawrence called again, louder this time.

"Daddy?"

Lawrence followed the sound to its source and saw Lydia standing at the top of the staircase, hugging her favorite stuffed animal—a black and white kitten named Ralph.

"Hello, Lydia dear. Where's mommy?"

"She's shweeping."

Lawrence smiled. Lydia hadn't actually answered his question. "Where is mommy sweeping?"

"In the bedroom," Lydia giggled.

Lawrence frowned. He felt like he was missing something. Starting toward the stairs, a thought suddenly occurred to him, and he paused in mid-step. *Of course*, he thought. *Shweeping*. A smile sprang to his lips.

"Lydia, are mommy's eyes closed?"

"Yes! She's shweeping!" Lydia giggled again.

Lawrence laughed at himself and climbed the stairs. When he got to the top, Lydia wrapped her arms around his legs in a fierce hug.

Setting his briefcase on the ground, he went down on his haunches to return her hug. "Did you have a good day, sweetheart?" he asked, holding her at arm's length.

She shook her head energetically, her long, golden-brown curls swinging and fanning out over her shoulders as she did so.

Lawrence's dark eyebrows drew together. "Why not, honey?"

"Mommy's been acting stwangewy," Lydia said, and then hugged him again.

Lawrence's eyebrows drew even closer together. He was tempted to ask Lydia *how* mommy was acting strangely, but he

decided that she probably wouldn't know how to explain anyway. Letting go of Lydia, he picked up his briefcase, stood up, and started for his bedroom.

"Whewe awe you going, Daddy?"

"To check on Mommy."

As Lawrence opened and walked through the door, he found his wife sleeping just as Lydia had said. He walked over to the bed and gently nudged his wife.

"Rebecca?"

She didn't stir.

He nudged her again, harder this time.

Nothing.

He felt a sudden stab of adrenaline, and his heart began to pound. Lydia's voice echoed through his mind: *Mommy's been acting stwange wy* . . .

He dropped his briefcase with a *thud*. His arm a blur, he put two fingers to the carotid artery in his wife's neck.

* * *

The dormitory was anything but quiet. It was only half-full, but that rarely made a difference. It took only one Beckett to make a lot of noise. Nicholas was glad that there was at least an upper limit on just how much noise they could make—prefects would only tolerate so much rowdiness. But when the prefect was gone . . .

Nicholas looked up from reading a letter and scanned the room. His prefect, Nathan Stimple, wasn't back from the Coffee Club yet. Every day, there was one free hour where nothing was scheduled: no classes, no homework, no sports—nothing. One blessed hour where Nicholas could do anything he wanted.

It was in that spirit that the Coffee Club had been created. The headmaster of Saint Andrew's was a firm believer that "idle hands are the devil's tools," so he'd decided to create a place where students could go to have some unscheduled fun. There was a jukebox, a snooker table, a dance floor—complete with spinning disco ball—and a bar that served a variety of non-alcoholic beverages. Best of all, they could invite girls there.

Nicholas would have been there, too, except that when he'd received his mail at lunchtime, he'd spotted a letter from Elizabeth. Having learned his lesson from the last time, he'd decided to wait for a private moment to open and read it. And

this, Nicholas thought, his eyes panning around the room, noting maybe half a dozen others, was about as private as moments got.

Nicholas's gaze returned to the letter in his lap. Elizabeth started the letter by apologizing for taking so long to reply and then followed up with an explanation. Apparently, she and her family had been busy moving. He took comfort in that. She hadn't been ignoring him, just busy.

She also wrote to him about her new boyfriend, Pieter. He wondered briefly why she was telling him about *that*, but supposed it was in keeping with the tone they'd set for their relationship. He'd told her that he had a girlfriend at home, and she'd told him that she was between boyfriends. They hadn't felt the need to keep any secrets.

Then again, he had a similarly open relationship with Denise, but he knew better than to talk about Elizabeth in his letters to Denise—or vice versa. He didn't want to make them jealous of each other. Which begged the question: was Elizabeth trying to make *him* jealous?

He re-read the part about Pieter and shook his head. No, it was little more than a summary of places they'd gone and things they'd done, and for all her letter revealed, they could just as easily have been friends.

Nicholas checked his watch. He didn't have enough time to reply to all of his letters, maybe not even enough time to reply to more than one, but he already knew which he was going to reply to. Elizabeth's letter still in hand, he went to his locker and fished out an envelope, a pen, and a piece of paper.

* * *

Lawrence Stevens withdrew his fingers from checking his wife's pulse. He looked down at his hands and silently willed them to stop shaking. Rebecca's pulse was strong and steady; she really was just sleeping. He breathed a sigh of relief. But why hadn't she woken up when he'd nudged her, then?

He frowned. As his head began to clear from the rush of adrenaline, he realized what he was missing. There was a familiar smell hanging in the air—sharp and astringent. He leaned over his wife, a sinking feeling in his gut, and sampled the air closer to her. The smell was stronger now. He smelled her hair, her clothes, and then her breath—

He almost choked and drew sharply away.

Brandy.

She was drunk, so drunk that she'd fallen asleep—or passed out. That explained why Lydia thought her mother had been acting strangely.

"What's the matter, Daddy? Is Mommy okay?"

Lawrence turned to see Lydia standing in the doorway, still hugging Ralph, the stuffed kitten. He smiled reassuringly. "Nothing's wrong, honey; Mommy's fine."

"When's supper going to be weddy?"

Lawrence blinked a couple times and glanced back at his wife. He stared at Rebecca for several long, indecisive seconds, then turned back to Lydia. "Mommy hasn't made supper yet?"

Lydia shrugged.

"Well, don't worry, sweetheart; I'll think of something."

"Okay," Lydia replied and disappeared into the hallway.

Probably going to her room, Lawrence thought as he ran a hand through his hair and turned again to gaze upon his wife's sleeping form. He hoped desperately that this was an isolated incident, but he knew better than to believe that.

He looked down at his briefcase where it lay next to the bed. It had popped open when he'd dropped it, and now the papers were spilling out. *I should put that away,* he thought. But he just shook his head wearily and headed for the door. Apart from confronting his wife when she awoke, there *was* another way for him to discover just how bad her habit had become.

When he got to the bottom of the stairs, he continued on to the living room and out the back door. He turned the corner, walked down the side of the house and came upon a pair of black garbage bags.

He opened the first bag and began searching through it. It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. With a sinking feeling quivering in his stomach, he opened the second bag and searched its contents. More of the same. His expression turned grim, and he began pulling bottles and cans from the bags and lining them up along the side of the house.

He was filthy by the time he'd finished: an unidentifiable, sticky, yellow residue was clinging to the palm of one hand, and his shirt sleeves were dotted and smeared with wet, dark splotches of who-knew-what.

He didn't notice. He just stood there, staring at the lineup of bottles and cans: an unmarked bottle that smelled of brandy, a

bottle of chardonnay, half a dozen beer cans—none of which he could remember drinking—and a small bottle of vodka that he couldn't even remember having purchased. *Why didn't I see it coming? I must have been blind!*

Now he understood why there'd been so few bottles to pack when he'd emptied the liquor cabinet in his old home. She'd been drinking then, too.

Bending down slowly, he collected the bottles and cans into his arms and started back around the side of the house to the back door. He accidentally dropped a beer can on the deck as he fumbled with the doorknob, but he left it where it had fallen. Once inside, he continued to the kitchen, and one by one, set the evidence down on the kitchen counter. He would confront Rebecca with it later.

Washing his hands briefly at the sink, he dried them on a dish rag, then made his way over to the phone. Picking up the receiver, he began dialing a local restaurant to place an order for fish and chips. He'd have to go fetch it in twenty minutes, but better that than have to cook supper himself. It was too late; he was too tired; and his wife certainly wouldn't be making any.

* * *

Lawrence walked around the table collecting dirty plates. There was nothing but silence to greet the clank and clatter of the dishes as he collected them from the table. He'd just finished putting Lydia and Julia to bed, and Rebecca was *still* asleep.

He stacked the dishes in the sink, picking a few stale fries off of Lydia's plate and tossing them in the garbage. He was in a daze. What was he going to do? He needed Rebecca to handle the responsibilities at home while he handled those at work. If she couldn't do that anymore . . . he shook his head. He couldn't do *everything* by himself. And that was to say nothing of the emotional toll that having an alcoholic wife would take. How could she?

How *could* she?

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming up behind him. "Hello, dear. Sorry, I guess I must have been—" Rebecca broke off mid-sentence, her eyes flicking to the line of empty bottles and cans on the kitchen counter. Lawrence turned around.

Her eyes flicked to his, looking wide and panicky. "I had

some company and—”

“And what, Becky?” He picked up the unmarked, empty bottle of brandy and shook it in her direction. “They drank a whole bottle of brandy, a bottle of vodka, six beers, and some Chardonnay?” He shook his head. “No. No excuses. I want the truth.” He paused to wait for her answer, but she just stood there, staring dumbly at the empty bottle in his hand, unable to speak. “*Now*,” he prompted, “I want to know how long this has been going on for.”

“I . . .” she began, her eyes still glued to the empty bottle, her head slowly shaking.

“Becky!” he boomed.

She flinched and her head came up sharply, but then she winced and closed her eyes, holding a hand up to the side of her head. “Please, not so loud.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes flashing. “Hurts, doesn’t it? Serves you *bloody* right.”

Her eyes opened now, looking hurt.

“You have a hangover, Becky! A hangover—at night! You must have been drinking all day! While I was working—*working*. For *you*. For *us*.” He took a breath and shook his head, looking down at his feet for a moment. His head came back up again. “Why? Tell me *why*, after all we’ve been through, you thought it would be a good idea to add this—” He gestured violently to the lineup of bottles and cans. “—to our problems.”

Rebecca was holding both hands to her temples now, eyes tightly shut. “Are you done?” she asked.

“No, I’m not bloody done!” he slammed the empty bottle of brandy on the counter. “This stops here, Becky.”

Her eyes opened, flashing with a fire of their own, which shone brightly and spilled hotly down her cheeks. “You don’t *get it*, do you? This is *your* fault. If you hadn’t forced me to move into this rotten little hovel—”

“*Hovel? Forced* you?” Lawrence roared. “You *agreed* to move here!”

“Yes, I *agreed*, but only after you badgered me into it with all your whining.”

Lawrence looked away, shaking his head. “You selfish, *selfish* woman.” His head came back around. “You want your home back? Fine. I’ll get it back.”

She laughed—a short, brittle laugh. “You think it’s that easy? Move us here—” She gestured to the walls around her. “—and then move us back? Get real, Lawrence.”

“I’ll do it. Watch me. But I don’t *ever* want to see you drinking again.”

“*Typical*. So you can drink all you like, but I can’t? You think my memory’s so short? I remember Edwin driving you home because you were too *sozzled* to do it for yourself.”

“That’s different.”

“Oh really? How is it different?” She leaned forward and lowered her voice dangerously. “*En-lighten* me.”

“It was an isolated incident. You haven’t seen me like that since, have you?”

“And what about the funeral? You spent the whole of the following *week* at the bar! There was a whole *stream* of incidents then!”

Lawrence turned away and started walking. “I’m not going to discuss this with you anymore.”

“Fine! Run away, Lawrence, but someday I’m not going to be here when you come back.”

“Fine with me,” came Lawrence’s choked reply, just before he disappeared from sight.

Rebecca bit her bottom lip to stop it from trembling. She just stood there, rooted to the spot, staring after Lawrence, tears coursing down her cheeks.

And then the front door slammed, and Lawrence was gone.

* * *

Lawrence sat at the bar counter, studying his reflection in the dark, lacquered surface. He was struggling to find a good way to say it, but after a long moment, he decided that there really was no good way to say it.

He sighed and took a gulp from his drink. “Eddie, I’ve got a problem.” He set his glass down again and returned to studying his reflection.

“Oh? What’s that?” Edwin asked.

Lawrence ground his teeth a few times before replying. “My wife isn’t happy with the trade.”

Edwin raised his eyebrows, trying to decide how to reply to that. Why was Lawrence telling him this? “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said finally. It sounded trite, even to him, but what else could he say? He felt guilty, but it hadn’t been his idea to

trade homes. He hadn't even wanted to. "Is there anything I can do?"

Lawrence stopped studying the bar counter and turned to regard his friend. "As a matter of fact, there is."

Edwin waited for Lawrence to continue, but the silence stretched out uncomfortably between them until he had to ask, "Well? What is it?"

Lawrence took another gulp from his drink and thumped the glass back down heavily. "Have you finished unpacking yet?"

Edwin frowned and began shaking his head. "No, but Lawrence, what are you getting at . . ." Edwin trailed off, having just answered his own question.

Lawrence met his friend's gaze and nodded slowly, but Edwin was staring past him, deep in thought. "I know it's a lot to ask, but . . ." Lawrence turned away with a frown of his own and fiddled absentmindedly with his glass. "She's been drinking, Edwin. I came home last night to find her lying on the bed, dead to the world." He let out a puff of air. "You know, for a moment, I actually thought she *was* dead, but she was just sleeping off a hangover." Lawrence laughed bitterly.

Edwin's mouth worked a few times as he tried to say something, but what could he say?

"I went looking through the garbage and found all the empty bottles. Supper wasn't ready; the kids were worried; and I just kept thinking to myself: what if this is just the beginning?" Lawrence picked up his glass and finished his drink. Setting it down, he resumed studying his reflection in the bar counter.

"If she caves in right now, there won't be enough pieces left of me to put back together again." His voice was growing hoarse, but he swallowed and continued anyway. "The thing is . . . I'm afraid it may already be too late."

Edwin still wasn't sure what he could say. He'd just moved! How could he move back? But, he hadn't really wanted to move in the first place, and if it helped Lawrence . . . well, that had been the whole point of the trade. A sudden, desperate thought occurred to him: what if he was mistaken about what Lawrence was suggesting? Surely he was mistaken.

"Lawrence," Edwin began, "am I crazy or are you trying to suggest that we trade homes back again?"

Lawrence looked over at Edwin. Unable to meet Edwin's eyes for long, he turned away again. Edwin saw the muscles

working in Lawrence's jaw, as gritting his teeth. Then his mouth opened, and in a whisper, he said, "That's right. And I'll gladly pay for any of your expenses."

Edwin just sat there, struggling with his thoughts. He couldn't let his friend's life fall apart just because he was tired of moving boxes and furniture . . .

"Okay, let's do it."

Lawrence spun around on the bar stool, his eyebrows shooting up, his eyes brightening.

But Edwin stopped him with an upraised hand. "Don't thank me yet, Lawrence. We still have to convince my wife."

The light faded from Lawrence's eyes as quickly as it had appeared. "Ah," he said simply, lowering his head and turning back to the bar counter. "Of course."

Edwin caught Lawrence's despairing tone. "Don't worry. You can come by tomorrow, and we'll discuss it with her. I'm sure she'll understand."

Lawrence nodded slowly, but gave no reply.

Chapter 4

“Well then, Edwin tells me you have something you’d like to discuss with me?” Constance prompted.

Edwin shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Yes,” Lawrence said, his eyes panning over to Edwin and then back again, “has he told you anything yet?”

Constance shook her head. “No, why? Is this the sort of thing I should be prepared to hear?”

“Well—maybe.” Lawrence frowned and took a deep breath. Then, he explained the situation to Constance as he had to Edwin the night before. All the while Constance barely moved, her face was blank, and she didn’t say a word. Edwin was equally still, except for his eyes, which continually darted from his wife to Lawrence and then back again, making him look like a cornered mouse: not moving for fear of attracting attention to himself, but ready to bolt at a moment’s notice.

When Lawrence finished, there was a long, uncomfortable silence. Finally, Constance moved, her head slowly shaking. “I understand your concern over your wife’s drinking habit, but I can’t say I’m surprised to hear of it. Perhaps you’ll recall a few months ago how much your wife was drinking when she came for supper?”

Lawrence didn’t reply and didn’t meet Constance’s eyes. He just sat there studying the coffee table. He remembered. They’d had a fight that night, and he could still recall how unsteadily his wife had been pacing around the bedroom.

“Well, I do,” Constance said. “She was the only one drinking white wine, and the bottle was empty by the time you left.”

Constance’s voice softened and she went on, “That was *before* we traded homes, Lawrence. Your wife’s drinking has nothing to do with the fact that she prefers her old home. But apart from that, you can’t seriously expect us to move again. The only reason we moved in the first place was to help you. It

wasn't because we wanted to."

Lawrence swallowed hard and sniffed. He felt truly miserable now. Constance was right. How could he have missed it? His wife had been drinking the whole time, turning to alcohol to wash away the pain. And now he'd actually had the gall to ask his best friend to trade homes back again in order to fix a problem that had nothing to do with where he and his wife were living. Is that how he solved problems? By running away from them?

Constance smiled sympathetically. "You can't keep running, Lawrence."

That brought his head up and sent a shiver down his spine. It was as if she knew what he was thinking. "You're right," Lawrence said, nodding slowly. "I'm sorry."

Constance's smile didn't waver. "Don't worry about it. If there's anything else we can do . . ."

Lawrence shook his head.

"Would you like to stay for supper?" Constance asked.

Lawrence shook his head again. "No, thank you. I think it's time I got home."

Constance nodded and Lawrence stood up from the couch. She and Edwin followed him to the front door. Once the door was safely closed behind Lawrence, Constance rounded on Edwin with a glare. "Well, *that* was interesting. I don't suppose you could have given me some warning?"

Edwin opened his mouth to reply, but she brushed by him with a scowl before he could get the words out. "At least no harm was done," Edwin heard her say as she retreated down the hallway from the door.

He didn't move. Something didn't fit. His wife's arguments had seemed so reasonable, so feeling, but now that Lawrence was gone, she seemed angry, not sympathetic. Edwin frowned. *She's an enigma*, he thought, shaking his head.

* * *

Lawrence had come home to find that, yet again, supper wasn't ready and his wife was no where to be seen. But to add to it, the dishes hadn't been done since yesterday, and he was pretty sure that he was wearing his last clean pair of pants.

He'd slept in the spare room the last two nights—ever since he'd found out about Rebecca's drinking habit—surrounded by unopened boxes, sleeping in fits and starts. He'd forgotten how

hard it was to sleep alone. And now he was sitting slumped in a chair in the living room, staring at the wall. How had it come to this? When his son had died he'd stood next to Edwin at the funeral thinking that things couldn't possibly get any worse. And now . . .

He shook his head wearily. No wonder he'd been running from his problems. *Still*, he thought, *I have a good job, my health, two wonderful little girls, and a . . . drunken wife?* He stopped his thoughts with a frown and got up from the chair. He decided to go talk to Rebecca. He smiled wryly as he went; no one had even noticed that he was home yet. *One of the disadvantages of a two-story house*, he thought.

When he got to the top of the stairs, he saw the doors of Lydia's and Julia's rooms swing open, one after another. They must have heard him coming up the stairs.

"Hi, Daddy!" Lydia said. Julia was characteristically silent, but her smile said more than words could.

"Hello, girls," he greeted, offering a smile of his own. "I'll be with you in a moment. I have to talk with your mommy first."

"She's not feeling good," Lydia said. "She has a headache."

Lawrence hesitated on his way to the bedroom. A headache—he knew what *that* meant. "Nevertheless, I need to speak with her," he said, continuing on to the master bedroom.

"Awe we gowing to have fish and chips again?" Lydia's hopeful voice came from behind him just as he reached for the bedroom door handle.

He smiled ruefully to himself. *She really has no clue what's going on*. Her naïveté was refreshing—and enviable. He wished he could be so oblivious.

If only.

"We'll see, sweetheart," he said, and with that, opened the door and walked into the bedroom. He closed and locked the door behind him.

"Where have you been?" Rebecca asked, sitting up on the bed.

He met her accusing stare, surprised to find her awake. "I was at Eddie's house. We discussed—" He struggled for the right word, but couldn't find it. "*undoing* the trade."

"And?" she prompted. "I was right, wasn't I?"

Lawrence sighed and looked down at his feet. "Yes." He felt too defeated to argue.

"I knew it!" she laughed, but it sounded half-hysterical to Lawrence. She quieted again and studied the bedspread.

Lawrence walked over to the bed and sat down next to his wife. "Becky, I'm sorry. If I'd truly known how much that home meant to you, I never would have gone through with the trade." He paused. "But don't you think that maybe your drinking has more to do with Benjamin than the move?"

Her head came up suddenly, her eyes wide and shining. "What do you mean?"

"I think we've *both* been running."

She laughed again. "No, Lawrence. It's just you. You're the one who runs. You always were."

Lawrence gritted his teeth but swallowed his pride. "You're wrong, Becky. You've been running, too. You just haven't admitted it to yourself yet."

She shook her head slowly.

"Constance saw it, as well. Even before we traded homes, she noticed how much you were drinking."

Rebecca gave a derisive snort but it came out sounding weak. "And you'd believe her over me?"

Lawrence frowned. "I think it's easier for her to be objective about your behavior than it is for you right now."

"My *behavior*? What are you trying to say? That I'm some kind of alcoholic? What about *your* behavior?"

"Becky," Lawrence began, his voice soft and full of sympathy. "Whatever my behavior—and I'm not excusing it—I haven't been neglecting my responsibilities. But you . . . supper isn't ready, the washing hasn't been done, the sink is full of dirty dishes . . ." he trailed off when he heard his wife sniffing. He swallowed painfully and then continued. "I realize that this is hard for you. It's hard for me, too, but you're not making it any easier by denying that you have a problem. You need to face it—and beat it."

Rebecca continued sniffing, giving no reply. She *couldn't* reply. His words were hammering away at her, every one of them hitting a chink in her armor and uncovering truths that she hadn't even realized she was hiding from. Lawrence was right. She *had* been running. She remembered:

It was late, and she'd heard some commotion outside. She went to the door, her feet not quite able to walk a straight line.

Just before opening the door, she heard her husband outside, talking to someone. Too curious to interrupt, she put her ear to the door to listen.

"You don't know what it's like, Eddie," she heard Lawrence's muffled voice say. "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 . . . I can't."

She felt the tears welling in her eyes and heard another voice—Edwin's—say: "Well, I . . ."

"He's dead, Eddie. There's nothing I can do to fix that."

She opened the door and saw her husband sitting on the grass, clearly drunk himself. . .

It had been then—when she'd caught a whiff of the smell on Lawrence's breath—that she'd decided to invest in some particularly minty gum.

She remembered the bottle of vodka she'd hidden behind the kitchen towels that week. She'd selected it from the liquor cabinet because it was clear like water, and if she were careful, it would be hard for someone to catch her drinking it.

"Becky?" Lawrence sounded worried. She'd been silent for a few minutes. He frowned, thinking that maybe he was being too hard on her and reached over to put his arm around her. "Hey, listen, it's going to be okay. We'll get through this. I'm going to hire a live-in maid, so you won't have to worry about a thing, okay?"

Abruptly, she melted beneath his arm, collapsing against him and sobbing quietly. Her tears quickly soaked through his thin cotton shirt. "We'll get through this," he repeated, now whispering in her ear. *We have to*, he added silently.

Betrayal

Chapter 5

—EIGHT MONTHS LATER—

The mechanical arm of the alarm clock was hammering away at the shiny brass bell on top, causing an annoying metallic trilling sound. Edwin stirred, but didn't wake up. Constance reached over to the nightstand and switched the alarm off.

She sat up, propping her back against the headboard, and covered a yawn with her hand. "Edwin," she said, turning to her husband.

No reply.

She sighed. "Edwin!"

He stirred again. "Mmmm?" he asked sleepily, his eyes still shut.

Well, at least he's conscious now. "It's time to get up—six o'clock."

"Impossible," he said and rolled over.

She gritted her teeth. "Come on, then, don't be difficult. You need to get up to go to work."

"Five more minutes," he said.

"You'll be late, and besides, I have something I want to discuss with you."

"I'm listening . . ." he said.

"I would prefer it if I had your *full* attention."

He sighed and sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Very well, dear, what is it?"

"I've been thinking about where we should take our vacation this year."

"Oh? And have you decided yet?"

"Yes. Despite Mister Nixon's stubborn refusal last year to give us a better spot in Siesta, I think it would be only fitting for us to go back now that we have the best home in Wellington. I shouldn't like to miss the looks on people's faces when we tell them. But apart from that, Mister Nixon might very well have a change of heart when he hears how well off we

are.”

Edwin skeptically raised one eyebrow. “I doubt if that will make a difference to him, dear.”

“Well, we won’t know until we tell him, will we? I want you to call him as soon as you get home from work today, so no dithering around with Lawrence.”

Edwin frowned. He’d done a lot of *dithering* with Lawrence lately. The poor man, his wife wasn’t the best of company; she was still trying to hide her drinking from him. Lawrence knew, but he was at a loss as to what to do about it. He’d hired a live-in maid earlier in the year, so she could focus on breaking the habit, but it hadn’t seemed to help very much. Edwin could sympathize. Constance wasn’t constantly drifting in and out of alcohol-induced stupors, but somehow, she wasn’t always the best of company either.

“I’ll call Mister Nixon from work,” Edwin said, thinking that that would enable him to go golfing with Lawrence anyway.

Constance narrowed her eyes. “Fine, but I still want you to be home in time for dinner.”

Edwin sighed again and got out of bed. *This is where I put my foot down.* He made a pretense of gathering his work clothes from the closet so he wouldn’t have to face his wife as he said: “We’ve been over this, Constance. It’s not that I like to be away, but rather that Lawrence needs me right now. Our games of golf together are the only joy he gets out of life these days.” He turned from the closet, and saw her thin-lipped frown. “How can I take that away from him?”

Constance didn’t blink. *Really Edwin? You think me such a fool, do you? I know you better than you think. Well, no matter. Even the Devil has his uses, but in the end God still throws him into hell with the rest of the riffraff. So go ahead and have your fun, my dear. It won’t last.*

“Well, I suppose you’re right,” she said. “The man does appear to need you for the time being. You’ll be back late, then, will you?”

Edwin’s features froze, all except his eyes, which widened to twice their usual aperture. He couldn’t have been more surprised if his wife had suddenly turned into a leprechaun. Snapping out of it, he said, “Yes. Yes, I believe I will be.” He smiled inwardly. It felt good to get his way for once.

“I won’t bother to keep dinner warm for you, then, but I’ll

leave it in the refrigerator in case you're hungry when you get home."

"Excellent. Thank you, dear." Edwin left his clothes on the chair in the corner of the room, and then went to take a shower.

* * *

Rebecca stirred in her bed and her eyes cracked slowly open. She was momentarily blinded by the light streaming through the window and quickly shut her eyes. She brought a hand up to her throbbing head. What time was it? She rolled over, away from the window and the cruel light pouring through it, and opened her eyes again to study the clock on the wall. It was only seven thirty in the morning. With a groan, she picked up her husband's pillow and buried her face in it. Lawrence had crawled out of bed more than an hour ago. Right now, Mary, their maid, would be taking care of breakfast for him and the kids.

Her eyes popped open. All she could see was the darkened pillowcase. Her eyelashes scraped across it as she blinked. There had been a time when she was the one making breakfast for her family each morning. Back then she'd made all of their meals, done their washing, cleaned the house, gone shopping for the groceries . . .

She'd been *able* to then. Now Mary did all those things, so where did that leave her? Taking care of her family had been *her* job. She shut her eyes tightly as her head began throbbing even more painfully. Why did they even need her?

That thought got her to sit up. If nothing else, she could still say goodbye to them before they left. Slinging her feet over the side of the bed, she started to stand, but a wave of dizziness swept over her and forced her to sit again. She sat there for a long moment, her head between her knees.

Once the dizziness had passed, she climbed to her feet—this time more slowly, and with one hand pressed to her forehead. She went to the closet to get her bathrobe. Before cinching it around her waist, she blinked down at what she was wearing. It wasn't her nightgown. She was still wearing her clothes from yesterday, though now thoroughly wrinkled.

The events of the previous day came rushing back to her. She frowned and swallowed past a painfully dry throat. She'd been drinking again and had gone to take a nap only to end up

sleeping through the night. Well, that explained the headache.

Trying not to think about it, she walked to the bedroom door, opened it, and started down the hall toward the stairs. As she walked, she began to hear voices coming from downstairs . . .

“Goodbye, Mairwy.” That was Lydia’s voice.

Rebecca reached the top of the stairs and came to a sudden stop. There, by the front door, was Lydia—looking adorable in the blue dress with white socks and trim that was her school uniform. She was *hugging* Mary goodbye.

Lydia’s first year of school was almost over now, and Rebecca could only remember having received a handful of those precious, heartfelt goodbyes that Lydia was still young enough to offer. *Because this, this imposter has been there to receive them for me*, Rebecca fumed as she watched. Her gaze drifted to the open doorway where she saw Lawrence and Julia, waiting and watching the spectacle unfold. Lawrence was frowning. Rebecca didn’t have to guess the reason for her husband’s expression: Lydia’s breach of etiquette was obvious, but she was too young to know. Yet Rebecca wasn’t seeing Black and White. All she could see was her little girl hugging a stranger goodbye instead of her.

She wanted to say something—to scream, and cry, and yell down to that stranger: *she’s my daughter, not yours!* But instead, she just stood there, watching helplessly.

Then it was over and the stranger was sending Lydia on her way with a gentle pat on the back.

“Goodbye, Mister Stevens, Miss Julia, Little Miss Lydia. Have a wonderful day!” the stranger said, waving.

Rebecca opened her mouth to say goodbye as well, but stopped when she realized that no one had even noticed her standing there at the top of the stairs. A second later, the maid closed the door behind her family, and all was silent, but for a soft sniffing sound that only she could hear.

* * *

Elizabeth was sitting beside Pieter on the edge of her pool, her feet dangling in the water, kicking back and forth restlessly.

“So, Lizzie, has your family decided where they’re going for summer holidays this year?”

She shook her head. It was a bittersweet topic. She still hadn’t forgotten Nicholas, and they still wrote to each other from time to time, but if they’d had any illusions of meeting

again at Siesta this year . . . well, she'd have heard something by now, wouldn't she?

"Maybe you can stay in Wellington this year? We could have a lot of fun together."

She smiled at him. "I'd love to, but I doubt my parents will decide to stay. They always take the opportunity to go caravanning. We'll probably end up going to East London."

He held her gaze. "I meant that *you* could stay."

"Oh—" She seemed to consider that, then shook her head. "My parents would never trust me to stay here by myself."

"You could stay with my family."

"Is that an official invitation?"

He smiled. "It's an official unofficial invitation."

Elizabeth returned his smile. "I see." She looked away, out over the pool, considering the possibility. She sighed. "I could ask, but I already know what my mom's answer will be. It's a family holiday, one of the few times we all have together, and truthfully, as much as I like you, Piet, I'm not sure I'd want to miss that either."

"Okay. If you change your mind, let me know." He looked away, and they spent a moment gazing out over the glimmering blue surface of the pool, its surface shivering with a light breeze. Suddenly restless, Pieter stood up. "You want go see a movie?" he asked.

Elizabeth squinted up at him, her expression thoughtful, then she began nodding and joined him in standing. "Sure, just let me go get changed first."

He arched an eyebrow at her and made his best approximation of a leering look. "Or you could go just like that."

Her jaw grew slack and her eyes went wide. For a split-second she thought he was serious. Then, the absurdity of the idea struck her, and Pieter burst out laughing.

Elizabeth hastily shut her gaping mouth. "You little . . ." She emphasized her point for lack of words by giving him a forceful shove toward the pool.

His laughter cut off sharply, giving way to a look of shock and disbelief as he stumbled backwards. He teetered on the edge of the pool for a brief instant, then fell in with a resounding *splash!*

Elizabeth cupped a hand to her mouth to stifle her laughter

as he came up spluttering.

“*Jislaaik*, Lizzie! I was joking!”

“Oops.”

“Oops?” he echoed, feigning annoyance.

“Well, you shouldn’t tease me like that.”

“Ah—well, yes, I suppose you’re right,” he said, treading water back over to the edge of the pool. Grasping the concrete edge of the pool just in front of her feet, he brought a hand up to push a few strands of his curly hair out of his face. Squinting up at her, he sent her a vindictive little smile.

“Don’t you dare,” she said. “I’m already dry.”

He gave her a blank look. “Don’t I dare, what?” he asked.

“Mmmhmm. You know what.”

“You mean *this*?” His hand suddenly shot up and caught hers. He began pulling her toward the pool, but she was resisting fiercely.

“You rat!” she said, and gave a sudden, violent tug of her arm. Her hand slipped free of his water-slicked grip, and she ran for the back door of her house.

As she ran, she cast a glance back over her shoulder just in time to see Pieter hauling himself out of the pool. He was coming after her! Just as she reached the door, he rushed up behind her and encircled her in his arms. Then, with what seemed like no effort at all, he picked her up.

“Put me down!” she squealed.

He shifted her to a more comfortable position and began carrying her back down toward the pool.

“Pieter . . .” she trailed off, her tone more serious now. “If you throw me in that pool . . .”

“Then . . .” he appeared to think about the consequences for a moment. “You’ll shower me with kisses?” he asked, his eyebrows raised in question.

“No. I’ll be *hopping* mad!”

“Oh,” he said. He continued walking toward the pool.

“Pieter . . .”

“Yes?” he asked, affecting a syrupy sweet tone.

“You haven’t put me down yet.”

“I know. Don’t worry; I’ll put you down soon.”

“Fine.” Elizabeth crossed her arms. She had a plan.

When he got to the edge of the pool, he stopped to grin evilly down at her, savoring his moment of revenge. But just as she

felt the muscles in his arms tensing to toss her in, she locked her arms around his neck.

Elizabeth smiled smugly up at him. "Now what are you going to do, smarty pants? You'll have to pry me loose. It's just a pity your hands are busy holding me."

He returned her smile. "You've forgotten something, Lizzie."

"What's that?" she asked, still smug.

"I'm already wet."

Then she felt herself falling and noticed that Pieter wasn't moving away from her, but *with* her. Her eyes bulged and his closed. "Piet—"

The rest of her objection was swallowed as they plunged through the surface of the water. A moment later, they broke the surface, Elizabeth now no longer in Pieter's arms. She slapped the water, splashing it in his direction. He flinched away, laughing.

"That wasn't funny!" she said.

He splashed water back at her and laughed some more.

* * *

"I don't get it," Lawrence said, toying with his drink on the bar counter. "What's she got to be upset about?"

Edwin frowned. "Maybe she's not upset?" He didn't want to mention the obvious, that maybe Rebecca was still grieving over Benjamin, because he felt certain that Lawrence still was, and he didn't want to remind him.

"Why else would she be drinking?"

Edwin took another sip of his beer, buying time to come up with a reply. "Maybe she's just bored."

"No, that's not it. She's stewing over something."

He really can't imagine why she's upset? Edwin thought.

"Can't she see what her drinking has done? Most nights I'm afraid to go home." He shook his head. "And I'm not sure what I'm more afraid of—that she'll be asleep and I'll have to endure the gnawing silence all by myself, or that she'll be awake and have a blow-up fight with me over the color of my socks."

"Well, you know, sometimes habits are harder to kick than we'd like."

Lawrence rounded on him, his eyes flashing angrily. "Are *we* addicted? Are *we* drunk every night?"

"Well, no . . ."

"I could stop drinking if I wanted to, so why can't she?"

Lawrence's voice cracked, and he looked away.

Edwin felt a lump forming in his throat. He felt sorry for Lawrence, he really did, but he also felt *helpless*. "Maybe in time . . ."

But Lawrence just sat there, shaking his head. "No, time won't fix anything. I know that *bloody* well."

Through the dim yellow light of the bar, Edwin thought he saw a bit of moisture glistening on Lawrence's cheek, and he looked away, pretending to busy himself with his drink. It was an improper display, and he felt embarrassed for his friend. What was it that his wife always said? *Never let them see you cry*. Yes, that was it. There was some wisdom to that, he reckoned. *Stiff upper lip; that's the way to deal with things*.

But I can hardly blame Lawrence for shedding a few tears, can I? Raising his glass to his lips, Edwin idly wondered how much it would take to wear his own defenses down to that point.

* * *

Rebecca was sitting on her bed, contemplating her feet. Lawrence wasn't home yet, but that wasn't unusual. He spent most nights away these days. She glanced over to the half-empty bottle lying on the bed next to her with a mixture of longing and contempt.

It wasn't easy. Nothing was. There'd been a time when she was happy—she was sure of that—but somehow she couldn't remember when that had been. What had happened to bring her to this point? It was all a blur, and she struggled for a moment to find the cause. *Funny, that*, she thought, staring into the bottle. *I'm depressed and I can't even remember why*.

The corners of her mouth quirked up into a shaky smile. In a morbid way, it really was kind of funny. She gave a croaking laugh and her smile broadened.

But the smile quickly faded again. She was still staring into the bottle, eyes out of focus, torn between drinking more and re-hiding the bottle, so she could cry herself to sleep without Lawrence finding it when he got home. Did he know? She hoped not. What would he think of her if he did? *Weakling*. *Yes, that's probably what he would think*.

But could she disagree?

Her contemplation was interrupted by the sound of voices: outside her bedroom, across the hall . . . coming from . . .

Lydia's room? She got up from the bed and cracked her door open to see. The voices were louder now, and they were indeed coming from Lydia's room. Light was spilling into the hall from beneath the door. She walked quietly across the hall and put her ear to the door.

"... I *can't* sweep. I have to have a stowy fiwrst."

"You mean you can't *sleep* and you have to have a *story* first." That was Mary's voice.

"That's what I said," Lydia sounded tired and defensive. Rebecca smiled. Lydia didn't like being reminded of her lisp.

"Okay . . . how about this one?"

Rebecca listened as Mary read the Ugly Duckling to Lydia.

"That's so sad," Lydia interrupted. "The othews ignowed him just because he was diffewent . . . he must have been so lonewy."

Rebecca smiled.

"He probably was," Mary said. "Would you like to hear the rest of the story?"

"Yes, pwease!" Rebecca imagined Lydia's little head bobbing up and down emphatically.

The story ended and Rebecca heard Mary say, "Get some sleep, Lydia. You don't want to be falling asleep during school tomorrow, do you?"

"Okay, good night, Mairwy."

Rebecca heard footsteps approaching and was about to hurry back to her room, but then Lydia spoke again. "Mairwy?"

"Yes, dear?"

"You'we wike my mommy now, awen't you?"

There was a long, silent pause, in which Rebecca felt an overwhelming urge to scream.

"No, dear. I'm not."

"But you do ewevything she used to . . ."

Rebecca tuned out. Her head felt warm and fuzzy, and was throbbing as though it would explode. Hurrying dizzily back across the hallway to her room, she closed and locked the door behind her. She leaned heavily against the door, tears streaming down her face. Her eyes fell upon the bottle on her bed. Now she did scream. Racing forward in two quick steps, she snatched the bottle from the bed and dashed it against the painted cement wall. It shattered on impact and left a dark,

wet splotch on the wall and carpet.

She just stood there for a second, panting and staring at what she'd done, then her knees buckled and she sank to the floor. Sitting with her back against the bed, she drew her knees up to her chest, buried her face in them, and sobbed.

Two quick knocks sounded on the door. "Madam?" Rebecca gave no answer. "Madam? Are you okay?" It was Mary. She always knocked before coming in—ever the one to acknowledge her place.

So why is my daughter asking if she's her mommy?

Chapter 6

Elizabeth sat down to a steaming plate of scrambled eggs on toast, sending her father a smile as she did so. He was reading the morning newspaper, but she managed to catch his eye anyway.

“Good morning, Dad,” she said.

“Good morning, Lizzie dear.” He set the paper down. “How was your day yesterday?”

“Good. Pieter took me to the cinema in Paarl.”

“And?” he asked, digging into his breakfast.

She didn’t really remember much of the movie. They’d sat in the back row and . . . well, it was innocent enough, but she wasn’t going to go into details with her *father*. “It was fun,” she said.

They lapsed into silence, and Elizabeth sent her sister a glance. If Hattie had already said good morning, Elizabeth hadn’t heard her. *Maybe she’s in one of her brooding moods*, Elizabeth thought.

Constance came into the breakfast nook and took a seat opposite Edwin. Unlike their old house, where the nook had adjoined the kitchen, their new one had it as a separate room, cheerfully lit by arcing bay windows that looked out on the backyard and pool.

Elizabeth noticed that her mother didn’t have a plate of food. Apparently, she’d joined them at the table just to be companionable.

“Your father and I have some news to share with you, girls.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows over a steaming forkful of scrambled eggs. “Oh?”

Hattie didn’t bother to look up from her food.

“We’ve talked about where we’re going to go on holiday this year, and . . . we’ve decided to go back to Siesta.”

Elizabeth stopped chewing abruptly, her eyes going wide.

She swallowed. “Really?”

“Yes. Unfortunately, however, Mister Nixon hasn’t decided to give us a better spot.”

Edwin cleared his throat. “He said if we’d called him sooner, he might have been able to do better for us.”

Constance narrowed her eyes. “Nonsense, he’s just trying to rub our noses in the mud for standing up to him. But never mind that. God sees everything, and Mister Nixon will get his due.”

“So, if Mister Nixon didn’t decide to give us a better spot, what changed your mind about going back?” Elizabeth asked.

Constance looked at Elizabeth. “We have so many friends there, it seems a shame to abandon them and go somewhere where no one knows us.”

Elizabeth wondered for a moment which friends her mother was referring to. Her parents, particularly her mother, didn’t make friends very easily, and Elizabeth could count their friends in Siesta on one hand. But she wasn’t about to argue; going back to Siesta meant seeing Nicholas again. *Nicholas! Just wait until I tell you!* She would write to tell him as soon as she got home from school, and she’d be sure to send the photo her dad had taken of her—the one in her drum majorette uniform—along with the letter, to remind him of her and their summer romance.

But . . .

Elizabeth had a sudden, guilty twinge. What about Pieter? She hadn’t told him about Nicholas. There’d been no need when she’d thought that she wasn’t going to see Nicholas again. But now . . . would she tell Pieter? Would he understand?

She wasn’t sure. They’d been dating for almost a year already. How would he take the news that she was going to be with someone else when she went back to Siesta?

* * *

“Where are you going, madam?” Mary asked, emerging from the dining room. Rebecca was by the front door, tying her hat on. She was looking pretty for a change, wearing makeup and a nice clean dress—not the wrinkled, frumpish clothes she’d favored in recent months.

Rebecca looked up and saw Mary standing in the entrance of the dining room with a frown on her face. *She’s looking at me*

like I'm some kind of invalid. Rebecca forced a smile. "I noticed we're running out of butter, and I couldn't find any milk, either, so I thought I'd run to the store and get some."

"I can do that for you, madam—"

"No!" Mary's eyebrows shot up and Rebecca felt a guilty pang. "No," she said, more softly now. "I could use the fresh air."

And with that, Rebecca left. She drove to the store easily enough—she hadn't been drinking yet—and it didn't take her long to find the few items on her list. It felt good to be useful again.

When she left the store, it was getting close to the time that her children would be arriving home from school. She imagined Mary being the first to greet them when they got home, and gritted her teeth. She stepped on the gas, hoping she could make it back before her children did. But as the car sped up, she felt it start to wobble and shiver. *Oh no, what now?* She hoped it was nothing and tried to ignore it. The wobbling grew worse. No, something was definitely wrong.

Well, what can I do about it? I've never taken a car to a mechanic—I wouldn't even know where to start. And besides, what if it really is nothing? Maybe I just have the parking brake on . . . She checked. The brake wasn't on. *I'll just leave it for Lawrence to take care of and . . .*

And what? Prove to him just how useless I really am? She frowned. *No.* She tried to think where the nearest mechanic might be. She didn't know, but figured that if she drove around for a little while, she would find out.

It wasn't 10 minutes before she found a mechanic—located right on Church Street, on the way home—but by that time the car had gone from wobbling to bucking like a bronco, and she had to keep her speed very low to keep control of the car.

She pulled into the gravel driveway of the mechanic's shop, bumping and scraping along until she reached the parking lot around back. She parked there, in the empty space beside a blue pickup truck. As she got out of the car, she noted all the hollowed-out, rusted-up wrecks of old cars lying in the overgrown field beside the parking lot.

Turning to head toward the mechanic's shop, she began to note its features, idly looking for a door where she should enter. There weren't any doors that she could see, just the pair

that were made for cars, and they were already open. The whole shop was mostly just a double door garage; though, there did appear to be a second story above it. Homey-looking curtains were drawn across a few of the second-story windows, giving hint to what was inside. *Living space? A bedroom?* Rebecca wondered. Perhaps the mechanic stayed up there sometimes.

Rebecca wondered if the shop had a receptionist or a clerk that she should go to, but the garage was open and she could see a man working inside. She decided that he would be a good place to start. Stopping just outside the garage door, she called out to the man. "Hello?" It didn't feel right to walk in on him.

The man looked up from fiddling with what she supposed was part of one of the two cars parked inside the garage. He wasn't wearing coveralls—just some faded blue jeans and a greasy, white, sleeveless shirt. He was fairly greasy himself, she noted. Black smudges covered his well-muscled arms, and he even had a long smear of grease on one stubbled cheek. It gave him a rugged look, which combined with the unruly set to his hair, made him quite handsome. *Well, at least he wears his dirt well,* she mused, almost smiling at the thought.

"Yes?" the man asked, cutting off her thoughts. He'd been waiting for her to elaborate.

"I've been having some trouble with my car . . . who should I see about that?"

He grinned—a sparkling white smile that would have fit his face perfectly if it weren't for all the grease. *With a shave and shower he'd be quite dashing in a suit,* she thought. "Well, you'd have to see me, actually." He set the part he was working on down on a long, unfinished wooden table, which was strewn with a host of other greasy car parts. He came to meet her at the garage door, and then took a rag out of his pocket and began wiping his hands.

"You don't have a secretary to receive your clients?"

He raised his eyebrows and gave her a thoroughly amused look. For a moment, that was his only reply. Then he burst out laughing.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "It was just so funny the way that you said that. Makes me sound like a lawyer or something. No, if your car has trouble, you come to see *me*." He gestured around him. "Nobody else here."

"Not even a wife?" Rebecca asked.

"No, but if I did have one, I wouldn't expect her to hang around this grease pit and tend shop with me."

"Well, I don't know," Rebecca said. "I think she'd like to feel useful."

He acknowledged that with a nod. "So, you're having some trouble with your car?"

"Yes. Yes, I am. I was driving back from the grocery store and I noticed the car was wobbling and shuddering. It got worse whenever I accelerated . . ."

The mechanic pursed his lips and his eyes wandered over her shoulder. "That your car out in the lot?" Rebecca nodded and the mechanic whistled softly. "A Mercedes. Don't see too many of those around here."

Rebecca glanced absently over her shoulder. "No, I suppose not."

"Well, let's take a look, shall we?"

Rebecca nodded and led the way to her car. She stopped at the front of her white, convertible Mercedes and frowned down at it, as though it was a disobedient child. "I really don't understand what could be wrong with it; it's only a few years old." She turned to the mechanic and saw him grinning broadly. In fact, he was trying very hard not to laugh. His good humor was infectious, and for the first time in what felt like months, she couldn't help herself from smiling, too. "What?" she asked, wondering what on earth he could be so funny.

"Well, I know what your trouble is."

She raised her eyebrows. "And what's that?"

He gave a short bark of laughter and began shaking his head. Then he pointed to her back wheel. "You've got a flat."

She was at a loss for words. *A flat? Oh dear, and I didn't even notice.* She blushed. "I feel like such a fool. I drove around on that wheel for over ten minutes without realizing, looking for . . . well, you."

"Really? Me specifically? I'm flattered," he said, still grinning. "No, don't worry about it. It's hard to recognize what a flat feels like 'til you've had one."

"Well, umm, can you fix it? Or have I destroyed the . . ." She gestured to the back wheel, trying to remember what the part that the tire fitted over was called. "The thingamajig?"

He laughed again. "The thingamajig, huh? Never heard it

called that before. Well . . .” He walked over to the back wheel to take a closer look. “It doesn’t look like you’ve ruined the rim, so yeah, it should be easy to fix. Give me ten or fifteen minutes and I can have it changed for you—unless you’d rather not wait around, in which case you can pick up the car this evening, or tomorrow morning.”

Rebecca thought about her husband, still at work or—if he’d been able to get away early—out golfing with Edwin. She wouldn’t be able to get a ride home anytime soon, and she certainly wasn’t going to walk. “No, I can wait,” she said.

“All right, then. I’ll go get my tools.”

As she watched him work, she felt inexplicably guilty. “All I wanted to do was get some groceries, and just . . . oh, I don’t know,” she sniffled, shaking her head and wiping at the tears welling in her eyes.

He stopped working and looked up at her. “You okay, miss?”

She gave a weak smile that faded as quickly as it had come and shook her head. “No, I don’t believe I am.”

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, and half-turned back to the task of changing her tire. “You want to talk about it? I’m a good listener.”

She hesitated, but then something inside of her crumbled, and the words tumbled out one after another. She told him everything—from her son’s death, to the trade of homes that had left her feeling out of place and stepped on, to her maid, who made her feel so utterly useless, and then to her husband who was always away when she needed him the most. All the while, the man just listened, nodding from time to time, and encouraging her to go on. When she was finished, to her surprise, she did feel better—but also embarrassed.

She blushed and gave a brittle laugh, wiping more tears away with the back of one hand. “Here I am baring my soul to you, and I don’t even know your name. You must think I’m terribly foolish.”

He looked up and smiled. “Sometimes it’s easier to talk to a stranger, but if it makes you feel better, I’m Mike.”

She returned his smile with a shaky equivalent and held out her hand. “Rebecca.”

His smile broadened into a grin, but rather than shake her hand, he held his own hands up for her to see. They were black with dirt and grease. “Well just pretend we shook, shall

we?”

She laughed again—a real laugh this time. She couldn’t care less that he was a little greasy. So she’d have to wash her hand later, a small price to pay for the man who’d made her laugh again. She took a step toward him, still holding out her hand. He raised his eyebrows and sent her a quizzical look. She didn’t even blink.

After a few indecisive seconds, he climbed to his feet. Self-consciously wiping his hand on his jeans first, he shook her hand. “A pleasure to meet you, Rebecca.”

She smiled. “The pleasure’s all mine, Mike.”

* * *

Nicholas had just opened Elizabeth’s latest letter to him and discovered the color photo of her sitting on a red, MG sports car. She was dressed in a skimpy drum majorette’s uniform, showing off her ballerina-perfect legs and her petite figure. In the photo her long, brown hair was cascading over and around her bare arms and shoulders, making her look particularly beautiful.

Looking around to make sure that he was not noticed by any of the boys nearby, shielding the photo with the envelope to make sure, Nicholas studied the photo intently, and a faint smile appeared on his face as he remembered. He turned the photo over and read, *To Nicholas, with much Love, Elizabeth. P.S. Waterfall!*

She’d read his mind! She knew exactly what feelings this photo would evoke in him—ones she’d intended, but then she’d just as quickly defused them.

With a chuckle, Nicholas tucked the photo carefully back inside the envelope, and then pulled out the letter and began to read. Nicholas could hardly believe his eyes! As he read, he realized that her family had decided to go back to Siesta this summer. His heart seemed to skip a beat, and he basked in the glow of that thought for a moment. He couldn’t believe it. It had seemed so hopeless at the end of last year, and as time wore on, they’d even stopped writing to each other as often, but now . . . he began imagining all the things they would do together, and a grin spread unstopably across his face.

He was sitting on his bed, reading and rereading the same line over and over again: *Hi Nicholas, guess what? We’re going back to Siesta this year!*

Nicholas checked his watch, wondering if he'd have enough time to reply. It had been dark for hours already, and it was almost time for lights out, so his reply would probably have to wait until tomorrow . . .

"Hey, Beaver!" Nicholas looked up. It was Jamie Beckett. "What's with the silly grin?" Jamie asked.

"Oh, nothing," Nicholas replied, having the presence of mind to act the part.

"Doesn't look like nothing," Jamie said, gesturing to the letter in Nicholas's hands. Nicholas frowned. He'd forgotten to hide that. "A letter from your girlfriend?" Jamie asked, with a wink and a toothy grin as he rounded the bed and sat down beside Nicholas.

"Uh, yeah . . ."

"Interesting," Jamie drawled, nodding absently as he read over Nicholas's shoulder.

Nicholas abruptly folded the letter in his lap and stuck it back inside its envelope.

"Hey, I was reading that!"

"Really?" Nicholas said. "Just as well I put it away, then."

"That's not very polite of you. Good thing I'm such a fast reader." Jamie was grinning smugly.

Nicholas narrowed his eyes. "Shorty, if you were any nosier, you'd be a rhinoceros."

"Looks like you're going to have some company in Siesta," he replied, proving just how fast a reader he really was.

"That's it." Nicholas reached an arm around Jamie's neck, getting him in a headlock, and then used his free hand to thoroughly ruffle the other's hair.

"Oi! Beaver—ahhh . . . okay, I'm . . . wait a bit, I'm not sorry," he chuckled. The ruffling intensified. "Checkers! Muffy! A little help here?"

They came running. Muffy, clumsy as his nickname implied, managed to stub his foot on a bedpost as he ran and ended up hopping the rest of the way, repeating "ow ow ow, ow ow ow," at regular intervals, but Checkers hadn't slowed, and Nicholas had a moment of sudden consternation as he realized that he was about to be bowled right off his bed by the Beckett brothers.

Where was the prefect when you needed him?

They slammed into Nicholas at high speed and knocked

him—but also Jamie—off the bed and onto the floor.

Nathan Stimple entered the room just in time to see Nicholas being catapulted off the bed. “Hey, knock it off, you guys!” the prefect said, striding purposefully toward them. The Becketts scrambled to their feet. Nathan stopped in front of them, his head slowly shaking as he looked them up and down, taking in the utter disarray of their clothes and hair—especially Jamie’s hair. “I can’t leave you three alone for one minute, can I?”

Three fingers pointed in unison to Nicholas, joined by a chorus of, “He started it!”

Nicholas frowned. *They’re like the rat pack*, he thought as he cast about for Elizabeth’s letter. He found it lying somewhat crumpled beneath his bed.

“Why don’t I believe that?” Nathan asked. Jamie opened his mouth to object, but Nathan stopped him with a wave of his hand. “Anyway, I don’t care who started it. Now go file through the washrooms, and get ready for bed,” he said, jerking a thumb behind him. “It’s almost time for lights out.”

They did as they were told, grumbling as they headed to their lockers to collect their toothbrushes and toothpaste. As he was leaving, Jamie shot Nicholas a backward glance, his face brandishing an impish grin.

Nicholas shook his head wearily, picked himself up off the floor, and dusted off his clothes. Nathan was still there, staring after the Becketts. “Those brothers are incorrigible,” he said. “If you want to stay out of trouble, Beaver, you’d do well to keep your distance from them.”

Nicholas snorted. “Keeping my distance from trouble is easy; it’s trouble running headlong into me that I’ve got to watch for.”

Nathan laughed and sent Nicholas a sideways look. “Good point.”



Chapter 7

Johann brought the Chevrolet Impala to a grinding halt in the gravel driveway of their home. Nicholas got out, hauling his hard-topped, black leather suitcase out behind him. He took a deep breath and let it slowly out again. Maybe it was just the relatively cooler mountain air and the wide-open spaces, but it always felt to Nicholas like freedom. No more waking up at six in the morning, no more sleeping in a room with more than a dozen other guys, and no more being told what to do, when to do it—and where. For the next month, he could do whatever he wanted. He grinned at the thought.

Nicholas started on his way to the house, coming up alongside his parents. Halfway there, however, he was ambushed by two streaking balls of fur—his dogs, Bobby and Scampy.

Nicholas got down on his haunches to greet them. They'd only jump up if he didn't. When they reached him, Bobby began energetically wagging his rump for lack of a tail and reaching up to shower him with slobbery kisses. Scampy was jumping up to do the same.

After enduring a few minutes of that, Nicholas laughed and started for the house again. His parents were already out of sight.

As Nicholas reached the front door, it opened to reveal his sister, Kristina, and his older brother, Philip. The latter was a few inches taller than Nicholas at just more than six feet; he had darker and shorter hair, and a strong chin that was darkened by facial hair even though he was clean-shaven. Last year, Philip had spent summer vacation with his friends, but this year he'd decided to join the family in Siesta instead.

Nicholas stopped short of the door. "Hey, Krissy. Phil—long time no see," he said, setting his suitcase down and holding his hand out to his brother.

Philip caught Nicholas's hand in a vice grip, pulling him closer and then enthusiastically slapping him on the back. "*Ja, nee wat*, back in the ol' *dorpie*, huh?"

"Looks like," Nicholas said.

* * *

"Piet!" Elizabeth exclaimed as she opened her front door. He was standing there in shorts and a T-shirt.

"Hello, Lizzie," he said, his eyes lighting up when he saw her. "I was just about to call you, but then I decided to come over instead. You finished packing for Siesta yet?"

Elizabeth nodded. "We're leaving tomorrow morning."

Pieter's grin faded. He already knew when Elizabeth would be leaving; they'd discussed it earlier in the week. She was probably reminding him so he wouldn't forget to say goodbye. He had tried again to convince her to spend the summer with him in Wellington, but she'd just reiterated her prior objections. *A pity*, he thought. *We would have had lots of fun together, Lizzie.*

"You want to go see what's playing at the *bioscope*?"* he asked.

"Now?"

"If you're free."

She smiled. "I think I am. What's playing?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't have said 'you want to go see what's playing at the *bioscope*?'"

"Smart Alec. Just let me check with my parents," she said, then disappeared inside to do so. She reappeared a minute later with a purse on her shoulder. "Let's go," she said, closing the door behind her.

Fifteen minutes later, they were in Pieter's car and driving to the nearby town of Paarl. They'd checked what was playing in Wellington's theater first, but it was relatively smaller than the one in Paarl, and they had already watched the movie playing there.

Elizabeth watched as they passed an old, beaten up bus that was crawling along at an indecent speed. In typical African style, the bus didn't just have passengers on the inside, but on the outside as well, sitting on top with the baggage, or standing

*

Bioscope: cinema

on the back bumper with their arms wrapped through open windowsills.

"Don't they ever fall off?" Elizabeth asked.

Pieter glanced at the bus in his rearview mirror and smiled. "Not usually. The bus driver rents them magnetic shoes."

"Really? I didn't know that . . ." Elizabeth said, her brow furrowing in thought.

Pieter started chuckling. "*Jinne*, Lizzie, you're gullible."

"It's not true?"

"Of course not," he replied, still chuckling.

"You rat!"

There was a moment of silence.

"That wasn't very nice, Piet. I believed you!"

He spared a glance from the road to give her one of his best *I'm-too-charming-to-be-mad-at* grins. She almost couldn't help smiling back.

Almost.

* * *

"So . . . you're leaving for Siesta tomorrow," Lawrence said, swirling the last of his brandy around in its tumbler.

Edwin nodded. "It'll be nice to get away from the office for a while. What are you planning to do for the holidays?"

Lawrence frowned and cast Edwin a sideways glance. "Work."

"Couldn't they find someone to fill in for you?"

Lawrence shook his head. "I've got to prepare the company's sales strategy for the next quarter. Profits are down from last year, and the board wants me to find a way to bump them back up again."

"I thought the company was making good profits . . . 'strong positive cash flow'—wasn't that what the report from the sales division said?"

"Yeah." Lawrence barked a short laugh. "But apparently not strong enough for the brass."

"Well, either way, developing a sales strategy sounds like a job for the sales division, can't you delegate it to them?"

Lawrence drained his glass and sighed as he set it down. "Unfortunately not." He gave Edwin a grim look. "The board has been worried about me, Eddie. They won't say it, but they are. Even if I've given them no reason for concern, my 'unfortunate' circumstances are enough. I think this is their

way of seeing if I can still handle the pressure.”

“What? Put you to work when you need a break the most? That’s ridiculous. Delegate the task and take the credit, Lawrence; you don’t need to feel guilty—everyone does it.”

“Lawrence shook his head. If they found out, it would be as much as admitting that I can’t handle the pressure. I need to show them they’re wrong.”

Edwin frowned, his gaze dropped from Lawrence to the mirror-clean countertop, his eyes narrowing in disgust. *All cold calculation and no heart.* Sometimes Edwin felt he wasn’t cut out for business.

Lawrence gave a knowing smirk at the look on Edwin’s face. “Well, like it or not, that’s the job.” Lawrence motioned to the bartender for a refill, then Edwin drained his mug and pushed it forward for the same.

The bartender withdrew a bottle of brandy from the shelf behind him and refilled Lawrence’s tumbler. Then, taking Edwin’s empty mug, he refilled it from the keg behind the bar.

“On the bright side, my wife seems to be doing better lately,” Lawrence said. “According to our maid, she’s taken to doing all the little errands that require her to get out of the house.”

Edwin stifled a grimace. Lawrence seemed to get some relief from talking about his problems at home, but Edwin would have preferred to talk about something else. *Anything* else. Lawrence continued, “I couldn’t be happier . . . I just hope she’s not driving drunk.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t . . .” Edwin said, trailing off as another, far more horrible thought occurred to him.

“Why not?” Lawrence asked.

“Hmmm? Why not what?” Edwin asked, distracted by his thoughts.

“Why wouldn’t she be driving drunk? She does everything else that way.” Lawrence turned back to face the bar and shook his head.

Edwin wasn’t sure what to say, so he took a gulp of his beer instead. Setting his mug back down and clearing his throat, he decided to change the topic. “Would you like to bounce some of your ideas for the sales strategy off of me?”

Silence. Lawrence was contemplating the depths of his drink as if he hadn’t heard. Edwin was about to repeat the question, but then, slowly, Lawrence turned to regard him. “No. Thanks

for the offer, Eddie, but I think I'd rather just forget about it for now."

"Ah. Okay, then."

They lapsed into silence again, and this time it lasted much longer. Finally, Edwin couldn't take it any longer, and he had the perfect excuse. He drained his glass. "Well, Lawrence, the best of luck to you, my friend, but I'd better get going. We'll be leaving for Siesta early tomorrow morning." Edwin hopped off the bar stool.

Worried that Lawrence was going to get drunk and drive himself home afterward, Edwin offered, "You want a lift home?"

Lawrence turned to Edwin, his eyes glassy and out of focus. It took him a moment to process what Edwin had said. "No, that's okay. I think I'll just stay here for a while."

Edwin felt a brief pang of guilt. How could he leave his friend all alone, still obviously depressed, and on their last day together for the next three weeks? On the other hand, he really *did* have to get going, either that, or get home to face his wife, who would nag incessantly about how late they'd be leaving tomorrow due to his "thoughtless indiscretion," or some other such disparaging reason.

He chewed his lower lip, considering for a moment what he should do. But, having already declared his intentions, he thought it best to follow through. "Well," Edwin said, "see you in three weeks, Lawrence."

Lawrence nodded slowly and held out his hand to Edwin. "Goodbye, Eddie." Edwin accepted the handshake—a desperate vice grip—and tried to ignore the shimmering look in Lawrence's eyes. Maybe it was just an effect of the brandy. "I hope you have a great vacation."

Edwin sighed and nodded. Lawrence let go of his hand, and Edwin turned and strode for the door. As he left, Edwin couldn't help wondering: without their games of golf and the time they spent together afterward, what did Lawrence have to look forward to at the end of the day?

A drunken wife? That blasted sales strategy? Edwin shook his head. And then there was the matter of Rebecca's frequent trips into town. Edwin's prior suspicions came vividly back to him, but he pushed them aside with a grimace.

He could only hope that he was wrong.

Chapter 8

Elizabeth and Pieter were sitting together on a bench in the park, listening to the crickets chirping and the wind rustling through the trees. They'd finished watching a movie in Paarl only to find they still had some time before Elizabeth's appointed curfew of nine o'clock. They'd whiled away most of that time sitting and talking, watching the passersby in the fading blue twilight. Now it was fully dark—the park only scarcely lit by an occasional, low-lying street lamp and the silvering glow of the moon and stars—and there were no more passersby.

Pieter seemed to be wrestling with words in his head, working up to saying goodbye. Elizabeth was leaving for Siesta tomorrow, which meant that he wouldn't see her again for another three weeks.

Elizabeth smiled. He was so sweet, but she was feeling more and more uncomfortable as the silence wore on. Maybe it was the fact that in just a few days she would be with Nicholas again. Standing on the brink of one relationship, looking down on the other, she was given just enough time to second-guess her feelings before leaping into the abyss and hoping someone would be there to catch her.

"Lizzie . . ." Pieter began. She turned her head to meet his gaze and waited for him to continue. "This past year has been . . . incredible. It seems like just yesterday that I was standing there, on that bridge—" He gestured to it through the silvery gloom of the park. "—saying goodbye to you before you went off to Siesta. Do you remember that day?"

She nodded.

"You were telling me, with tears in your eyes, about a little boy whose funeral your parents were attending. You know, I'd always had a bit of a crush on you, but I think it was then that I really fell in love with you."

Elizabeth's heart began to pound. He hadn't exactly said, "I love you," but he was definitely pushing the limits of that technicality. She wasn't sure what to say. She'd been mentally preparing to resume her relationship with Nicholas, and now . . . Pieter was *in love* with her?

"It tore me apart to see you so upset," he continued. "I'd wanted so much to kiss you, but I gave you a hug instead, knowing that I was really saying goodbye." He shook his head. "Three weeks. It felt like an eternity." Elizabeth swallowed past a painfully dry throat. Why was he doing this to her *now*? "Promise me something, Lizzie," he said. "Promise me we'll always be together."

Always? The word rattled around in her head. She'd thought they'd just been having fun, but now it was becoming abundantly clear that she was alone in that assumption. There were definitely some disadvantages to having an older boyfriend: she wasn't ready for the kind of commitment he was looking for.

"Promise me you'll never find anyone else."

An image of Nicholas came, unbidden, into her thoughts, and she nearly flinched. How could she respond to that?! She had to say *something*!

Taking his hand in hers, she smiled and said, "Always is the same as forever, Piet, and I'm just not ready to start thinking about that." He swallowed visibly and his shoulders hunched. "But I really do like you—a lot."

He returned her smile and sat up a little straighter, trying to reclaim some of his pride. Now she was certain that she could never tell Pieter about Nicholas. He wouldn't understand. She frowned inwardly. Knowing that, it was going to be difficult to pick up where she'd left off with Nicholas without feeling guilty.

Sensing the moment, or perhaps trying to recover it, Pieter leaned closer to Elizabeth, his lips parting slightly as his head tilted to one side. She went the other way, her eyes closing as their lips met.

She felt herself relaxing slightly, and then—again—an image of Nicholas flashed into her head. She went rigid and pulled suddenly away from Pieter. Seeing the bewildered look on his face, she gave him what she hoped was an affectionate smile.

What he saw instead was thin and wan. He wondered just how badly he'd misjudged the timing to tell Elizabeth how he

felt about her. She was, and had always been, the only one for him. He knew that, but did she feel the same way? He had hoped so, but it seemed that she would need more time to come to the same conclusion. After all, she was only sixteen. Had he known what he'd wanted when he was sixteen?

No.

Not at all.

"I need to get going . . ." Elizabeth said. "It's almost nine o'clock."

Pieter nodded and quietly stood up from the bench. He held his hand out to Elizabeth. "Come on, I'll drive you home."

As they walked hand-in-hand back through the park, Elizabeth mentally kicked herself, thinking she must be the stupidest girl in the world. Here she had this great guy—handsome, intelligent, sensible, hopelessly in love with her—and what did she do? She all but recoiled when he told her how much she meant to him. And, she found herself being distracted by thoughts of a guy she would only ever see in the summer.

She squeezed Pieter's hand a little tighter. Nicholas could never be as real in her life as Pieter was. Nicholas was a whisper and a dream, a ghost in all but fact, and she couldn't afford to give him too much of her attention lest he haunt her.

But what you don't believe in can't hurt you, she thought. She had believed all too strongly that she and Nicholas could find a way to overcome all the obstacles in their way—right up until the moment when her mother had said they would never be going back to Siesta. And he *had* haunted her then, distracting her from reality, from Pieter. Now, Pieter had come to fill the void in her heart that Nicholas had left, and she was determined never to let herself be that vulnerable again. Things would be different this time. They had to be.

Turning to Pieter as they walked the moonlit pathway back to his car, Elizabeth smiled adoringly up at him. Noticing out of the corner of his eye, Pieter met that smile with one of his own, marveling at how beautiful Elizabeth was, and wishing . . .

Wishing that he knew what she was thinking.

* * *

After Sterkspruit's usual Saturday afternoon *bracivleis*, Nicholas and Denise went down to the river, and sat on their favorite rock beneath the shade of an old willow tree. They

watched as the sun hovered above a distant ridge of mountains, gilding them and the entire valley with its fading light.

Nicholas turned his eyes from the view, and they settled on Denise instead. A light breeze came, waving the willow's branches and letting streaks of light come dancing down between its hanging leaves. The light painted intricate patterns of gold upon Denise's already golden hair.

Noticing his scrutiny, she flashed him a sparkling smile and asked, "What?"

"Nothing. I was just admiring the view."

"The view is *that* way," she replied, her smile turning wry as she pointed across the river to the setting sun.

Nicholas gave her a dumb look, then turned to see where she was pointing. Turning back to her, he shook his head. "I prefer this one." She smiled coyly at him, and their eyes locked for a long moment.

Nicholas was just about to edge a little closer when Denise looked away. He mentally kicked himself for squandering the moment. He looked away, too, seeing as he did so that the clouds and sky had deepened from gold to a rainbow of pastel blues and reds. They continued watching as the red faded altogether and the blue deepened to black. Glittering from in-between scattered, shadowy puffs of clouds, the stars began to form familiar constellations.

"Look, there's *Drie Konings*,"* Nicholas said, pointing.

Denise looked up. "Where?"

Nicholas leaned over until his head was above her shoulder. He stretched his arm out in front of her so that she could see where he was pointing. "Right there," he said, his voice coming as a whisper beside her ear.

She sighted along his arm, but found herself too distracted by Nicholas's proximity to care about the constellation. She managed to find it anyway.

"Ah, now I see it," she said, immediately disappointed that she had, because Nicholas drew away again.

The seconds ticked by as they watched the starry sky and listened to the sounds of the frogs and crickets chirping. More

* *Drie Konings*: three Kings; the Afrikaans name for the three bright stars that make up Orion's Belt

distantly, the sounds of sudden exclamations and raucous laughter were rolling down the hill from the clubhouse, where the rest of the town was still gathered.

“Why do you suppose they call it that?” Denise asked.

“What? *Drie Konings*? I don’t know. Maybe it’s a biblical reference.”

Denise nodded. “Could be.” She wasn’t really interested. Steeling herself, she decided to steer the conversation in a different direction. “Excited to be going back to Siesta again?” She bit her bottom lip, hoping he’d say: *No, I’d rather be with you.*

He turned from stargazing to face her. She wasn’t looking back at him, or even up at the stars anymore, but rather, down into the inky blackness of the river.

“Definitely,” he said, smiling.

Her heart sank. He was excited to be leaving her? The illogical train of that thought belatedly struck her. *He’s just excited to be going on holiday . . .*

“I must’ve forgotten to tell you: Elizabeth’s parents have decided to go back to Siesta after all.”

Denise swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat. It was worse. He was excited to be leaving her so that he could be with another girl.

“That’s great,” she said, not looking up from the river.

“It’s *incredible*! I was sure I was never going to see her again. I guess you just never know, do you?”

She nodded, not trusting her voice to be steady enough for a reply. Nicholas frowned, wondering at her silence. Then he heard something that gave him a sudden jolt. Was he mistaken, or had he just heard Denise sniffle?

There it was again.

“Denise . . . are you okay?”

She swallowed, hoping he wouldn’t hear the tremor in her voice. “Of course.”

Nicholas’s frown deepened. He’d known Denise a long time—since the first grade—and he knew when she was lying. He wished that it wasn’t so dark out, so he could see what she was hiding from him. Could she be crying? And if so, why? He hadn’t the faintest clue, and she didn’t seem to want to say.

“Denise, you know—”

“There you two are!” interrupted a loud, familiar voice.

Nicholas turned to look, knowing already who it was. "Uncle Jimmy is about to fire up the generator for the movie. Hurry up or you'll miss the *shorts!*"* Nicholas frowned at his brother's poor timing.

Eager for an excuse to escape Nicholas's scrutiny, Denise got up quietly from the rock where they were sitting, and started up the hill to the clubhouse. Nicholas sat there a moment longer, his eyebrows drawing together in confusion as he watched Denise leave. If his brother hadn't interrupted them, he might have had a chance to figure out what was bothering her. Was it something he'd said? He mentally tracked back through their conversation. They'd just been talking about constellations. That was nothing to get upset about . . .

Then he remembered what else they'd been talking about. He'd just been telling Denise the good news that he was going to see Elizabeth again at Siesta. Right after that, he'd noticed that she was upset. He remembered the enthusiastic way he'd told her—"It's *incredible!*"—and grimaced, wondering how he could have been so insensitive.

He began nodding with grim understanding. *She's jealous.* But with that realization he became even more confused. *She's jealous?* He continued watching Denise until her starlit silhouette crested the hill and disappeared from sight, leaving him alone in the dark. The chirping of the crickets and croaking of the frogs reverberated accusingly in his ears.

Denise had never had a problem with his summer romances before, nor he with hers, so what had changed? She was the girl next door, more his friend than anything else. It had always been that way. Somehow he'd missed the point where he'd stopped being the *boy* next door. His expression settling back into a frown, Nicholas got up from the rock where he was sitting and began jogging up the hill. He'd catch up with Denise and . . . he shook his head. He wasn't sure what he'd do, but if he was right, and Denise really was jealous . . . Nicholas felt a shiver course through him as a cool evening breeze swept down the hill toward him. What if Denise made him choose between her and Elizabeth?

*

Shorts: cartoons which precede the main attraction on older movie reels

Chapter 9

When Nicholas reached the top of the hill, he couldn't see Denise anywhere. Breaking out of his jog, he slowed to a fast walk and cast his eyes about, his pulse hammering in his ears. There were still a few people scattered around outside, tidying up after the *braai*veils, but he couldn't tell one person apart from another in the pale starlight. He grimaced and headed for the clubhouse, deciding she'd probably gone there.

Nicholas strode through the doors of the clubhouse and headed straight for the building's makeshift movie theater—a large banquet/community hall with ample seating and a broad, white wall at the far end, which served as the perfect screen for the movie projector. He entered the hall to find Uncle Jimmy setting up the movie projector at the back of the room, while the other adults set up rows of chairs and took their places along them. The younger children were plopping down with blankets and quilts on the floor in front of the foremost row of chairs, and in his peripheral vision, Nicholas could see family servants arranging chairs outside the windows of the clubhouse so that they could watch, too.

Nicholas didn't even know what movie they were about to see. He wasn't sure he cared. Stopping to scan the rows of chairs, it didn't take him long to find his family, and then Denise's family, but there was no sign of Denise. He frowned. *Where is she?*

Then he felt a soft brush against his arm, and he saw her walk straight past him. Had she noticed he was there? Nicholas caught up to her and made a grab for her hand, capturing it in his, and steering her gently away from the row where her family was sitting.

"I've been looking for you," he said. She glanced his way and gave him a wan smile. "You left in a bit of a hurry earlier."

"I had to go to the *loo*."

"Ah." She wasn't fooling him. "Come on, let's find a spot," he said, and led her by the hand to the most vacant row of seats he could find. He wanted to be alone with her, or at least, as alone as possible under the circumstances. Maybe then he would be able to work up to an apology. He'd never intended to hurt Denise.

They sat down together and waited, listening to the sounds of conversations around them. More distantly, they heard the continuous hammering of the clubhouse generator. Nicholas sat beside Denise in uncharacteristic silence, debating whether to come right out and say it, or find a more subtle way to apologize. He glanced her way and noted how rigidly she was sitting. Grimacing, he looked away again.

The hall filled up quickly, taking only a few minutes for the last of the people to come in from outside and take their seats.

"Okay, all set," came Uncle Jimmy's voice, promptly followed by the whirring tick-tick-ticking of the movie projector as it ran the reel of film.

Someone switched off the lights and opened a window so that the servants outside could hear the movie. Nicholas slid his arm around Denise's shoulders, but she didn't respond to his gesture. She continued sitting just as rigidly as before, his arm lying unnoticed around her shoulders. He frowned. For a moment he was afraid that she was going to tell him to keep his hands to himself, but she kept silent. He was tempted to apologize right then. Better to have it all out in the open so they could deal with the problem, than to have her silently fuming beside him. But now—with the movie playing and people all around them—it wasn't the best time. He let out a long, quiet breath and tried to watch the movie.

* * *

Denise glanced sideways to where Nicholas's hand lay on top of her right shoulder. Had he noticed that something was bothering her, or was he just obnoxiously bad at reading people? She wasn't sure which she'd prefer.

If he knew that she was jealous, how would he react? Would he smile and tell her there was nothing to worry about, that Elizabeth was just a summer romance, all the while his eyes shining with that look which said: *I'm flattered, but . . .*

She winced. How *did* he see her? They'd started out as friends. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe they'd just never

grown beyond that. But did *friends* kiss the way they did?

She shook her head slightly. It was all so confusing. It had never mattered before that Nicholas went to Siesta every year, usually with a girl waiting for him there, so why did it matter now? A part of her already knew the reason. When he'd returned from Siesta last year, so obviously heartbroken because it seemed like he was never going to see Elizabeth again, she'd felt like she was losing him. Secretly, she'd been happy that he wasn't going to see Elizabeth again. She'd hated herself for feeling that way, but she'd been happy nonetheless.

Seeing him moping for the next few days before going back to school, she had wondered how he would have felt if their places were reversed, with Elizabeth living near to him and her living far away, only ever seeing him for three weeks a year. Would he be just as heartbroken? Would it take him as long to get over her? And now that Elizabeth was going back to Siesta after all . . . She sent Nicholas another sideways glance, her eyes studying the youthful curves of his face in the flickering light of the movie projector.

Noticing her scrutiny, Nicholas met her gaze and smiled. A muscle jerked in his jaw, and he swallowed visibly. She caught a glimpse of the regret shining in his eyes, and with a silent gasp, looked away. He wasn't oblivious to her feelings after all.

Whatever he felt for Elizabeth, it was apparent that he cared for her as well. She released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding and relaxed beneath his arm. Sidling closer to him, she leaned her head against his shoulder and began paying attention to the movie for the first time.

It wasn't even an hour into the movie when they heard the distantly grinding generator cough, sputter, and then die. A collective sigh issued from the rows of seats, and the room erupted into noisy chatter. Nicholas turned to look over his shoulder and saw the silhouette of a man standing up from his seat. It was too dark to make out who it was, but he didn't need the light to know that it was Uncle Jimmy.

"Okay, settle down, people. I'll go see what I can do to get the generator running again," Uncle Jimmy said.

The generator usually died once or twice during a movie. No one could figure out why the generator was so unreliable, but thankfully, it never took more than ten minutes to get it running again. Nicholas turned back around and settled in to

wait. He listened to the sounds of growing discontent around him.

"... but it *always* happens. Why doesn't he just get a new one?" one woman said to her husband.

After a minute, Uncle Jimmy came back into the hall. "Ah . . . I seem to be having some trouble getting the generator running again. I wonder if some of the men could come and lend me a hand?" Uncle Jimmy was never able to fix the generator by himself.

Nicholas turned to look and saw a number of men rising from their seats, one by one, some at the urging of their wives, who were impatient to get on with the movie. Both Nicholas's dad and brother went. He watched with a bemused frown. *How many men does it take to fix a generator?*

As Nicholas turned back to the fore, he realized that now was the perfect opportunity to apologize to Denise. "You know, Denise . . ." he began, "I'm not as stupid as you've probably been thinking." She turned to look at him in the near-darkness, her expression studiously ignorant. He met her gaze. "You don't need to worry about Elizabeth. I see her for three weeks a year, and who knows when even that might change . . . but you—I've known you my whole life. She could never replace you. I'm sorry I was so insensitive earlier. I didn't mean to make you feel jealous. It's just that we're always so open with one another that I didn't think about what I was saying, or *who* I was saying it to."

Denise hesitated, and then smiled adorably at him. "Apology accepted." With that, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. Nicholas matched her smile with one of his own, and Denise nestled in closer beneath his arm.

As they sat there, waiting for the generator to come back to life, Nicholas smiled, remembering how rigidly Denise had been sitting at the start of the movie.

"You know, now I think I know where that saying—*giving someone the cold shoulder*—comes from."

Denise giggled. "Serves you right."

Ten minutes later, they heard the generator roar to life and the shouts of laughter, which heralded the men's return as they came striding back into the room amid cheers of "well done!" and "what took you so long?" Nicholas smiled—some things never changed. He turned to look just as his brother

rounded the corner from the generator room.

His smile turned to a curious frown as he noticed Philip wiping his mouth on his sleeve. It was almost as though . . . Nicholas shook his head, thinking: *Nah, that doesn't make any sense.*

Chapter 10

Tuesday morning found Elizabeth sitting alone on the old, gray bench in the Siestuary, watching the rising sun shimmering on the surface of the Touws River. The air was still fresh from the dawn, and little beads of dew lay evaporating on the grass. Wearing only sandals, Elizabeth's feet were wet from walking to the Siestuary.

She'd only been in Siesta for a day, but it seemed more like a week. She'd forgotten how boring Siesta could be when she was by herself. Nicholas had written in his last letter that he'd be arriving sometime in the beginning of the week. *Well, it's the beginning of the week, so where is he?*

When her family arrived in Siesta early yesterday morning, she had gone looking for Nicholas almost immediately, and had been just as quickly disappointed to find his family's spot near the entrance of the park empty. With a sigh, she picked up the book that lay beside her and opened it to the page she had bookmarked. She quickly lost herself in the pages, shutting out the sights and sounds of the world around her. She became so absorbed in the story that she didn't even notice when a young man came up behind her.

"Looks like an interesting book," he commented. "What's it about?"

Hearing the words as though from a great distance, Elizabeth drew her eyes reluctantly from the page and began turning to see who it was.

She looked up into the smiling face of the young man, and felt her heart skip a beat. She inhaled sharply. In a rush it all came back to her, and she wondered how she ever could have set her heart against him. *Remember Pieter*, she told herself, but struggled vainly to remember his face.

"Surprised to see me?" Nicholas asked.

She blinked. "I was so focused on my book that for a minute

I thought you were someone else!”

Nicholas rounded the bench and took a seat beside her. He raised his eyebrows. “You were expecting someone else?”

“No,” she laughed. Sliding her bookmark into place, she closed the book, and set it beside her on the bench.

“Ah.” His face settled into an easy grin. “So, did you miss me?”

“Yes,” she said. There was a hint of an uncertain quaver in her voice, but not because it was a lie. She really *had* missed him. Nicholas noticed the quaver and gave her a curious look. “Did you miss *me*?” Elizabeth asked quickly, hoping to distract him. It had been different last year. Now she was in a serious relationship: she and Pieter had been dating for almost a year, and he didn’t even know that Nicholas existed.

Instead of responding in kind to Elizabeth’s question, Nicholas brought one hand up and lightly brushed her cheek. She felt her heart begin hammering wildly in her chest. His handsome face grew steadily closer until their lips and eyes were bare inches apart. Then he closed that gap and their lips met in a rush. He kissed her tentatively at first, and then with all the passion of a year spent apart.

He broke away again, leaving her breathless. “Does that answer your question?”

She smiled wryly at him. “Yes.”

He stood up from the bench and held his hand out to her. “Come on, let’s go for a walk.”

Her smile broadened and she rose from the bench to join him. Taking his hand in hers, she led the way back through the bougainvillea-entwined archway which marked the entrance of the Siestuary.

“When did you arrive?” Elizabeth asked from the other side of the archway, watching as Nicholas ducked beneath a leafy branch of red bougainvillea.

“Late last night, and you?”

“Yesterday morning.”

He nodded. “You haven’t been having too much fun without me, have you?”

“No, until now, I’ve been dead bored.”

“Sounds like I got here just in time, then, huh?”

She raised her eyebrows. “What if I’m not that easy to entertain?”

He shrugged. "I can tell jokes. Knock knock."

She gave a short laugh. "Who's there?"

"Doughnut."

"Doughnut who?"

"Dough nut ask me silly questions."

Elizabeth laughed again. "But what are you going to do when you run out of jokes?"

He grinned wryly at her. "Then I'll tell you a riddle."

"And if I don't like riddles?"

"*Jinne*, you *are* hard to please, aren't you? Well . . ." He gave her a mischievous look. "There is another way to get laughs out of you."

"Oh? And what's that?" she asked, wary of the look he was giving her.

"Well, if I recall . . ." Nicholas drawled ominously. "You're quite ticklish."

Abruptly she let go of his hand and took a quick step back. Holding up a warning finger, she said, "Don't even think about it."

"Think about what?" he asked, taking a step toward her.

"You know what. Besides . . ." She took a moment to affect a matter-of-fact tone. "I'm not ticklish." He just grinned, and she took another step back.

"Then why are you backing away?" he asked.

"Ah . . . hey, what's that over there?" she pointed. Not waiting to see if he fell for it, she turned and ran in the other direction at top speed.

A moment later he appeared, jogging beside her. Her eyes widened and she sped up. He kept pace easily.

"You know, you really shouldn't run in flip-flops," he said, breathing easily.

Seeing a large tree down by the riverside, she aimed for it and poured the last of her energy into a final sprint. Pulling briefly ahead of Nicholas, she reached the tree first and hid behind it.

She stood there, gasping for air and leaning up against the tree for support. Somehow she still had the presence of mind to peer around the tree trunk to see where Nicholas had gone. She was sure that he must have caught up to her by now . . .

But he was nowhere to be seen.

That's strange, she thought.

“Boo!”

She jumped and screamed as a jolt of adrenaline lanced through her. Swinging around, she found Nicholas right in front of her, laughing hysterically.

“That *wasn’t* funny!”

He just laughed harder and she watched him with growing irritation. He was laughing so hard that he didn’t even notice when her face turned dangerously red and her eyes narrowed to slits. Noting their proximity to the river, she rushed him, planted both her palms against his chest, and shoved him with all her might toward the river.

His eyes grew wide and his laughter abruptly stopped. “*Jinneee!*” he yelled, his voice rising in pitch just before the *splash!* Once the spray of water cleared, he emerged—an eloquent picture of astonishment—sitting on the sandy bottom of the river, his arms propped behind him, his legs bent up at the knees. Water was dripping from his wet hair, running down his face and into his open mouth, causing him to splutter.

Now Elizabeth was the one laughing hysterically.

Nicholas spied one of his shoes floating slowly down the river and grabbed it before it could get out of reach. *Jislaiik man!* she heard him say under his breath.

“Serves you right.”

“Remind me never to scare *you* again,” he said as he got up and waded slowly from the river, shoe in hand.

When he reached the shore, she backed away to a safe distance. A wry grin formed on his lips. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I wouldn’t even think of it. If you threw me in the river just for scaring you, I’d hate to see what you’d do if I threw *you* into the river.”

She smiled as she looked him up and down, remembering an occasion when she had done something similar to Pieter.

Nicholas noticed her studying him. “What?” he asked as he sat down on the grass and pulled on his shoe. He grimaced as water squirted out the front.

Elizabeth considered her reply. He already knew about Pieter, but how would he react if she mentioned him? Putting her reservations aside, she decided that she’d feel better if she could be open with at least one of them. “It’s just that seeing you soaking wet, you reminded me of Pieter.”

Nicholas looked up from his shoe. “Why? You threw him in a

river, too?" Nicholas stood up and brushed off the back of his pants.

"It was a pool," she said, pleasantly surprised that he hadn't reacted negatively to the mention of Pieter's name. *Perhaps he's not the jealous type?* she thought.

One corner of his mouth tipped up. "I had no idea you were such a professional."

"Aww . . ." She smiled sympathetically, watching as droplets of water ran down his face to the tip of his nose and dripped from there to the ground. Walking over to him, she cupped his cheek with one hand and spent a moment gazing up into his jade-green eyes. Standing on tiptoes, she brushed his lips with hers and kissed him.

Withdrawing slowly, she flashed him an apologetic smile, and Nicholas grinned. "Hey, you should throw me in the river more often."

She raised her eyebrows in amusement. "Let's go get you some dry clothes," she said, and held her hand out to him.

They walked down along the river, hand-in-hand, eventually coming to the inlet where people parked their boats. Nicholas absently scanned the line of boats.

"Hey, look," he said, pointing to a red and white boat with *Jabula* written on the side. "That's Uncle Flippy's boat—the one we took to get to Fairy Knowe last year."

"I'm surprised you remember," she said.

"How could I forget? I even remember the song that was playing during our first dance, what you were wearing that night . . . our first kiss. Do you?"

She raised her eyebrows, but said nothing for a long minute. He frowned. "Elizabeth?"

"Well, it's just that . . ." She paused. "You know I have a boyfriend at home now, right?"

"Yeah, so? If you'll recall, I have a girlfriend at home."

She nodded. "I just didn't want you to get the wrong idea."

"About what?"

"About me."

Nicholas slowed to a stop, forcing Elizabeth to either stop beside him or let go of his hand. She turned to face him, her head cocked in question. "Look, Lizzie, I know that we can only see each other in the summer—that we live too far away for it to be any other way. But I also know that it's a small world,

and that you just never know how things work out. Take the fact that here we are again, together in Siesta for the summer holidays—that was unimaginable at the end of last year.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

“For now, let’s just enjoy the time we have, while we have it. Let the future take care of itself.”

Elizabeth smiled suspiciously up at him. “How did you get so smart?”

He smiled back, and they started walking again. A moment later, he sent her a sidelong glance and replied, “Sunshine and vitamins.” She laughed and bumped her shoulder playfully into his.

“Hey, *Vas Vat*, is that you?” a loud voice called down to them.

Nicholas rolled his eyes and turned toward the voice. “Hello, Uncle Flippy. Yeah, it’s us.”

As usual, Flippy was sitting in a lawn chair overlooking the river, a beer in his hand, his old, floppy fishing hat on.

“Good to see you again. You kids need a ride to the dance on Friday?”

Nicholas’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. He turned to Elizabeth. “What do you think?” She nodded, smiling. “That would be great, Uncle Flippy, thanks,” Nicholas replied.

Flippy tipped the brim of his hat to them. “Just come by here when you’re ready.”

“Well,” Elizabeth began once they were out of earshot, “despite being an awful tease, he’s really quite a nice guy.”

“Yeah, he is.”

* * *

They arrived at Nicholas’s campsite to find his parents sitting outside their tent—Johann watching the scenery with a beer in hand, and Kathleen beside him, reading a magazine with a glass of Coke sitting next to her on a foldout table. Johann was the first to see them coming.

“Well, hello there, Elizabeth,” Johann said. Then he noticed the way Nicholas’s clothes were clinging to him, and he started chuckling. “You know, Nick, if you wanted to go swimming, you could have at least waited to get your *cozzie* on.”

“Uh, yeah, I’ll try to remember that next time, Dad.”

Kathleen looked up now, too, and saw the two of them standing there—Nicholas dripping wet. “*Ach, nee man,*

Nicholas. Why would you go and do something silly like that?"

Nicholas opened his mouth to reply, but Elizabeth spoke first. "He didn't, Mrs. Strauss, I . . . kind of *pushed* him into the river."

Johann's eyebrows went up suddenly, and he began chuckling with renewed vigor.

Kathleen said, "Well, you probably deserved it. Go on and get changed—and remember to give your wet things to Emily so she can hang them up to dry."

Nicholas nodded once, and said to Elizabeth, "I'll be right back." With that, he disappeared inside the tent.

Johann said, "Take a seat, Lizzie. There are some chairs over there," he indicated a pile of folding lawn chairs lying on the grass beside the tent. Elizabeth folded out a chair and set it down on the grass beside Johann.

Kathleen set her magazine on the table beside her. "We're going to the beach in an hour or so. Would you like to come?"

Elizabeth's face brightened. "Yes, thank you. I'd like that very much."

Kathleen nodded. "Good."

Johann took a sip of his beer, then set it down on the armrest of his chair. "I noticed last year that your dad has a boat. Does he like to fish?"

"Yes, he's very fond of fishing."

"Excellent! We'll have to plan a fishing trip together."

Kathleen spoke again, "Actually, we've been thinking of having your parents over to join us for dinner sometime—today even, if they're able. Would you mind asking them for us?"

"For today?"

"Or any other day which they'd prefer. If they decide to come today, tell them to be here by five. Oh, and please try to let us know an hour or two ahead of time."

"Okay, I'll ask them. I'm sure they'll be happy to come."

Nicholas emerged from the tent, wearing a fresh pair of clothes. His shoes, however, were still making wet squelching sounds.

Kathleen frowned, her eyes resting on his shoes for a moment. Not wanting to make an issue out of it, she looked up. "We were just telling Elizabeth that we'll be going to the beach in about an hour. She's decided to join us."

"Great," Nicholas said, grinning.

"Well," Elizabeth began, "I should probably tell my parents that I'm going to the beach with you." Elizabeth rose from her chair and Nicholas joined her. "Bye," she waved.

Johann nodded.

"See you soon," Kathleen replied, watching as they turned and started to leave. "Don't forget to invite your parents for tonight!" she called after them.

"I won't!" Elizabeth said, glancing back over her shoulder.

"Such sweet girl," Kathleen said.

"Mmmm, yes, quite sweet . . ." Johann replied.

Kathleen looked askance at him. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing." He shrugged and took a sip of his beer.

"No, that was something."

"Well, I just hope Nicholas is being realistic about her."

"Oh?"

"If he's not careful, she's going to break his heart."

Kathleen frowned. "Possibly, but they're young, and I'm sure he's aware that eventually it'll have to end. All summer romances do."

"Yes . . ." Johann sighed, squinting through the bright morning sun to watch as Nicholas and Elizabeth wove their way around a big, steel-gray caravan and out of sight. "That's precisely the trouble."

* * *

Constance eyed her husband carefully as he came out of the tent with a beer in his hand. "Edwin, dear . . ." He glanced her way and she gave him a pleasant smile. "What do you mean to do with that?" she asked, pointing to the drink in his hand.

"Well, it had occurred to me that I might pop the cap and drink it."

"Don't be sarcastic, dear. It's *not* very endearing. Why don't you put that beer away and get yourself something more suitable. It's still the early morning and you wouldn't want people making snide comments about you, now would you?"

Edwin looked about incredulously, as if to draw attention to their surroundings. "I'm on vacation! And besides, who would be making snide comments? In case you haven't noticed, there isn't a dry mouth in this park—regardless of the hour."

Constance stared blankly back at him, as though he were speaking Chinese. "Then it's up to you to set a proper

example.”

Seeing the implacable look that had settled onto his wife’s face, Edwin sighed. *Well, it was worth a shot*, he thought. “Yes, dear,” he said and headed back inside the tent.

“I don’t see why you even need to drink such revolting things in the first place.” Constance’s words came to him through the thin barrier of the tent fabric as he dug through the ice in the cooler, looking for a can of Coke. “Beer is hardly a proper drink for a gentleman. Why don’t I make us a pot of tea?”

Figures, you’d just as soon I be a teetotaler, he thought. She was no fan of alcohol, particularly its inhibition-removing qualities. It was no coincidence that of the sum total of occasions in which he’d stood up to her, nearly all of them had involved at least some level of insobriety. *Dutch courage*. Yes, *I could use a little more of that*, he thought, glancing ruefully at his beer where it now lay, rejected on a bed of ice at the bottom of the cooler.

Closing the cooler, Edwin went back outside and took a seat beside his wife. She noted his new choice of beverage with an approving smile.

“That’s much better, dear.”

Edwin grimaced all the same, dubiously eyeing the can of Coke and then his wife. *Killjoy*, he thought. There were a few blessed seconds of silence, and then: “Edwin, I’ve been thinking.” *Oh-oh, not a good sign*, Edwin thought, bracing himself as he began to pull the tab on his Coke. “When do you think we could go shopping?”

“*Shopping?*” Edwin parroted, his hand frozen midway through opening his soda. *Shopping?* he repeated to himself. If it wasn’t one rotten, holiday-dampening thing, then it was another. “*Shopping?*” he repeated, now audibly, hoping it sounded like the most ridiculous thing in the world. “But we’ve only just arrived!”

“I’m perfectly aware of that. The fact remains that we are lacking certain essential supplies.”

In other words, more trinkets and fripperies, he thought. He took a hearty gulp of his Coke and grimaced again. “Well . . . I suppose we could go to George tomorrow.”

“Wonderful! It’s settled, then.”

Shopping! Edwin thought, shaking his head miserably. As he did so, he caught a glimpse in his periphery of Elizabeth and

. . . he frowned, trying to remember the young man beside her. It was the boy Elizabeth had been with last year. What was his name? Before long, they were upon him, and the time for remembering names was past.

“Hello, Mom, Dad—you remember Nicholas.”

“Of course,” Edwin replied, now putting a name to the face.

Constance gave an affable smile. “It’s good to see you again, Nicholas.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Smythe, and likewise. I didn’t expect to see any of you here again.”

Constance acknowledged that with a nod, and Elizabeth used the break in the conversation to say, “Nicholas’s parents have invited me to join them at the beach in about an hour. Would it be okay if I went with them?”

“Certainly,” Constance said, still smiling.

“Oh, and they’ve also invited us to join them for dinner tonight.”

Constance took some time before replying. “What time would they like us to be there?”

“Five o’clock.”

Constance began nodding. “Yes, that will be fine. Tell them that we shall be happy to join them.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Okay.”

Suddenly, Constance frowned, having just noticed that Elizabeth’s hands were both empty. “Elizabeth, where’s my book?” Elizabeth’s brow furrowed. “The book I lent you this morning?” Constance specified.

Elizabeth’s face flashed with sudden horror and recollection. “I must have left it on the bench in the Siestuary!”

Constance raised her eyebrows.

“Don’t worry,” Elizabeth said quickly. “We’ll go fetch it right away.”

“Hmmm. Yes, see that you do.”

Chapter 11

“It’s not here!” Elizabeth cried.

“What’s it called?” Nicholas asked.

“*Pride and Prejudice.*”

Elizabeth scanned the immediate area around the bench in ever-widening circles, as though the book might have been blown away by a strong wind. “What could’ve happened to it?” she asked. When he didn’t answer immediately, she went over to the nearest bush and looked inside.

Nicholas unsuccessfully stifled a laugh. “You’re looking in a bush?”

“Well—”

“Because everyone knows that monkeys and squirrels like to read classical English romance novels . . .”

She turned to glare at him and saw the amused smile on his face. “Are you making fun of me?”

He inclined his head and made a small space between his thumb and forefinger. “Maybe just a little.”

She turned back to the bush and frowned down into it. “My mother’s going to be furious.”

“Why? It’s just a book.”

“She hasn’t read it yet.”

“Ah. Well, even so . . .”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, I can just imagine what she’ll say: *I’m disappointed in you, Elizabeth. I was sure I could trust you with something as trivial as a book.*”

“Accidents happen. I’m sure she’ll understand.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows dubiously at him. “Come on, let’s go see if someone’s found it and turned it in at the *Duka.*”

When they arrived at the little store, Elizabeth went straight to George, the elderly shopkeeper, and gave him a description of the book.

He shook his head. “Sorry, I’m afraid we haven’t had anyone

turn in a book. I'll let you know if it turns up, though. In the meantime, you're welcome to browse through our selection of used books to see if there's one you'd like to borrow."

Elizabeth smiled, but shook her head. "Thanks anyway."

"You're welcome. Nice seeing the two of you again," George called after them as they left.

They returned the sentiment, and the doorbells chimed in time to their departure.

"Well," Elizabeth sighed, "I'd better get ready for the beach. Meet you back at your campsite?"

Nicholas nodded. "See you soon."

* * *

In the distance, Nicholas could see crowds of people milling around the park: people bustling in and out of tents, running across the grass, sitting lazily in lawn chairs beneath the flickering shade of the trees, or standing over smoking fire pits and barbecues. Amidst all of that, he was searching for just one person—Elizabeth. His family was ready to go to the beach; now they were just waiting for her.

Then, suddenly, the crowd seemed to part, revealing a familiar face. He smiled and watched the wind playing through her long, shining, chestnut-brown hair.

"So, I'm finally going to meet this girl of yours," Philip said, coming out of the tent. He was wearing large, semi-oval dark glasses, a towel was slung over one shoulder, and he'd forgone the modesty of a shirt in favor of his hairy chest.

Nicholas nodded, but didn't look away from watching Elizabeth. Philip followed his gaze, but found nothing of interest. "What are you looking at?"

"Her." Nicholas gestured with a nod.

Philip followed his brother's gaze again, this time noting the object of Nicholas's scrutiny. Philip raised his eyebrows, then smiled, seeing an opportunity to tease his younger brother. He whistled through his teeth. "I see what's drawn your attention, but you should probably stick with what's-her-name. That girl is way out of your league."

Nicholas turned to his brother with exaggerated patience. "That is what's-her-name, and her name is Elizabeth."

Philip feigned surprise. "Oh. Well. That's awkward."

Nicholas stood up as Elizabeth reached them. "Hey, Lizzie." Then, gesturing to his older brother, he introduced them.

Philip gave her his most charming smile. "A pleasure to meet you. It's a pity my brother found you first. If he hadn't, I'd have half a mind to show you a good time myself."

Elizabeth arched a skeptical eyebrow at him. "Thank you—I think." Nicholas almost burst out laughing.

"Nicholas! Is Elizabeth here yet?" Kathleen asked, her voice emerging from the tent just before she did. Then she noticed Elizabeth. "Oh, never mind. All set to go?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"Good." Kathleen called back over her shoulder. "Jan! We're waiting! Get Krissy and let's go."

A moment later there came the sound of the spring-loaded camper door slamming. Johann emerged from the tent, heavily-laden with a bright red cooler in one hand, a beach bag in the other, and two colorful towels slung over his right shoulder. Kristina emerged a second later. Johann gave a brief nod to Elizabeth and headed for the truck, fiddling with his keys as he went.

"What did your mother say about the book?" Nicholas asked as he and Elizabeth followed Johann to the truck.

"I had to buy some time, so I told her I left it with you, in case I felt like reading on the beach."

Nicholas's eyes widened. "You realize that's just going to make it harder when you have to explain that you actually lost it."

Elizabeth gave him a brief smile. "Let's just hope it turns up, then."

* * *

Kathleen caught a flicker of movement in her periphery and looked up from the magazine she was reading. She watched from her chair as Elizabeth and Nicholas left the shelter of the beach umbrella and started heading for the water again. She noted Elizabeth's pale, white skin with growing concern. "Elizabeth," Kathleen said, and waited for her to turn around. "Be careful you don't stay out too long. The sun is very hot, and you're still very white. You don't want to get burnt."

Elizabeth smiled at Kathleen's motherly concern. "I should be fine. Most of me will be underwater anyway."

"Okay . . ."

As Elizabeth and Nicholas walked down the beach, a strong breeze swept across the sand, driving it into their legs and

bringing the fresh, salty smell of the ocean to their nostrils. Elizabeth closed her eyes and smiled, feeling the warm sand beneath her feet . . .

Her eyes popped open. The sand wasn't *warm*. It was *hot*! She grimaced and picked up her pace. Nicholas did likewise, hopping from one foot to the other as he ran. He shot straight past her, hopping and skipping across the sand like a three-legged frog.

Casting a glance back over his shoulder, he called to her, "Come on! You're going to burn your feet like that."

She grinned and shook her head, running faster now to catch up with Nicholas. She hit the water running, and reveled in the cold relief. The water splashed up around her, quickly slowing her pace. She did a shallow dive and came back up a second later. Hearing a roaring sound, and seeing a frothing, white wall of water coming toward her, she stood up.

Noticing that Nicholas was standing beside her, she said, "You're pretty light-footed."

He laughed, and the wave she'd seen coming passed them, bringing the water level up over her waist. "You've got to be."

Elizabeth smiled, remembering. "I wish I'd had a camera. You looked ridiculous."

"Ah, but my feet will live to make me look ridiculous another day, whereas your slower, more dignified approach must have cost you."

"Well, my feet are stinging a little."

He laughed again, and they began wading out together. "So . . ."

"So?" she asked, when he didn't elaborate.

"I was just going to ask you why your parents decided to come back to Siesta? I mean, I'm very glad they did, but I'm curious about what changed their minds."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment. "To be honest, I'm not really sure. My mother said it's because they didn't want to go somewhere where they hadn't made any friends yet . . ."

"But you don't buy that?"

"Well . . . I do. Kind of," Elizabeth said, not willing to believe that her mother had lied. "But maybe that's not her only reason."

Nicholas nodded. "And your dad?"

"What about him?"

"Why did he want to come back?"

"I . . ." She shook her head. "I guess for the same reasons."

"Ah." Nicholas wasn't really sure what to make of that. Noticing that they were reaching the breakers now, he pointed. "You'd better get ready to dive. That wave looks like it's going to break right on top of us."

And a second later, it did just that, but Nicholas and Elizabeth were already gone, having disappeared seconds before beneath the water's rippling, blue surface.

* * *

An hour later, they were back on the shore, walking down along the water's edge. The waves were periodically crashing in the background and rushing up past their ankles in much-diminished form. Nicholas was watching Elizabeth in his peripheral vision. Unbeknownst to him, she was doing the same. Then they seemed to notice one another's scrutiny. Embarrassed, Elizabeth began to look away, her cheeks flushing red. Nicholas smiled, but then he noticed that Elizabeth's head hadn't turned fully away—she was staring intently at something farther up the beach. He followed her gaze, trying to discern what had caught her attention.

"I don't believe it!" Elizabeth said and abruptly stopped walking. "I think that's my book!"

"Where?"

"Right there!" She pointed to a spot not far up the beach, where a young boy was sitting and reading a book in a folding chair beneath a variegated umbrella.

Nicholas frowned, squinting against the sun. He put a hand to his forehead to shield his eyes. "Are you sure? I can't read the title from here."

"Absolutely positive. I recognize the cover."

"Well, let's go find out, shall we?" Nicholas said, starting up the beach toward the boy.

"Wait." Nicholas paused in mid-step and turned to regard her. She hadn't budged. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to get your book back."

"Just like that?"

Nicholas grinned and shook his head wonderingly. "Well—" He started down the beach again. "—I suppose we could let the thieving little rascal have it, and you could explain to your

mother how you lost her book—*twice*—since, as you'll recall, you mentioned to her that you brought it with you to the beach . . .”

“Hmmm. I see your point.”

He grinned again. “I thought you might.”

As they walked up the beach, Nicholas began to make out words on the cover. Before long, he could read the entire title: *Pride and Prejudice*. It *was* Elizabeth's missing book.

They stopped in front of the boy. He couldn't have been more than ten years old. At the moment he was by himself, but there was evidence of at least one other member of his party. The boy was wearing round, black-rimmed glasses, and had a studious, if slightly squinty-eyed look on his face. Nicholas might have believed it was just a coincidence that the boy had a book by the same name as the one Elizabeth had lost, if it had been any other book, but *Pride and Prejudice* was advanced reading, even for Elizabeth.

The little runt, Nicholas thought. *He probably can't understand a word he's reading.* Nicholas cleared his throat to get the boy's attention.

No response.

He cleared his throat again, louder this time.

The boy frowned; his eyes elevated, and he peered at them over the top of the book. “May I help you?” the boy asked in a thick British accent.

“Yes,” Nicholas said. “We were just wondering where you got that book you're reading.”

The boy blinked once. “It was a birthday present.” With that, his eyes returned to the book.

Nicholas glared at the boy, silently counted to three, and then cleared his throat once more.

The boy's eyes elevated from the page he was reading. “Oh. You again. I was rather hoping you might have scurried off by now.”

Nicholas gritted his teeth and caught Elizabeth stifling a laugh beside him. *Scurried off?* Nicholas thought. *Oh, someone's going to scurry all right.*

“That book you're reading—”

The boy cut him off with a sigh. “We've already been over this, haven't we?”

“Not quite.” Nicholas took a step forward and leaned

menacingly closer. He was gratified to see the boy sink a few inches lower in his chair. "You see, I have good reason to believe that you *stole* that book."

"*Poppycock!*" the boy said, squirming, his voice now an octave higher than it had been before. "I told you. It was a present for my birthday."

"You expect us to believe that your parents would give you a book that you can't even read?"

"I can read it just fine, thank you." The boy drew himself up in his chair again. "And I would appreciate it very much if you would stop disturbing me while endeavoring to do so!"

"Of course. As soon as you give the book back."

The boy's eyes flashed, then darted from left to right, as if looking for an escape. Apparently giving up on the idea, his eyes came back to the fore; his nose abruptly twitched, and his face scrunched up defiantly, making him look like a rodent. "Well, you can't have it. I'm sorry you lost *your* book, but you can't have *mine*."

Why that little . . . Nicholas loomed closer to the boy and imagined picking him up by his leg and shaking the book loose from his slimy grasp.

But, it was not to be. A sinewy young man, who looked to be in his early twenties, came up from behind the boy and cuffed him across the back of his head. Nicholas was satisfied to hear a sudden yelp.

"Give the book back, Roderick."

"No, it's mine! I found it!"

"Aha! You *found* it," Nicholas said, thrusting his finger at the boy's chest. Roderick shot him a seething look.

At this point, Elizabeth was becoming uncomfortable with the confrontation, and the people around them were starting to stare. "Just let him have the book, Nicholas. I don't need it back that badly." Nicholas glanced at her, thinking, *fat chance*.

The young man's head came sharply around. "It's your book?" he asked, addressing Elizabeth. Not waiting for the answer, he cuffed Roderick again.

A startled, "Yow! What was that for?" issued from the boy. Elizabeth started to object but the young man cut her off with a wave of his hand.

"Don't feel sorry for him. A little clip about the ears isn't going to hurt him, and it might just knock some sense into

him. I'm Samuel, by the way, but you can call me Sam," he said, holding his hand out to Elizabeth and then Nicholas as they told him their names. Nicholas frowned in thought; the young man's name was ringing a distant bell somewhere in the back of his mind.

"You've already met my younger brother," Samuel said, casting a meaningful glance back toward Roderick. "Well?" Samuel demanded, looking as though he was about to cuff the boy again.

Roderick's eyes darted from Nicholas to his older brother and back again, glaring at each of them in turn. "Fine. Take it," he said, making no move to hand over the book.

Samuel reached out and grabbed it, then handed it to Elizabeth. "I suggest you don't let it out of your sight again," he said, grinning faintly.

"I won't," she replied. "Thank you."

"Anytime."

They turned and left, heading back toward the spot on the beach where Nicholas's parents were sitting. After a handful of seconds, Elizabeth burst into sudden laughter and Nicholas turned to regard her, his eyebrows raised in question. "I was just thinking about that boy . . . Roderick."

"*Nim-rod* suits him better."

Elizabeth jostled his arm in mild rebuke. "Oh, come on, I think it was kind of cute the way he was trying to read the book."

Nicholas snorted. "Yeah, cute like a weasel."

She laughed again.

* * *

Having spent most of the day at the beach, Nicholas and Elizabeth were now back again and changed out of their swimsuits. They were sitting across from each other on a brown, wooden picnic bench at Nicholas's camp site, where they were playing Hearts with Nicholas's brother and sister. Elizabeth's parents were due to arrive for supper any minute.

Elizabeth stared intently at her cards, trying to ignore the hot, stinging tightness of her skin. She was trying even harder not to move. With even the slightest movement, her jeans would chafe painfully against her sunburned legs. She wasn't used to spending all day at the beach. Whenever her family went, they usually came back before lunch, but Nicholas's

family stayed from morning till the late afternoon.

Selecting three particularly nasty cards, Elizabeth passed them left to Philip, wincing as she had to lean forward to do so. Nicholas noted her pained expression.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just my sunburn."

Nicholas frowned. "We probably should have spent more time in the water."

Philip passed three of his cards to Nicholas and grimaced when he picked up the ones Elizabeth had passed to him. "You should talk to our mom," Philip said, finding a place for the cards in his hand. "She'll fix you up. She's got an excellent remedy for sunburn."

Elizabeth looked up from studying her cards. "Really? What is it?"

Nicholas arched an eyebrow and looked up from his cards to stare at Philip. "Not a proven remedy."

Kristina tugged on Nicholas's shirt to get his attention. "You haven't passed me your cards yet," she said. Nicholas ignored her and went on staring at Philip.

Philip grinned. "Oh, I don't know, it's proven enough. She tried it on me once, and by morning, all that was left was a nice tan."

Nicholas looked doubtful, but Elizabeth still seemed curious, so he explained. "She'll tell you to put vinegar on it."

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "*Vinegar*? Do you think it will work?"

Nicholas shrugged. "It can't hurt, but I don't know whether or not it will help."

"Well, at this point, I'm willing to try anything. If it's this bad now, imagine how bad it will be when I go to bed!" Laying her cards face down in front of her, she got up carefully from the table. "I'll be right back."

Kristina put her cards down with an emphatic sigh, propped her elbows on top of the table, and planted her head on her fists.

"Take your time," Philip called after Elizabeth, "and don't go easy on the vinegar! Rub it in real good. The more you use, the better it will work."

Nicholas watched Elizabeth walking woodenly toward his family's camper and frowned, thinking: *rub it in? On a*

sunburn? He glanced suspiciously at Philip. “Is that true? The vinegar really helped with your sunburn?”

Philip grinned. “You’d doubt the word of your only brother?”

Nicholas narrowed his eyes. “That’s not an answer.”

Philip laughed. “I guess we’ll just have to let the results speak for themselves.”

* * *

Elizabeth returned to the table fifteen minutes later, walking even more woodenly than before. Nicholas watched as she sat down gingerly.

“Did it help?” Nicholas asked.

She frowned. “I don’t know—it’s stinging a lot worse than before.”

“Don’t worry. That just means its working,” Philip said, picking up his cards again.

“I’m not sure I should believe you,” Elizabeth replied.

“Can we *play* now?” Kristina asked.

“Sure, Krissy . . .” Nicholas trailed off when he saw three recognizable figures approaching. Elizabeth turned to look.

“Looks like my family has just arrived.” Turning to Kristina, Elizabeth said, “Sorry, Krissy. I guess we’ll have to play later.” Kristina sighed and got up from the table while Nicholas stacked the cards onto the deck and put them back inside their box. The rest of them got up from the table and went to greet the new arrivals. By the time they got there, Nicholas’s parents had beaten them to it.

“Can I get you a beer, Edwin?” Johann asked.

“Please.”

“Lion or Castle?”

“Lion,” he said, thinking: *if I’m not the king of my castle, then may I at least have the courage of a lion.* Johann nodded and disappeared inside the tent.

“Hello, Nicholas,” Edwin said, noticing him standing there. He held out his hand for shaking. Nicholas took it and returned the greeting. Turning to the unfamiliar young man standing beside Nicholas, Edwin said, “And you must be Nicholas’s older brother . . .”

“Philip.”

“Pleased to meet you, Philip. I’m Edwin, this is my wife, Constance, and my youngest daughter, Hattie,” he said, gesturing to each in turn.

The formalities were over by the time Johann returned with two cold beers. He handed Edwin the can of Lion Lager. Noticing that Kathleen was busy in a conversation with Constance, he asked, "And Constance, what would you like to drink?"

"A Coca-Cola if you have one," she replied.

Kathleen smiled. "A woman after my own heart." Then, turning to her husband, she asked, "Where's Emily?"

"I sent her to fetch some milk from the Duka. No point asking Nicholas to do that," Johann said, and winked at Nicholas. "As I recall, he's not a very reliable milk man."

Nicholas managed a laugh at his own expense as his dad sat down beside Edwin and opened his beer.

Kathleen smiled. "In that case, Nicholas, would you ask everyone else what they'd like to drink and come help me bring it out to them?"

Nicholas nodded and did so. When he was done passing out drinks, he took a seat beside Elizabeth, a bottle of Coke in his hand. While he'd been fetching drinks, everyone had taken a seat around the fire pit, and his dad was now busy piling wood into the pit to light the fire.

Nicholas and Elizabeth sat politely listening to the adults' conversations, not adding anything to them, but simply enjoying each other's company and the beautiful evening. Nicholas smiled wryly as a warm breeze blew, and he caught a strong smell of vinegar coming from Elizabeth.

He leaned close to her ear and whispered, "Do you smell that?" He sniffed the air audibly. "Smells like fish and chips."

Elizabeth drew sharply away and scowled at him. "That's not funny." His grin broadened, and he returned his attention to the adults' conversations.

Edwin was nodding in response to something Johann had just suggested. "A fishing trip is a brilliant idea, but tomorrow won't work I'm afraid." He shook his head ruefully. "I promised to take my wife to George to go shopping."

Johann's eyes lit up. "That's not a problem. My wife's been making noises about going shopping, too. We can let the women go shopping together, and then *we* can go fishing."

Edwin brightened and turned to his wife. "Would that be all right, dear?"

Constance appeared to consider it.

"We'll make a day of it," Kathleen added, "and if your husband is anything like mine, he'll be happier on his fishing trip, anyway—though God only knows why."

Constance pursed her lips, then nodded. "Yes, I believe that would be satisfactory."

"Excellent!" Johann grinned. "I'll bring the cooler."

Kathleen sighed and shook her head. "So that's why. It's just another excuse to drink beer."

Constance narrowed her eyes at Johann, but he missed the look as he turned to his own wife. "Now, I didn't say *what* would be in the cooler, did I? Suppose I was planning to bring soda pop?"

"Were you?" Kathleen asked, her eyebrows skeptically raised.

Johann grinned. "No."

"Men!" Kathleen said, looking to Constance for sympathy.

"Indeed," Constance returned, nodding slowly.

"So," Kathleen began, "I hear from my son that you've recently moved homes?"

Constance's expression livened considerably. "Yes, we did, and if I have to say so myself, we now have the best home in all of Wellington."

"Really? That sounds wonderful. How did you find it?" Kathleen asked.

Constance briefly outlined the situation which had allowed them to trade homes with the Stevens family. Nicholas raised his eyebrows. He'd known that Elizabeth had moved, but he hadn't known about the unusual circumstances. *They* traded homes?

"Isn't that the man you told us about last year, the one who lost his son?" Kathleen asked.

"The same," Constance replied.

Edwin fidgeted in his chair, feeling uncomfortable with the topic. He still felt guilty about the way they'd moved into Lawrence's home. But Lawrence had agreed to trade, hadn't he? Edwin frowned. He'd also tried to undo it a few weeks later, and despite the fact that Lawrence's home was far nicer, no money had changed hands to compensate.

"The poor man," Constance went on. "Now his marriage is in trouble."

"Understandable," Johann said.

"Losing a child is enough to break most marriages," Kathleen

added.

Constance nodded. "Yes, but to add to that, his wife has become an alcoholic."

Kathleen's eyes widened and she covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh dear."

"I'm not sure how he manages to hold onto his job with so many other things to worry about. No doubt, with no small amount of help from his assistant..." Constance said, glancing meaningfully at Edwin.

Edwin fidgeted again and grimaced. "I *have* been filling in for him rather more than usual, but I'm confident that he will make it through this without further incident."

Constance raised her eyebrows skeptically, then turned away from him. "Yes, of course, one must always hold on to hope, no matter how slim it may be."

There was an uncomfortable silence in which everyone either diverted their attention to the ground or to their drinks. Kathleen was the first to break that silence as she looked up and said, "Well, we must all pray for him."

"Yes," Constance replied, nodding, "we must. Good things come to all who wait, and God is nothing if not just."

"Well," Johann began, getting out of his chair. "I should probably get the fire going."

Edwin let out a long sigh as quietly as he could. He was glad for the change of topic. Thinking about Lawrence's situation always made him depressed, and he was on holiday for goodness' sake! He took a long swallow of his beer, emptying it, and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He gazed absently down at the now-empty can, frowning. He shook it a couple of times to verify that it was indeed empty. Johann noticed and offered him another one. Edwin quickly accepted, despite the disapproving look that Constance sent him.

Johann called to Emily—now back from the Duka—to bring out another two beers, one Lion, one Castle.

Nicholas took advantage of the break in the conversation to lean closer to Elizabeth and ask, "Why don't we let the adults chat, and we go play a game of cards while it's still light out?"

"Sounds good. Let's see if the others want to join us," Elizabeth said, and then asked Hattie, who promptly smiled and nodded.

Turning to his brother and sister and raising his voice,

Nicholas asked, "You two want to join us for a game of cards?"

"Yay! Finally!" Kristina replied.

Philip shrugged. "Why not?"

* * *

The next day, Edwin and Johann went on their fishing trip, Constance and Kathleen went shopping, and Nicholas and Elizabeth spent most of the time playing cards and table tennis with friends and family while Elizabeth recovered from her sunburn—to which the much-lauded vinegar remedy had added little more than the pungent smell of fish and chips. Nicholas suspected his brother had known that vinegar wouldn't help with her sunburn, but Philip still claimed that it had worked wonders for him—usually with a weasely grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. Nicholas smiled. It *had* been funny, in a mean sort of way . . .

"What?" Elizabeth asked, noticing Nicholas's smile.

"Oh, nothing," he replied, deciding it was better not to remind her about the vinegar.

Now, with most of the day behind them, they were on their way back to Elizabeth's campsite, walking beneath the arching green branches in the gold-speckled shade which always set the part aglow just before sunset.

Nicholas sent Elizabeth a quick smile and she smiled back. When they arrived at Elizabeth's campsite, they found that Elizabeth's parents had just arrived and they were in the middle of a heated discussion with their youngest daughter. Their fierce whispers were rising swiftly to Nicholas's ears and he began to frown.

What's going on? he wondered. Nicholas sent Elizabeth another look, but found her expression as puzzled as his.

"You've never loved me!" Hattie accused, struggling to break out of her mother's grip. She wasn't taking any care to keep her voice down. "Not like Elizabeth!" Hattie added, sobbing.

"Stop screaming you ungrateful child! We've never been cruel to you." Constance gritted in a loud whisper.

"You took me to an orphanage! I *still* remember that. You think that wasn't *cruel*?"

"You're making things up again, Hattie."

Just then Constance saw them coming and she gave up her battle with Hattie and let her go. She tore off at top speed, crying as she went.

"What was that about?" Elizabeth asked as they stopped in front of her mother.

Nicholas noted that Constance looked startled to see them. "Oh, hello there," she said quickly, smiling to cover her reaction. "How are you two? All fine, then?"

Nicholas's eyebrows arched downward, but he nodded.

"What happened?" Elizabeth asked again, casting a glance over her shoulder to look for Hattie, but she was gone.

"Oh, you know Hattie," Constance said, waving her hand dismissively. "Always so dramatic. She really ought to try to be more like you, Elizabeth."

"She seemed to be very upset . . ." Elizabeth said.

Constance nodded and began turning away. "Yes, well, we can't all have everything we want, now can we? She'll just have to learn her place."

Nicholas watched Constance go, his frown still in place. Once she had disappeared inside the tent and they heard the camper door open and close, he turned to Elizabeth, his eyebrows raised, and asked, "Your mother took her to an orphanage?"

Elizabeth met his gaze with a hesitant look on her face. She shot a furtive glance at the tent where her mother had disappeared, and then turned back to Nicholas.

"Let's go someplace quiet so we can talk."

After a few minutes they were seated on their favorite old, gray bench in the Siestuary, looking out over the Touws River as a fiery, red sunset gave way to a growing dark-blue twilight.

Then Nicholas turned to Elizabeth once more. "Well?"

She continued gazing out over the Touws, her eyes focused on some distant point along the darkening green of the horizon. "When my sister was four and I was eight, we took her to an orphanage for a week."

Nicholas gaped at her. "You what?"

"Well, it wasn't my ideal!" Elizabeth said, sounding defensive.

Nicholas shook his head. "No, no, of course not, but why? Your parents were having difficulty paying the bills?"

"No . . ." Elizabeth trailed off. "She was throwing so many tantrums my parents didn't know what else to do. My mom decided to take her to an orphanage for a week."

"That'd just make her worse!" Nicholas sputtered. "What a horrible thing to do to a child!"

Elizabeth's face took on a guilty look. "I didn't know. I

thought she was just going on a holiday. I didn't understand. Later when I remembered what my mom had said to her, I realized what had happened."

Nicholas's frown deepened. "What did she say?"

"She said that if Hattie didn't behave herself she would have to stay there."

Nicholas looked horrified.

"Well, she didn't—" Elizabeth reached out to touch his arm. "I mean we didn't leave her there."

"Obviously not," Nicholas replied. "or she wouldn't be with you today." He looked up at Elizabeth then. "Hattie remembers that?" It was a rhetorical question.

"Every now and then she mentions it, so I suppose she must."

Nicholas shook his head slowly. "My goodness. Elizabeth, no wonder your sister is always acting up. She may never really forgive your parents for that."

"Don't say that."

"It's true! How would you feel if it had been you?"

Elizabeth frowned and looked away. "I . . ."

"You'd feel exactly the same way." Nicholas looked away now, too, gazing out into the falling darkness with a stupefied look on his face.

"You can't ever tell my mother that I told you. She would never forgive me."

"No, of course I won't. That's a private family matter, so I don't need to pry for more details."

"Thank you."

"But you know, just between us, I know what it's like to have my parents leave me someplace, to understand that I'm not going to be living with them anymore." Nicholas turned to look at her. "That was hard to accept—even at eight years old—but I always knew they'd be coming back. They never threatened to leave me at boarding school forever."

Elizabeth turned to look at him, her expression now a mirror of his horror. "I know it wasn't right what my mom did, but you understand that I didn't have anything to do with it, right?"

"Of course, Lizzie. I guess I just want to say I understand where Hattie's coming from. I understand why she gives your parents so much trouble. I think anyone would."

Elizabeth nodded and turned back to look out at the horizon.

It was almost fully dark now. They were waiting for it to get dark enough for Mr. Nixon to show the movie he'd promised.

A cool breeze blew in across the water, and Elizabeth shivered. Nicholas slipped his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close.

He sighed. "Being here with you again, Lizzie . . . it's like magic. I still can't believe it."

An image of Pieter's face flashed through her mind, and Elizabeth worried her bottom lip, remembering the last time she'd seen him . . .

She'd been sitting with him on a park bench in Wellington, not unlike the one she was sitting on with Nicholas now. "*Promise me we'll always be together. Promise me you'll never find someone else.*" Pieter's words echoed through her mind.

And here she was, not even a week later, with *someone else*. Elizabeth felt a sudden need to get away from Nicholas, to ease her troubled conscience, but she couldn't think of any plausible reason for having to go. Instead, she sat up straighter on the bench and pulled slightly away from him.

Nicholas glanced her way. "What's wrong?"

Was it that obvious? she thought. "Nothing. Just getting more comfortable. The sunburn, you know."

"Ah," Nicholas said, quietly unconvinced.

She felt bad about the lie. Could she tell him what was bothering her? If she did, would he understand? She frowned. *No, that would just make things more complicated.* If he knew that being with him made her feel guilty, it would just make things awkward between them and drive him away.

And she didn't want that . . .

Nicholas cleared his throat to talk. "Lizzie, we've both been putting this off for the last few days, but I'd like to take you up-river in the canoe again—to a very special place, our place! How about tomorrow?"

Lizzie appeared visibly startled for a moment, but she quickly gathered her composure. She turned to him with a smile and said, "With this awful sunburn, do you really think several hours spent sitting in a canoe, in the sun, would be a good thing for me right now?"

Nicholas sighed. "I suppose not. I guess if we've waited this long, we can wait a few more days."

"Thanks," Elizabeth replied, squeezing his hand

affectionately. She forced a smile and went on, "We should probably get going. Mister Nixon will be starting the movie shortly."

"Yeah . . . we probably should," Nicholas said, getting up from the bench.

They walked back through the archway of the Siestuary together with Nicholas deep in thought, his mind working to figure out what was really bothering Elizabeth. He sighed as he was struck by an awful feeling of déjà vu. Only a few days ago, just before he'd left for Siesta, something had been bothering Denise, too. He felt a guilty pang as he remembered that night. Denise had been jealous that he was going to Siesta to be with Elizabeth. Could that be what was bothering Elizabeth? Was she jealous, too?

No, that didn't make any sense. He hadn't even mentioned Denise, except maybe just the once. His brow furrowed as he tried to remember her reaction . . . It had been yesterday morning, shortly after Elizabeth had thrown him in the river. He'd been reminiscing about their time together in Siesta last year, and then she had gone uncomfortably silent and reminded him that she had a boyfriend at home. Nicholas frowned, thinking that that was somehow significant.

He sent Elizabeth a searching look, but found no inspiration in her delicate features. Walking there beside him in the moonlight, she was like something out of a dream. A cool wind blew, rustling leaves overhead, and he heard an owl hooting.

Then he was struck by a sudden, ridiculous thought: what if this really was a dream? For a moment he almost believed it, and was afraid that if he blinked or even breathed too hard, he would wake up and she would disappear. He shook his head, chiding himself. Of course she was real. He knew when he was dreaming.

But he still had to pinch himself to make sure.

Chapter 12

As the boat neared the shore, and Fairy Knowe grew in the distance, Nicholas watched Elizabeth sitting beside him out of the corner of his eye. Though his arm was around her shoulders, she was sitting just a little too far from him, and it felt to him like she was leaning the other way. Something was definitely bothering her, but in the past two days, he'd had absolutely no luck in finding out what that was. She'd been strangely withdrawn whenever they were together. He frowned, thinking: she hadn't been that way last year. Then, she'd been so carefree. What had changed?

When the boat reached the shore, Frederik clambered over the prow and began securing it to the shore. Just like last year, Flippy had offered the services of his boat and son to take them to the dance, although this time, Nicholas's brother had come along as well.

Philip's head appeared from the back of the boat, between Nicholas and Elizabeth, and he rested his arms on their shoulders. "Well, much as I'd like to stick around with you two lovebirds," Philip began, "I'm going to go see if I can chat up a bird or two of my own." With that, he climbed out over the front row of seats and the prow, not even waiting for Frederik to finish securing the boat to the shore. As he strode toward Fairy Knowe, they heard him say, "Look out, ladies—when you see me coming, you're going to wish you were wearing socks, just so that I could knock them off!"

Nicholas snorted.

Elizabeth turned to Nicholas. "Is he always like that?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Yeah. Come on." He stood up and held out his hand to Elizabeth. She took his hand and they clambered out of the boat together. Once upon the shore, they thanked Frederik for the ride and started for Fairy Knowe.

Little had changed since they'd last been there, but this time

they were arriving after the sunset. The sky was a deep purplish blue, and tall palm trees stood around the perimeter of the hotel, their shadowy fronds waving in a light breeze that was more felt than heard over the distant melody drifting out of Fairy Knowe's dance hall. Despite being nearly dark, Nicholas could still make out an abundant presence of flowers scattered around the grounds of the hotel. It would be an amazing show of color in the daylight, but at the moment they registered in varying shades of gray, almost monochromatic in the twilight.

When they entered the dance hall, Nicholas noticed his brother standing by the bar with a drink in his hand, talking to a young woman about his own age. Philip said something; she laughed and covered her mouth with one hand. *Well, he sure doesn't waste any time*, Nicholas thought.

Hearing the band start a lively tune, Nicholas turned on his heel and stopped in front of Elizabeth. "May I have this dance, M'lady?" he asked, taking her hand in his, and bowing slightly over it. He glanced up to see her eyebrows raised in amusement. She was trying hard not to smile.

"Why, of course you can, good Sir." He flashed her a quick grin and led her by the hand onto the dance floor.

He held both of Elizabeth's hands in his as they danced, alternately letting go of one hand and twirling her around, first by one arm, and then the other. It wasn't any particular type of dance, just an improvisation which seemed to match the lively style in which others were dancing to the song.

At some point, Nicholas came abreast of his brother, who was now dancing with the girl he'd been chatting to at the bar. Philip sent him a smug look and then twirled his partner in a particularly elaborate fashion, ending with her at the farthest possible extent from him, their hands barely touching, and then he drew her back again, whirling her like a dervish until she was draped over his arm.

What a smoothy, Nicholas thought, grinning.

When the song ended, the band followed up with a slower one in which partners held each other close and shuffled around the floor. The overhead lighting dimmed, and the disco ball that hung above them, casting rainbow-colored light in all directions, began to slow its twirling. Nicholas held Elizabeth lightly on her left arm, his other hand just above the small of her back, his head over her shoulder.

"As always, you're a good dancer," he whispered beside her ear.

She smiled. "I take ballet."

His eyes widened fractionally, but she couldn't see. "My beautiful little ballerina."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "Not that little."

Nicholas laughed. "No. Just the perfect height."

A few dances later, Nicholas and Elizabeth walked off the floor to get refreshments from the bar that lined one side of the dance hall.

Turning to Elizabeth as they walked toward the bar, Nicholas said, "What would you like to drink?"

She thought about it for a moment. Then, grinning with a sudden recollection, she said, "Apple cider."

Nicholas placed an order for two apple ciders and turned back to Elizabeth. "Well, at least this year you can legally drink it, huh?" he said, winking at her.

Elizabeth put a finger to her lips. "Shhh! You'll get me into trouble."

He gave a short chuckle. The bartender placed their drinks before them and quoted a price. Nicholas paid, and they turned their backs to the counter and leaned against it, sipping their champagne-like cider.

Nicholas's expression suddenly registered shock as he spotted a familiar face on the dance floor. "I don't believe it!" he said.

"What?" Elizabeth asked, following his gaze. Then, her face flashed with recognition, but not shock, as she saw who he was looking at. There, on the dance floor, was Samuel, wearing an army-gray uniform, dancing with a tall, blond-haired girl she didn't recognize. Her eyebrows drew together. There wasn't anything strange about seeing him at the dance. "It's just Samuel . . ."

"Well, yes, but—" Nicholas broke off when he noticed Samuel and the girl he was dancing with coming off the dance floor and heading for the bar. As soon as they were close enough to hear, Nicholas exclaimed, "Hey, Bog Rat!"

The girl's head abruptly swung around, searching for whoever had called her. Her eyes widened with astonishment as they lit upon Nicholas. "Beaver!"

Elizabeth looked between Nicholas and the girl with a

mixture of jealousy and confusion. The girl was stunning: tall, with long, flowing blond hair, and delicately chiseled features. She looked like a model.

“Bog Rat?” Elizabeth echoed, watching as the girl strode smilingly toward them, Samuel keeping pace beside her. She turned to Nicholas with eyebrows raised. “Beaver?”

Pet names? She wondered.

“You’re the last person I expected to see here,” Nicholas said.

“I could say the same about you!” Bog Rat replied, giving Nicholas a warm hug. Elizabeth watched, her jealousy and confusion mounting. By the look of him, Samuel was equally confused, though not particularly jealous. Finally, the girl stopped hugging Nicholas, but she left her hand resting affectionately on his arm. She turned to Elizabeth. “Who’s your friend?”

Friend! Elizabeth thought, fuming.

“This is Elizabeth—you remember—the one who sent me her picture earlier in the year?” The girl’s face flashed with recognition.

“Ah! I’m sorry. I should’ve recognized you! You’re even more beautiful in person. I’m Claire, by the way,” the girl said, holding out her hand to Elizabeth.

“Not *Bog Rat*?” Elizabeth asked, shaking Claire’s hand.

Claire laughed and shot Nicholas an accusing look—to which he shrugged, and his expression seemed to say, *oops*.

“No, just like *Beaver* here—” Claire nodded in Nicholas’s direction. “—I was saddled with an unfortunate nickname during my first few years at boarding school. But, I’m forgetting something.” Claire gestured to Samuel. “This is—”

“Samuel,” Elizabeth interrupted, drawing a surprised look from Claire.

“We’ve already met,” Samuel explained. “A few days ago Roddy found a book of hers and insisted that it was his.” Claire looked to her for confirmation of the story and Elizabeth nodded.

“Well, that sounds just like him,” Claire said. “Speaking of which, where is the little *darling*?”

“I don’t know,” Samuel said, turning to look behind him. “I left him by the door with a fruit smoothie . . . but he seems to have—” Samuel turned again, looking down to the other end of the room. “—disappeared,” he finished with a frown.

"You brought him to the dance with you?" Nicholas asked.

Samuel gave him a bleak look. "It was the only way I could come. My parents left me to look after the little . . . *darling*. And I thought—silly me—how much trouble could he possibly get into?"

Nicholas grinned. "Knowing him . . ."

Samuel began nodding gravely. "Exactly." He turned to Claire and said, "I'm sorry, but I really have to find him. Do you mind if I leave you here for a while?"

"Not at all," Claire smiled. "Nicholas and I can spend the time catching up." She patted his arm affectionately.

Samuel's expression flickered and he paused in mid-step of leaving, but a second later he was on his way again.

"So, you're staying in Siesta, too?" Nicholas asked.

"Yup," Claire said, finally letting go of Nicholas's arm.

"Great! We should all get together sometime," Nicholas said.

Elizabeth frowned at that. *Yeah, let's all get together sometime.*

"That would be lovely," Claire said.

"How do you two know each other?" Elizabeth asked suddenly, interrupting their two-way conversation. "I thought Saint Andrew's was an all *boys'* boarding school?" she continued, privately wondering if they'd ever been dating.

"Claire's school is our sister school, and across the road from mine. I think we first met at a school dance, but this year her school lost its biology teacher, and they had to join us in our classroom."

Elizabeth's eyes widened. *They met at a dance?* "And Samuel?" she asked of Claire. "Is he your boyfriend?"

Claire smiled. "Yes. He's assigned to the Tank Corps, close to my school."

"Ah," Elizabeth said, returning Claire's smile. She felt silly for being jealous now. Regardless of whether Claire and Nicholas had ever been more than friends, they were obviously just friends now. Why else would Claire be with Samuel instead of him?

Elizabeth noticed that Nicholas was distracted, peering intently across the room to a darkened corner of the hall. She followed his gaze, wondering what he was looking at, and saw a table and some chairs stacked against the wall, but nothing else. "What is it?" she asked.

Claire followed his gaze now, too. “I don’t see anything, either.”

Nicholas frowned and then shrugged. “I guess it was nothing.” He’d thought he’d seen something moving in that corner . . .

A few minutes later, Samuel returned, out of breath and looking annoyed.

“I take it you didn’t find him,” Claire said.

“No, I didn’t, and at this point, I don’t really care. He can find himself.”

Nicholas chuckled.

“You don’t mean that!” Claire replied.

“Oh yes, I do!”

“But he could be in trouble.”

Samuel raised his eyebrows and gave a snort of laughter. “Yeah, he’s probably at the bottom of it.”

Claire looked to Nicholas in appeal, but found him nodding his agreement with Samuel. She would have had more luck convincing a dog to like its fleas than convincing Nicholas to argue Roderick’s case.

“Well . . .” Samuel began, his attention momentarily fixed on the band as it finished the song it was currently playing. He turned back to face Nicholas and Elizabeth. “It was nice seeing you two again.” He held his hand out to Claire. “Shall we?”

Claire nodded and took his hand. With her other, she waved goodbye to Nicholas and Elizabeth.

“I think Nicholas and I will do the same,” Elizabeth said, turning to Nicholas in question as Claire and Samuel glided back onto the dance floor.

“Let’s go,” Nicholas said, taking Elizabeth’s hand in his.

A few minutes later, as they were dancing, Nicholas felt the pitter-patter of something cool landing on the back of his neck. Frowning, he reached a hand around to feel what it was. His hand came away wet. He looked up, expecting to find water dripping down from a leak in the ceiling.

There was no leak.

Nicholas looked behind him. His eyes narrowed as he found himself peering once again into a darkened corner of the hall, where a table and chairs were stacked against the wall.

“What is it?” Elizabeth asked.

“Hmmm . . .”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows and waited for Nicholas to elaborate. Before he could explain, a startled cry issued from the couple just in front of him. They stopped in the middle of the dance floor, the girl staring, aghast, at a spot just below her partner's waist, where there was a dark, wet patch on his pants. The guy looked bewildered and mortified.

Nicholas turned back around. "That's it," he said. "Come on, Lizzie; I need to get a glass of water." Elizabeth followed, struggling to keep up as Nicholas strode purposefully toward the bar. "But you just had a drink a minute ago."

When they reached the bar, Nicholas asked the bartender for the water, and upon receiving it, turned to Elizabeth and said, "I'll be right back."

Her eyebrows drawing together, Elizabeth said, "Okay . . ." and then watched as Nicholas walked to the end of the bar. He kept walking until he reached the far wall of the hall. For a moment Elizabeth thought he was heading for the restrooms, but he turned the other way and started creeping down along the wall. Frowning, she watched him slow to a stop as he reached a darkened corner of the room . . .

* * *

As Nicholas drew near to the table in the corner of the room, he slowed his pace, and took extra care not to make any noise with his footsteps. Now only a few paces away, he could see a suspicious looking shadow crouched beneath the table. A second later, he saw a flicker of movement and followed it to another young couple. The young man had stopped dancing and was now wiping the back of his neck and looking accusingly up at the ceiling.

Nicholas heard a sudden snickering issue from beneath the table. He narrowed his eyes. Setting his glass of water on top of the table, he got down on his haunches—

And came eyes to glasses with a sniggering little weasel packing a squirt gun. "Hello, Roderick," Nicholas said.

The weasel's head jerked. "Oh! Ah, hello . . ." he responded, his eyes darting from left to right.

"Pretty funny trick, that," Nicholas said, pointing to the squirt gun.

The weasel cocked its head, as if wondering whether Nicholas might possibly be a kindred spirit. "Yes, well—" Another snicker. "—I rather thought so."

“I have a better one, though.” Nicholas said. Roderick cocked his head again, and then his eyes widened in horror as Nicholas’s hand came down from on top of the table, holding a large glass of water. “Time for a taste of your own medicine.” And with that, Nicholas threw the water on Roderick.

An outraged cry issued from beneath the table, and Roderick bumped his head as he involuntarily straightened. A number of people stopped dancing, their heads turning to see what the commotion was about. A moment later, they were greeted to the sight of Nicholas hauling Roderick out from under the table by his ear. A few, seeing that Roderick had a squirt gun in his hand and was now himself soaking wet, started laughing, and a few others—marked by dark patches on their clothes—began applauding.

Nicholas snatched the squirt gun from Roderick’s hand. “That’ll teach you.”

* * *

Elizabeth stood beside Nicholas, watching the shimmering reflection of the moon upon the water. The palm trees rustled, waving softly in the breeze. Elizabeth sighed, closing her eyes as the breeze swept past her face and played softly through her hair. She could smell the flowers, the grass—even the ocean, which could be heard distantly beating upon the sandy shore. She smiled, her eyes opening again. It was all just like last year.

“Do you remember where we are?” Nicholas asked, his voice a whisper.

Elizabeth nodded and turned a smile in his direction. “Yes.”

Nicholas left that word hanging in the air as he gazed down into her eyes. He reached a hand up and cupped her cheek lightly in his hand. She gazed back at him, her eyes searching his.

Suddenly she felt trapped beneath his gaze. An unpleasant, gnawing sensation was forming in the pit of her stomach. Not everything was just like last year. Where were those carefree days now? She longed for that sweet simplicity. Then, she’d had just one boy in her heart. Now, whenever she looked at Nicholas, she remembered Pieter’s parting words—“*Promise me you’ll never find anyone else.*”—and his eyes, shining, so full of hope, with tiny reflections of her locked away inside, as if proving that he only had eyes for her.

But I didn't make that promise, she thought.

Nicholas watched as Elizabeth's smile vanished. He hesitated, and she looked away. Frowning, his hand fell away from her face. He'd been about to kiss her. Surely she knew? So why had she looked away? He spent a long moment staring at her, hoping she would fill the silence with an explanation.

In her periphery, Elizabeth noticed him gazing expectantly at her and wished he would look away. *She barely knew what she was feeling, so how was she going to explain it to him? Even if she could explain, he couldn't possibly understand. She imagined his reaction: being with me makes you feel guilty? That's silly! I have a girlfriend at home, and I'm not feeling guilty about being here with you.* But he had some sort of understanding with her. Pieter, on the other hand, thought they were exclusive. How would he react if he knew about Nicholas?

He'd probably break up with her.

Trying desperately to think of an excuse for her behavior that would allow her to avoid telling Nicholas the awkward truth, Elizabeth latched onto the first thing which came to mind. "Were you and Claire ever more than just friends?"

Nicholas's eyebrows shot up. *That's why she's acting so strangely. She thinks Claire's an old girlfriend, and she's wondering if I still have feelings for her.* Nicholas grinned and began shaking his head. "No, and we're not even close friends—more like acquaintances."

Elizabeth sent him a sidelong glance. "She greeted you with a hug."

Nicholas laughed. "Really, Lizzie, that doesn't mean anything."

Elizabeth gave him a patiently, skeptical look. "You don't think so?"

Seeing that she didn't believe him, Nicholas grew more serious and said, "Even if it did mean something, I wouldn't trade what I have with you, even for a girl as nice as her."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "As nice as her?"

Oops. "You know what I mean, Lizzie . . ."

Apparently unsatisfied, Elizabeth looked away again.

Reaching out with his hand, Nicholas caught her chin and gently brought her head back around. Tilting her head up until she couldn't have avoided his eyes if she'd tried, he stepped

closer, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "There's no one else like you, Lizzie. You're too special to have an equal. So believe me when I say there isn't a girl in the world that you need to be jealous of."

Elizabeth's heart fluttered, and she couldn't help but smile. He leaned in closer to her, his hand still resting lightly on her chin. His lips brushed hers, waiting for her to respond. And respond she did, kissing him all too eagerly, her lips seeming to melt against his. All thoughts of Pieter had vanished from her mind, and for a blessed handful of seconds, all she could think about was being here with Nicholas again, commemorating their first kiss.

But when the moment had passed, and they were left standing there in the moonlight, looking into each other's eyes, that old, gnawing feeling returned. She gave Nicholas a wan smile and looked away, out over the river. *How can anything feel so right and wrong at the same time?*

When the kiss had ended, Nicholas had watched Elizabeth carefully, searching for any sign of her former preoccupation. *Nothing*, he'd thought. *It must've been about Claire.* But then he'd seen her weak smile and watched as she'd turned away. There it was: that same, sad, distant look that told him she was busy rebuilding the walls he'd just finished tearing down.

It was then that he realized it couldn't possibly be about Claire. Elizabeth had been like this ever since they'd met again. Frowning, he joined Elizabeth in looking out over the river. He watched the moonlight shimmering upon its surface like a bright silver blanket, but then that light abruptly vanished, leaving nothing but inky darkness in its wake. Nicholas looked up and saw a cloud passing in front of the moon.

Elizabeth was right beside him, also gazing skyward, but she may as well have been up there with the moon. Whatever had come between them, it had done so in the year that they'd been apart. He just wished that she would trust him enough to tell him what it was. He let out a long sigh, drawing a questioning glance from Elizabeth. He answered that look with what he hoped to be reassuring, but she couldn't see it in the darkness, and he felt anything but reassured. Then, softly, strain-ing through the distance, he heard it 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.
It's gonna be a bright, bright, bright—
Bright sun-shiny day . . .*

It was their song.

Nicholas shook his head, feeling somehow that those words were mocking him. Turning to Elizabeth, he took her hand and said, "Let's go back to the dance, Lizzie. They're playing our song. It's only right that we be there to dance to it."

Slowly, as if having only belatedly heard him, she lowered her gaze from watching the capricious moon and sent him a look that was inscrutable for the darkness. Hesitating for an awkward second, she allowed him to lead her back to the dance hall.

Nicholas resisted the urge to sigh. There were plenty of dark clouds out tonight.

Chapter 13

Elizabeth got back from the dance to find her parents sitting outside the tent, talking. They stopped when she drew near.

"Did you have fun?" her father asked.

"Yes," Elizabeth said, smiling briefly at him.

Edwin nodded. "Nicholas is a good boy."

"He's—" Elizabeth couldn't bring herself to agree, not without feeling even more disloyal to Pieter. "—very *sweet*," she finished.

Sensing what was unspoken in that pause, Constance narrowed her eyes fractionally. In her opinion, of all the boys Elizabeth had dated—Pieter included—Nicholas was the best. He was a doctor's son, and despite being an *Afrikaner* by blood, he'd at least been raised as an Englishman, whereas Pieter was an *Afrikaner* by blood *and* culture.

Constance frowned. "My dear," she began, getting Elizabeth's attention just as she was about to enter the tent, "you really should consider Nicholas more seriously. I can see great potential in him. Don't be too quick to discount him just because you have a boyfriend at home. Things change, and the world has a way of growing smaller the older we get. Don't burn your bridges before you know what's on the other side of them, Elizabeth."

Constance was gratified to see her words had hit their mark. Elizabeth's eyes were wide and slowly blinking. *That's right, my girl, I know you better than you think.* Elizabeth covered her shock with a smile and inclined her head in a shallow nod as she continued into the tent.

* * *

Lying in bed, staring up at the steel bars of the bunk above his head, where his sister was now sound asleep, Nicholas found that he wasn't the least bit able to follow her example. He was too confused to sleep. Between Elizabeth and Denise, he had

more than enough to keep him awake at night. Elizabeth, withdrawn and distant for some unknown reason—had he done something to upset her? He couldn't imagine what—and Denise, jealous of Elizabeth. What was he supposed to do? If Elizabeth wouldn't tell him what was bothering her, there was little that he *could* do. And as for Denise . . .

He didn't even want to think about that. If she wanted an exclusive relationship, he wasn't sure that he'd be able to give her that. If circumstances beyond his control separated him and Elizabeth, then fine, but to lose her by his own design would be unbearable. He didn't want to lose Denise either, but if he had to choose . . .

He left that thought unfinished, unsure exactly what choice he'd make. Nicholas rolled over onto his side, determined to put such thoughts from his mind and go to sleep. Several minutes later he rolled over again, and his eyes popped open, as if spring-loaded. He let out a long sigh, picked up his pillow, and smothered his head with it.

* * *

Nicholas was sitting beside Elizabeth in the Siestuary, holding both of her hands in his, remembering. The past days and weeks had been equal parts fun and confusing. Elizabeth had continued to be guarded with her thoughts and feelings, keeping him at an ever-increasing distance. There had been times when he'd felt like she was only half there, and he *still* hadn't figured out where the other half was. Then there'd been other times when things were just as they'd been last year. They were few enough, but those were the times he chose to remember now . . .

He'd taken her back to the Holiday Inn and they'd sat down together in its restaurant, high on the cliff overlooking the rockier parts of the Wilderness beach. They'd had the same waiter as last year, the one who had served them the apple cider. He'd not forgotten his promise to her from last year. Now she was two months shy of 17, and it was legal for her to enjoy light alcoholic beverages with him. He'd made a special point of celebrating her newfound status, making her feel quite adult.

He'd also taken Elizabeth canoeing up the Touws River again—and again he'd picked a white arum lily for her from those which grew along the banks of the river. Just like last year, Constance had had something to say about it when

they'd returned: *"Get rid of it! It's bad luck!"* And just like that, his romantic gesture had been turned into a curse. Of course it hadn't helped that Elizabeth had him to stop the canoe just short of the last corner—before their waterfall—and then asked him to row her back to Siesta again. It seemed that writing passionate letters was far easier than living a passionate life—or maybe there was another reason for her reticence? He couldn't quite figure it out, but something was wrong. Elizabeth, whilst warm, was not fully focused—she was distant.

Apart from the canoe trip, they'd also found Kevin and spent some time playing cards and table tennis with him. But, despite their pledge to do so, Claire and Nicholas hadn't reconnected after meeting at the dance. And Nicholas hadn't bothered to look for her, not wanting to make Elizabeth jealous. Claire, whatever her reasons, hadn't—as far as he knew—made any attempt to find him either. Nicholas's brother, however, had taken every opportunity to reconnect with the girl he'd met at the dance. Her name was Linda; Philip seemed quite taken with her, and apparently, she with him, although Nicholas hadn't seen much of either of them since the dance.

Then, of course, as soon as Elizabeth had recovered from her sunburn, they'd made a daily habit of going to the beach—though this time Elizabeth had been much more careful about the sun. . . .

Nicholas sighed at all the happy memories and wondered how the time had gone so quickly. Now, it was their second last day together. Tomorrow her family would be leaving.

Hearing Nicholas sigh, Elizabeth raised her eyebrows at him.

"I was just remembering the past three weeks," he explained. She smiled. "Will you be . . ." he began, then hesitated, remembering the answer he'd received last year. He swallowed, and began again. "Will you be coming back to Siesta next year?"

Elizabeth thought about it for a moment before replying. "Almost certainly. My dad went to talk to Mister Nixon yesterday, and he said that he's going to put us on a waiting list for a better spot."

Nicholas began nodding slowly. "Good. Then this time, it isn't goodbye—it's just farewell."

Elizabeth smiled up at him and tucked her head against his shoulder. She was determined not to let their last couple of days together be ruined by her guilty conscience. After spending all holiday feeling guilty, she'd finally decided what to do about it: when she got home, she was going to tell Pieter about Nicholas.

She would try her best to explain, but if he couldn't take it, then she would just have to accept the consequences. It was the only way to be fair to both of them. She would tell Pieter that she was only sixteen, and unlike him, she was still far too young to be in a steady relationship. Of course, while they were together they would be exclusive, but holidays would just have to be an exception.

"Lizzie," Nicholas said, interrupting her thoughts. Then, as if he knew what they were, he said, "I know something's been bothering you these past few weeks."

Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat. So he *had* noticed. She braced herself, her mind racing to come up with a suitable excuse.

Nicholas went on, "I just want you to know that, whatever it is, you can tell me. I promise I won't criticize or make stupid comments. I'll just listen . . . It often helps to talk about your problems." *Not this one*, Elizabeth thought. He leaned his head against hers and whispered, "Just remember, I'm here for you."

Elizabeth swallowed past a painfully dry throat. "Thanks, Nick," she said in a weak voice.

And then she acted on impulse. She turned to him suddenly. "Nicholas, would you take me up-river in the canoe again tomorrow morning?" Nicholas appeared surprised, but before he could reply, she continued, "I have something to explain to you, and I cannot think of a better place to do so, than at our waterfall."

Nicholas couldn't believe his ears! What had taken her so long? And why only now—now that they had barely 24 hours left together?

Struggling to seem calm, Nicholas took both of her hands in his, looked deep into Elizabeth's eyes, smiled kindly, and then softly replied, "Lizzie, nothing would make me happier!" How about we go right after breakfast? But wait, when are your parents leaving for home?"

Elizabeth replied, "Around four pm. We just need to make it

as far as Swellendam before sunset, and from there we always proceed home the next morning.”

“Great, then it’s a date!”

Elizabeth smiled. “It’s a date.”

* * *

Lizzie was just finishing the last of the breakfast dishes, when Nicholas put his head around the opening of the tent. “Hey, Lizzie, you ready to go yet?” he said with a carefree optimism that he had not felt in weeks.

Lizzie looked up, wiping her hands on her apron, smiled and said, “I thought you’d never get here!” she said. Then she untied her apron and hung it up. Turning to Nicholas, she continued, “Just give me a moment to go put on my Bikini—I mean, just in case we fall in the water again, by *accident*,” she said with a quick wink before she hurried off.

Nicholas’s heart skipped a beat as he watched her go. This all seemed too good to be true after almost three weeks of this odd distance between them—but who was he to complain if now things were returning to the way they’d been last Summer?

* * *

Elizabeth sat in the front of the canoe in her pale blue bikini, holding a white Aurum Lily and smiling gently at Nicholas. She felt nervous as the last corner drew near. The familiar sound of falling water grew steadily louder, and then suddenly there it was.

Nicholas steered the canoe into the surrounding pool, turned it sideways, and then stopped so that they both could see what had eluded them for the last year.

“Wow!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “It’s even more beautiful than I remembered it!” She turned back to face Nicholas, placed the white lily down and, as gracefully as her ballet lessons had ever taught her, slipped over the side of the canoe, into the clear, cool waters of the pool. She disappeared under the surface and reappeared a moment later, sweeping back her wet hair with both hands.

Elizabeth caught her breath and turned to smile up at Nicholas before swimming around the back of the canoe. Keeping eye contact and grabbing hold of the side of the canoe, she pulled herself up slightly, right next to a now-transfixed Nicholas. With both arms now resting on the Canoe’s rim, her

face just inches away from him, she asked, "What's taking you so long?"

Regaining his composure, Nicholas smiled, and taking advantage of Elizabeth's position as a counterweight, he slipped over the other side of the canoe, disappearing below the water's surface. He swam under the water in a wide arc before surfacing right behind her. His feet dug into the soft, sandy bottom of the pool, as he crept up and gave Elizabeth a big bear hug. She shrieked with surprise and laughter and released her hold on the side of the canoe as he simultaneously lifted her away.

His warm breath began prickling the hair close beside her ear. Elizabeth twisted around to face him, but finding the water too deep for her to stand, she instead placed her arms around his neck and locked her legs around and above his waist.

Before Nicholas could quiet his racing heart and shallow breathing, Elizabeth stared deeply into his eyes, smiled, and said, "Nicholas, I have a very big apology to make to you!"

His brow furrowed. "You do? What for, Lizzie?"

"For not having been as completely focused on you—on us—this summer as I was last year."

She started to explain, but Nicholas interrupted, saying, "Yes, I had kind of noticed you were distant. What was the reason for that?"

"Pieter was the reason. I cannot quite bring myself to forget him when I'm with you—and in just the same way, I could not bring myself to forget about you when I was with him."

"Oh." Nicholas blinked and then he began nodding slowly. "Now everything is beginning to make much more sense!" Nicholas sounded relieved. "I'm kind of flattered to hear that you have the same issues with him when I'm not around—at least I'd like to feel you still think of me and keep me tucked away in some small corner of your heart when I'm so far away. That gives me a lot of hope, for us, Lizzie." Nicholas continued before she could respond. "I'm okay with occupying just a small space in your heart when we're apart—for now."

"And by 'for now' what exactly do you mean, Nicholas?" Lizzie inquired, cocking her head to one side. "Well, all we can reasonably hope for, at best, over the next three years, is to spend our summer holidays together. I have one year of high

school left, you have two. After that I have two years of military service, and only then am I free. At which point I plan to attend Cape Town University, where you're also going, I hope?"

Now it was Elizabeth who looked relieved. "Pieter wants me to attend Stellenbosch when I graduate, so I can be there with him. If I agree to go to Cape Town University to be with you instead, what then Nicholas?" Elizabeth asked, moving her lips so close to his that he could feel her breath piling on his moist lips.

For a moment, Nicholas considered his reply, but then he realized none was needed, and he just kissed her—softly at first and then with a fast-burning passion born of three weeks of frustration. Elizabeth threw caution to the wind, moving her hands up behind his head, kissing him with an intensity that almost caused them to lose their balance on the river bed. Realizing they were about to go under, Nicholas instinctively moved to support her weight, letting her sit on his open hands. That only served to make matters worse. Now they both sensed they were in dangerous territory, but neither of them was stopping the other.

Suddenly Elizabeth broke out of their embrace, out of breath, barely able to breathe let alone speak—"Waterfall!" she said, and Nicholas broke away momentarily, casting a quick glance to the actual waterfall thundering down beside them, and then he turned back to her with a grin. "Yes, it is a waterfall—very beautiful."

And then he pulled her close and kissed her again. Responding eagerly to his insistent lips, Elizabeth reciprocated, but then she broke away once more, even more breathless, this time sounding almost sorry to be saying anything at all. "No, Nicholas—I mean *waterfall!*"

Nicholas moved his lips close to her ear and she felt his words as a soft caress of air as he whispered, "Waterfall, waterfall, waterfall!"

"Nicholas, you're teasing me!"

But he wasn't. Elizabeth started laughing as the memories of last summer's agreement came flooding back. Her laughter diffused the tension now just as it had then, and soon both of them were laughing and hugging each other. Nicholas held her tight, her head next to his, his arms around her back now, which was a safer place for them to be.

Lizzie withdrew just enough to whisper in Nicholas's ear, "Maybe one day, Nicholas, we won't need that word anymore?"

Nicholas hugged her more tightly and nodded. "I hope that day comes soon."

Lizzie withdrew far enough to look into his eyes. Finding the warmth and kindness there that she hoped to see, she asked him, "Nicholas, what's going to happen to us?" Before he could reply, she went on, "I mean, how do we handle just three short weeks together every year, and then go back to someone else for the remaining forty nine? How do you handle that? How does Denise handle that? It doesn't seem fair to you, to Pieter, to Denise, or to me!"

Nicholas took a moment to reply. Then, looking deeply into Elizabeth's eyes, he said, "Lizzie, we were 16 last year, we're 17 now, and next year we will be 18. Times change. Yes, we can't keep a summer romance going like that forever. But we won't have to. Sooner or later, we'll be able to choose to be together all the time, every day."

"As for Pieter and Denise, I guess we're going to have to be more honest—not just with each other, but also with them. We need to at the very least prepare them, and us for the eventuality of a break up because you're right; it's not fair. We can't stay torn between two loves. We'll just end up hurting everyone, including ourselves."

Elizabeth gave a thoughtful frown. "So what are you suggesting, Nicholas? That we break up with them and wait to be together?"

Nicholas shook his head. "No, just that you have to be honest with Pieter, and tell him about me. Tell him that even before you two started dating, you met me, and you didn't tell him about me because you weren't sure you'd ever see me again. Make sure he knows that you are not ready to marry him, or me, or anyone—*yet*—and that you want the freedom to explore your options. Make sure he is okay with having some competition for you."

Elizabeth sighed and studied his expression to gauge his sincerity. Finding it written everywhere on his face, she winked at him, and smiling, she said, "Nicholas Strauss, I have a boyfriend in Wellington. His name is Pieter. If you're okay with having some competition for my heart, then in three years time when we both attend Cape Town University together, I think

maybe it will be time for us to stop being torn between two loves and settle for only one. How's that sound?"

This time Nicholas winked and smiling, he said, "That sounds perfect. I only have one small proviso to add."

"Oh?"

"That never mind how far we are apart, or how long it takes for us to get back together again, that you will always give me one last chance to remind you, in person, of exactly why what we have is so special. I mean, Lizzie, I could never have imagined—not even in my wildest dreams—that I would meet someone as special as you. Could you?"

Elizabeth smiled and ran her hands up his neck to the back of his head whereupon she pulled him close and kissed him, but much more tenderly this time.

Nicholas kissed her back eagerly. A moment later, Elizabeth broke away. Making eye contact with him again, she spoke in a measured tone, "I accept your condition—but only if you agree to give me the same chance! After all, one day, it might be *me* that wants to remind *you* of what we have and why it's so special."

"Agreed!" Nicholas replied without hesitation. And then he kissed her to seal the agreement. As they kissed Elizabeth closed her eyes and lifted her chin, allowing his kisses to trail down her exposed neck. She parted her lips just a little and sighed. Nicholas, sensing they were getting into dangerous territory again, began working his way slowly upward once more, his hot breath piling on her wet skin until at last he returned to her lips. They kissed for a long, drawn-out moment where time seemed to slow down and then stop altogether.

Half an hour later they arrived back on the grassy banks of the river, running the canoe aground in front of Lizzie's family's camp site. Constance spotted them and called out, "Elizabeth, It's already one 'o clock! And you missed lunch!"

"It's okay, Mom. I'm really not hungry," Elizabeth replied.

"Well, then please make sure you're here and ready to go by 3:30. We plan to leave by 4:00!"

Elizabeth sighed. "Yes, Mother, I know, but I'll just get in the way of all the packing now, so Nicholas and I are going to spend our last few hours together in the Siestuary."

"Fine, but don't be late!" Constance replied.

As Nicholas and Elizabeth sat in each other's arms, saying

their final goodbyes in the Siestuary, now just one hour before the looming deadline of 4:00 pm, both of them were wondering why they'd been so misguided as to waste their precious three weeks together with guilt and recriminations.

From behind them came the sound of someone clearing his throat. They turned to look and saw Edwin standing beneath the entrance of the Siestuary.

"Your mother sent me to fetch you," Edwin said. "We're all packed and ready to go." Elizabeth nodded and Edwin thought to add, "You'd probably better say goodbye here. I'm not sure why, but your mother's in an awful rush to get to Wellington. She wants to leave now, instead of at 4:00." With that, Edwin turned and left, not wanting to intrude any longer than he needed to.

Nicholas and Elizabeth got up from the bench, somehow more at ease than before. For a lingering moment, Nicholas just stood there with her, holding her hand, his eyes traveling over her face until he was sure that he had memorized every beautiful feature. Feeling his eyes grow dangerously warm, he looked down at his feet. Sighing softly, he said, "Well, I guess this is goodbye, Lizzie."

"No, it's not, Nicholas. . . ."

Nicholas's head came back up, his face blank.

She smiled wryly at him. "It's just farewell, remember? We'll see each other here again next year, but then we won't waste any of the time that we have together! I want to go back to our waterfall, with you, on the very first day—I think we can trust ourselves there now, don't you?"

Nicholas broke into a grin, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his lips down for a kiss. She felt his hand tighten around hers, and he returned her kiss, his other hand roving across her cheek until it came to rest possessively at the nape of her neck. His every movement told her that he was afraid to let go.

But so was she.

Not wanting to go just yet, but knowing that she had to, Elizabeth broke the kiss and began backing away slowly until only the tips of their fingers were touching. She slowed down then, cherishing that final touch. "Write to me, Nick! As soon as you get the chance."

"I will."

She began to leave again, but felt his fingers holding fast to hers. She could have easily broken free, but instead she just smiled and stared pointedly at his hand.

Nicholas shrugged and let go, his arm falling back to his side. “*Vas vat,*” he explained. *Crazy glue.*

She gave a short laugh and her smile widened. With that, she turned and began walking away. As she did, she felt the tears well up in her eyes. Perhaps it was because she couldn’t help but notice that, as Nicholas spoke, his eyes had appeared unusually moist. Or perhaps it was just because of the gnawing feeling of apprehension now eating away at her heart. Rooted in place, Nicholas made no move to follow. He didn’t think his legs would have held him if he had tried. As she walked beneath the curtain of red and purple bougainvillea which hung from the arching wooden arbor of the Siestuary, he saw her slow and then turn, casting him one final, wistful look—one last lingering goodbye. She waved and blew him a kiss. He caught it and held it to his heart; then she turned and walked away, out of his world—and back toward hers.

He watched her receding into the distance, wanting to run after her, but knowing that it would only make it harder for both of them if he did. When she had finally disappeared from sight, obscured by the surrounding caravans, Nicholas turned slowly on wooden legs and reseated himself on their bench. He ran his hands back through his hair and tilted his head up to look at a broad, blue sky. There wasn’t a cloud in sight. He frowned at that. He’d thought it was overcast. He sat there, gazing up at the sky for a moment, reveling in its boundless beauty.

Then, with another sigh, he leaned forward and put his hands on his legs to help lever himself up again.

Once standing, he meandered down along the river’s edge, winding his way back through the park toward his parent’s campsite. He was almost there when he heard someone shout, “Beaver!”

Noting that the sound had come from behind him, he turned to look. There in the distance, he saw Claire running up behind him, waving as she hurried to catch up.

Chapter 14

“Long time no see!” Claire exclaimed once she’d caught up with Nicholas. He began walking again, and she kept pace beside him.

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

Claire frowned, noting his lackluster tone. “Why so glum, Beaver?”

Nicholas jerked his head in the direction of the Siestuary. “I just said good—” He hesitated. “—farewell to Elizabeth.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. Samuel’s gone home now, too.”

“When?” he asked, more out of politeness than real interest.

“Yesterday. But hey, when are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow, why?”

“Well, the last time we met, we agreed to get together sometime, but I guess we were just too busy. Now, like me, you probably have plenty of time to kill.”

A muscle jerked in Nicholas’s jaw. He’d been planning to spend his last day in Siesta alone. Then again, the solitude would probably just make him even more depressed.

“Well, I could probably use some company.”

“Great. So could I. How about we go see if the tennis table is free? If you let me win, I’ll let you buy me a soda . . .”

“Sure—hey, wait a minute!”

Claire started laughing. “Almost caught you!”

Nicholas snorted and they angled toward the tennis tables. Before long, they came to and crossed the dirt road which wound through the park. Once they were across, Nicholas heard the grinding noise of an approaching vehicle. He was tempted to look, half hoping it would be Elizabeth and that he’d have one last glimpse of her before she left, but he dismissed the thought. Elizabeth’s family would have left already.

“Hey, you’re going the wrong way . . . Nicholas?”

He didn't hear.

"Hey, Nicholas!"

Claire stepped abruptly in front of him, turning to face him as she did so. Unable to stop in time, he bumped straight into her, his forehead almost colliding with hers.

"Woah, careful." She took a step back. "Didn't you hear me? You're going the wrong way." She pointed. "The tennis table is that way."

Nicholas blinked, his face blank. Belatedly, his head turned to see where she was pointing. "Oh," he said, and then started off in the right direction.

Claire fell into step beside him. "Hey, cheer up, Beaver. You'll see her again when you get home."

Nicholas gave her a grim look. "No, I won't. She lives in Wellington, in the Western Cape."

"Oh." Claire looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I just assumed that you must have met at home like Samuel and me."

His look turned wistful. "If only."

"So where *did* you meet her, then?"

"Right here, last Christmas."

"Really? How romantic! I wish Samuel and I had met here . . ."

He sent her a sidelong glance, thinking, *no you don't*.

* * *

Elizabeth was looking out the window of the car, watching as the scene passed her by in a familiar blur of tents, trees, and caravans. People were milling all over the park, getting ready to leave for another year. She sighed quietly, remembering the past three weeks. Despite her intermittent guilt, they had still been wonderful. But now, having just said farewell to Nicholas, she found herself feeling almost as depressed as she'd been when they'd parted last year.

Almost.

She took comfort knowing that it wasn't goodbye, as it had seemed to be last year. They would see each other again; it would be another year before they did, but they *would* see each other again! Elizabeth was about to turn her head from the window when suddenly, she saw him.

Her heart wrenched at the sight. There, walking with his back turned to her, was Nicholas . . . and walking beside him was Claire! She could hardly believe her eyes. They had only

just parted ways and said their goodbyes, and already Nicholas was with another girl? And where was Samuel? Had Claire rid herself of him just to be alone with Nicholas? All those questions swirled through Elizabeth's mind in an instant. Then, even as she watched, Claire stepped in front of Nicholas; she turned to face him; he stopped . . . and . . .

They were kissing!

The car quickly passed Nicholas and Claire. They were oblivious to her watching. Elizabeth turned her head to keep watching, unable to believe what she was seeing, but her line of sight was cut off by the caravan being towed behind the car.

She turned back to face forward, her brow furrowed, her face stricken. Her heart felt heavy and her head felt light. There was a painful ache in her throat and her stomach had a sickening flutter. Was Nicholas secretly in love with Claire? Could he have deceived her that thoroughly? Surely not . . . but she couldn't deny what she'd seen.

She'd been right to be jealous of Claire after all. Now that she and Samuel were gone, Nicholas and Claire were free to be together. And so they were. To think she'd agreed to tell Pieter about Nicholas! There was no point in doing that now. Elizabeth's eyes grew hot, and salty tears welled up in them, forming pools. Then, just like their waterfall, those tears began cascading down her cheeks. She'd bared her soul to Nicholas, just hours ago. How could he!

How quickly things could change. Just moments ago, she had been so certain that Nicholas loved her, but now . . .

Now, nothing was certain.

* * *

When Nicholas got home, the first thing he did was greet his two dogs, Bobby and Scampy. After that, he spent a moment just standing there, feeling the cool mountain air splashing across his face, and looking up at a vast, starry sky. It wasn't Siesta, but it was home. Even though he was sad to leave Elizabeth, he was excited to be back. Tomorrow he would probably see Denise again.

Nicholas frowned at the thought, hoping she wouldn't still be acting jealous. He could really do with a return to their old, familiar relationship. Elizabeth was exciting, different, mysterious, but ephemeral—a short roller coaster ride packed full of powerful emotions. He only ever saw her for three weeks

a year, and who knew when even that might change?

Yes, a return to normal would be most welcome. Roller coasters could be fun, but it sure was tough to live on one.

“Hey! Nick!” Nicholas felt a heavy object slam him in the chest. “Stop daydreaming and take your things,” Philip said.

“Sorry,” Nicholas replied. Grinning, he took his bag from his brother.

* * *

The next day, Nicholas called Denise, inviting her to play tennis with him at the clubhouse. He hadn’t detected anything amiss on the phone, but in person it hadn’t taken him long to figure out that all had not yet fully returned to normal. His first clue had been that Denise hadn’t greeted him with her usual kiss. His second clue had come when they’d begun to play tennis . . .

The ball had a disturbing tendency to fly with unerring accuracy straight for his head, rather than the serving box, and her serves had more power than he remembered.

When the match ended, Nicholas was out of breath from running away from the ball rather than for it, and was quick to suggest a less dangerous activity—sitting down by the river, for example—at least there he would be able to talk some sense into her. Or so he’d thought.

She hadn’t given him a word in edgewise, all the while bending his ear with details about her vacation—most of which seemed to involve a boy named Robert. Nicholas didn’t want to be rude, but he found himself tuning her out. He made a pretense of listening, nodding his head in all the right places, making occasional comments. Meanwhile, his attention was focused inward, remembering his own vacation. The way Elizabeth’s hair looked, shining a golden, honey brown in the sun, her deep blue eyes, that adorable smile . . .

“You’re not even listening to me.”

Nicholas turned and met Denise’s gaze. “Of course I am.”

“What did I just say?”

Nicholas paused, remembering; then he repeated the last thing she’d said, word for word.

Denise narrowed her eyes at him. “And what did I say before that?” Nicholas obliged by repeating that as well, this time less accurately.

She looked away, apparently unconvinced. “Well, it wouldn’t

hurt for you to *act* like you're listening."

But that's exactly what I was doing. Acting. Apparently, I'm not a very good actor. Nicholas frowned, chiding himself: *You should have been listening.* "Sorry. You were saying?"

"I don't want to talk about it anymore."

Nicholas grimaced. *It's going to be an interesting couple of days . . .*

* * *

The movie theater was filling up quickly. By the time the movie started, it would be hard to find an empty seat. Elizabeth reasoned that was because summer vacation wasn't over yet. School only started again on Thursday, and today was Monday. That left her four days to spend with Pieter before going back to school. She planned to make the most of them.

Elizabeth reached a hand over to the bag of popcorn on Pieter's lap. It was the first time they'd seen each other since she'd left for Siesta. In the car on the way over to the movie theater, he'd made her uncomfortable by asking all kinds of questions about her holiday. She'd been careful to omit any details about Nicholas. It was just like her mother had said: *you shouldn't burn your bridges before knowing what's on the other side. And just as logically, you shouldn't burn your bridges while crossing them.*

Nicholas was a part of her past now, an interesting distraction at the time, but in retrospect, a misguided one. After seeing him kissing Claire, just minutes after she'd left him allegedly heartbroken . . .

She'd had no idea that people could be so dishonest. He had completely fooled her. *Well, live and learn. Turns out that really was goodbye, Nicholas. You stupid idiot.*

"You're strangely silent."

Elizabeth turned to Pieter and somehow managed a smile. "Just thinking."

"Oh? About what?"

"You," she said, and leaned her head against his shoulder. He put his arm around her and kissed the top of her head.

"I really missed you, Lizzie."

"I missed you, too, Piet."

* * *

Edwin's first day back at work had been a shock. It always was, but this year was worse than usual. Normally, he would

have had several days of vacation left after returning home, but last year he'd spent some of his vacation in advance by taking time off to move. That meant that today, Monday, the day after he'd returned from Siesta, had been his first day back at work.

Edwin swirled the last quarter inch of brandy in his glass before downing it and ordering a refill from the bartender. As ever, Lawrence was sitting beside him at the bar counter, but he may as well have been a stranger. They seemed to have less and less to say to each other these days.

Edwin frowned, watching Lawrence out of the corner of his eye. The man was getting to be a real downer. He was on to his fourth glass of brandy in half an hour, and his eyes were starting to look glazed. It was clear to Edwin that Lawrence's aim was not to unwind, but to get drunk. What had happened while he'd been in Siesta? Edwin was afraid to ask. And for once, Lawrence didn't appear to want to tell him. That was the most disturbing thing of all. Lawrence was usually eager to talk about his problems. It was a large part of how he coped.

When the bartender came by to refill Edwin's glass, Lawrence finished his drink in a quick gulp and slid his empty glass forward.

"Lawrence," Edwin said, waiting for his attention. Lawrence turned to him with glassy eyes. "Don't you think you've had enough to drink? Let it settle for a bit. You can always get a refill later."

Lawrence blinked lazily, then turned back to the bartender, who appeared to be awaiting further instructions. "Well, come on, fill it u—p," he said, hiccupping on the last word. The bartender hesitated, then did so. Edwin watched as Lawrence's glass was refilled, and continued watching as Lawrence took another gulp from it.

Edwin waited for the bartender to leave before speaking again. "Lawrence . . . what's bothering you? You've scarcely said a word since we got here. Did something happen while I was away?"

Lawrence swiveled slowly on his bar stool to face Edwin. "What do you want from me, Eddie?" His mouth quirked into a self-deprecating smile. "I'm just an old drunk masquerading as the managing director of a tannery."

"No, you're my best friend, and the best damn MD I've ever met. Now tell me what's the matter."

Lawrence arched an eyebrow at him. "I'm the *only* MD you've ever met."

"Not so," Edwin replied.

Lawrence began nodding. "Okay, then. You really want to know?" Edwin inclined his head and waited for his friend to continue. "You remember at the end of the last quarter, sales reported 'a strong positive cash flow?'"

Edwin's eyes narrowed to slits as he struggled to remember. "Yes," he said, his eyes widening again.

"Well, I decided to invest it."

Lawrence didn't elaborate. He just sat there swirling the brandy in his glass. "So?" Edwin prompted.

Lawrence sighed. "So, I invested it in cattle hides. *American* cattle hides."

Edwin raised his eyebrows. "American hides?" There was an uncomfortable pause in the conversation, and Lawrence nodded slowly. It was one thing to purchase hides—the company could always turn them into leather if it couldn't get rid of them, but *American* hides would need to be shipped all the way to South Africa before they could be used. "Well, last I checked, American cattle hides had reached record highs—something like ninety cents per pound."

Lawrence was shaking his head. "That's the problem. I bought them in November last year—at ninety *eight* cents."

Edwin swallowed hard, beginning to see where this was going. "Ninety eight?"

"They'd been going up all year; I thought they'd just keep going up—at least long enough for me to sell them for a profit." Lawrence looked away. "I was wrong. I think I bought them at the high."

Edwin let those words hang in the air while he worked some moisture into his mouth. "How much are they worth now?"

"Seventy nine."

"But that's not so bad!" Edwin said. "They could easily get back up to where you bought them—and higher! You know how the market is—like a seesaw." He imitated a seesaw with his hands.

Lawrence sent him a sidelong glance. "Yeah, until someone jumps off the other end, then it's more like a rock."

Edwin made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "You worry too much. You'll see, hides will go back up, and then you can

sell them for a tidy profit.”

“Let’s hope so.” Lawrence took another gulp of his drink. “But listen, Eddie, until then you need to keep this one under your hat. If hides keep going down in value and the board of directors finds out about this investment . . . my job will be worth less than dirt.”

Edwin held up a hand. “Say no more. I’ve tucked it so far beneath my hat, it may as well be a toupee.”

Lawrence raised his eyebrows and gave a tight smile.

Edwin grinned. “That’s more like it—some of the old fighting spirit.” He raised his glass. “To friendship.”

“To friendship,” Lawrence repeated, clinking his glass with Edwin’s.

Chapter 15

It was late on Wednesday morning when Rebecca got out of bed. She always got out of bed late. With the maid taking care of all her regular chores, she almost had no reason to get up at all.

Almost.

When she did get up, she spent the first few hours of every day getting ready. After all, she wanted to look her best for him. What else did she have to live for?

He'd given her a reason for being, an opportunity to remember the joy she'd once had. She'd almost forgotten that there was more to life than just her grief. She smiled as she put on her diamond earrings.

So much more.

Scanning the selection of perfumes in front of her, she found the most expensive one and then dabbed a few drops on the backs of her wrists and behind her ears. She took a moment to examine her reflection in the mirror. There wasn't a hair out of place, and even she had to admit that she looked good. She smiled again. He would be pleased.

Gliding out of the master bathroom, back into the adjoining bedroom, she checked her watch. It was still early. That was fine. She smiled wryly to herself; she'd find a way to occupy herself until Lawrence got home. She headed for the bedroom door, then out into the hallway and down the stairs. Once she reached the landing, she called out to the maid.

"Mary!"

"Yes, madam?" the maid said, taking a second to reply as she hurried from the kitchen.

"I'm going to the grocery store, and then I think I might pay a visit to the butcher as well. Is there anything we particularly need, or shall I just see what comes to mind?"

"Nothing I can think of, madam."

“Well, I’ll just have to use my intuition, then.” She made a move to open the door, then paused, thinking that shopping for unneeded groceries might not be a reasonable way to kill time. “I might also visit the shopping center.”

Mary nodded. “Very well, madam.”

With that, Rebecca opened the door and left.

* * *

As he was driving home, Lawrence tried to put the matter of falling commodity prices from his mind. He was torn between waiting for cattle hides to go back up, and selling them now before they lost even more of their value. If he sold them now and they went back up, he’d look like a fool, but if he didn’t sell them and they went even further down, he could lose his job.

Lawrence grimaced, turning his thoughts instead to the game of golf he was about to play with Edwin. Unfortunately, he’d forgotten his change of clothes and his golf clubs at home, so he was forced to go home to retrieve them. He felt guilty about returning home only to leave again, but what else could he do? Home didn’t have any pleasant connotations for him anymore. It was just a reminder of everything he’d once had: joy, hope, love . . . family. Now what did he have to go home to? An alcoholic wife, an echoing silence where once there’d been laughter, and an atmosphere of melancholy so thick that it was suffocating. No, it was bad enough that he had to sleep there.

His wife had been right all along. Moving homes hadn’t changed anything. The closest he could come to getting away from his grief was when he was on the golf course with Edwin, driving the ball toward an azure-silver sky and a distant green.

Lawrence pulled into his driveway, sighed, and got out of his car. He walked slowly up the path to his front door. Turning the key in the lock, he opened the door. No one was there to greet him. Well, perhaps, that was just as well. If no one knew he had returned, then no one would know he’d left.

He started up the staircase to the master bedroom. His change of clothes would be hanging in the bedroom closet, where he’d forgotten them that morning. Rebecca would probably be there as well, sleeping off a mid-afternoon drinking binge. He would be quiet so as not to wake her. What was it they said about sleeping dogs? He reckoned the same probably went for alcoholic wives.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he was surprised to find the door to the master bedroom open. He went inside. The bed was made, and for just a moment, Lawrence allowed himself to think that Rebecca had made it. That would be a good sign, he thought, refusing to admit to himself that the maid had done it. He went to the closet to retrieve his golf clothes and draped them over one arm, not wanting to take the time to get changed at home. The less time he had to spend here, the better. When he turned around again, he hesitated, staring at that neatly-made bed. His brow furrowed, and he began to wonder where Rebecca was, if not in the bedroom. Perhaps she was joining the kids for supper. That was a happy thought. He would peek into the kitchen before he left. If he was spotted, well, it would be worth it. Maybe he would even join them for a few minutes. Edwin could wait.

Lawrence descended the stairs, careful not to make any noise, and then crept over to the kitchen. As he drew near, he could hear the sound of lowered voices and of cutlery striking plates. Smiling, he peeked his head around the corner—

His face fell.

Lydia and Julia were eating quietly—with the maid. Rebecca wasn't there. Lawrence leaned further around the corner to see if maybe she was in some other part of the kitchen. The maid looked up from her plate to see him standing there. She stood up quickly from the table, looking guilty.

"I'm sorry, sir, I—"

He cut her off with a wave of his hand. She was probably feeling guilty for eating with the children, but how could he deny her that? She'd been more of a mother to his children than Rebecca over the past year. His children turned their heads in his direction now.

"Daddy!" Lydia exclaimed, getting up from her chair and coming to greet him with a hug. Julia stayed where she was, looking sullen as usual. "You're home early!"

Lawrence blinked in shock. He looked to Mary, then back to Lydia. Going down on his haunches he came to eye level with her. "Lydia, dear, you're speaking so . . ." He struggled for the right words and failed. "How?"

Lydia smiled broadly at him, pleased that he'd noticed. "Mary's been helping me."

"Oh . . ." he trailed off. He'd allowed himself to hope that it

had been Rebecca's doing. Nevertheless, it was amazing. Lydia's lisp was finally gone. "That's incredible, sweetheart." He gave her one last hug, then rose to his feet again. He nodded to Mary. "Please, sit."

"It's all right, I'm done, sir," she said, her voice quavering.

His eyes flicked to her plate—still half full—and then back to her. "No, you're not."

"I can finish it later . . ." He shook his head. Looking uncomfortable, she went on, "The missus said I mustn't—"

Lawrence's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Said what? That you mustn't eat with the children?" Mary nodded carefully and Lawrence felt his anger grow. "Please, sit!" he said with a vehemence that was not intended for her. "You've earned your place here." *I'd like to challenge Becky to do the same*, Lawrence thought angrily as he rounded the table to give his other daughter a hug. She hadn't stood up to greet him like Lydia, but he knew that that wasn't because she hadn't wanted to say hello. Julia was just more withdrawn than her sister. She hadn't always been that way.

As Mary sat down again, Lawrence remembered his original reason for coming to the kitchen. "Where's Rebecca?" he asked.

"She went to the grocery store . . . and to the shopping center."

Lawrence frowned and nodded. *Of course*, he thought. If she wasn't drunk, she was out gallivanting. Meanwhile, Mary was at home being a mother to his children. Yes, Mary had earned her place, but what had Rebecca done? All of her actions over the past year had done nothing but alienate her from her family. Didn't she realize that? Maybe she just didn't care.

"Thanks. Well, I won't keep you any longer."

"You've weaving?" Lydia asked, looking quickly up from her food. Mary sent her a look and she blushed. "I mean, you're leaving?"

Lawrence felt a pang of guilt. "Just for a little while, honey. I'll be home before you go to bed."

"Promise?"

He hesitated. He usually wasn't home before his kids went to bed, but he could make an exception.

"I promise."

Lydia nodded and returned her attention to her food.

As Lawrence was heading out the door to his car, he almost

forgot his golf clubs. Going back inside, he left via the garage, picking up his golf clubs on the way. He pulled the car out of the driveway and started driving down the road toward the golf course. He was on autopilot, more distracted than ever. His thoughts were torn in two directions now—neither of them good. He had problems at work and at home . . .

Suddenly, the car leapt beneath him, snapping him out of his thoughts. The car came down again with a bone-jarring slam and there was a loud grating sound. He stomped on the brakes and steered sharply to avoid riding up on the sidewalk. The grating sound abruptly stopped and the car came to a squealing halt. He just sat there for a second, feeling his pulse hammering in his ears. He'd hit something. But what was it? He was afraid to look, but knowing it would be worse not to, he checked over his shoulder.

There, lying in the middle of the road was a large rock, and next to it, a twisted piece of metal that had once belonged to his car. He cursed under his breath as he got out of the car and strode over to the rock. Seeing the twisted piece of metal lying next to it, he found himself feeling unreasonably furious with the rock. He cursed again and kicked it. His foot exploded in pain and immediately began throbbing. He felt perversely satisfied by that, and watched through narrowed eyes as the rock rolled over and wobbled to a stop.

After a long moment of staring at the offending debris, he sighed and bent down to pick up the rock. It was heavier than he'd expected, but full of adrenaline as he was, he had no trouble lifting it and carrying it to the side of the road. Once that was done, he went back to examine the piece of his car that had been torn off by the rock. It looked like a hunk of junk to him. He went down on his haunches and peered beneath his car. He couldn't see anything wrong. Maybe there wasn't any damage. Frowning, he considered that the odds of that were slim, but maybe it could wait to be fixed. Picking up the twisted piece of metal, careful to mind the sharp edges, he headed back to his car and put it in the trunk.

When he was back behind the wheel, he felt himself starting to shake from spent adrenaline. He turned the key in the ignition, and the car started normally. He allowed himself a flicker of hope at that. Maybe the damage was only superficial.

He put the car in drive and applied careful pressure to the

accelerator. He was immediately greeted to a scrape-scrape-scraping sound. The faster he went, the louder and more rapidly the sound came.

His heart sank. The car couldn't wait to be fixed. He imagined a jagged edge of metal scraping against an axle, or perhaps, the rim of one of the wheels. Slowing the car to a crawl, he considered his options. He briefly debated going back home to get the other car, but then he remembered that his wife had taken it to go shopping. He would have to find a mechanic. He scanned the sides of the road to see where he was. He was still in his neighborhood. He felt a surge of irritation at having had an accident in such a stupid place, so close to home. He continued driving, well under the speed limit, and turned onto the main street of Wellington. He flicked on his hazard lights to caution other drivers.

Sighing, he scanned both sides of the street for a mechanic. This was just what he needed. He came to the traffic light and stopped there, waiting for it to turn green. He sat idly, staring at the old Dutch Reformed Church to his right, drumming his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel. When the light turned green, he turned left and onto Church Street, with the church now at the end of a T-junction behind him. Again, he scanned both sides of the road for a mechanic.

This time it wasn't long before he spotted one. He pulled into the gravel driveway and drove to the parking lot around the back of the tan-and-gray-painted shop. He pulled in beside the only other vehicle there. Impatient to get his car fixed, he got out and strode over to the garage. He stopped inside the entrance of the garage and frowned. The mechanic was nowhere to be seen. His eyes traveled around the darkened interior of the garage, searching. It wasn't a very big shop. There was only one car inside and only space for two. He was about to shout to see if anyone was there when he heard noises coming from the back of the shop. His eyes swept to the source of the noise. There was a half-open door leading from the garage to a recessed portion of the shop. *Probably storage*, Lawrence thought. He headed for the door, thinking that he'd find the mechanic in there.

As he drew within a few feet of the door, he heard voices—first a man's, then a woman's. He couldn't make out the words, but as he started through the door, he heard the woman giggle.

It occurred belatedly to him that he might be walking in on the mechanic at an inopportune moment. Once through the door, he turned—

And found himself at the foot of a staircase, inside what was indeed a small storage room. The voices were clearer now, but coming down to him from somewhere beyond those stairs. The woman's voice was oddly familiar. Curious, impatient, driven on by some strange, unconscious dread, he climbed the stairs. When he reached the top, he found another door, but this one was fully open. Walking through, he found himself in a big open space that was loosely divided into living room, kitchenette, and bedroom. He could still hear voices, now lowered as if whispering, but he couldn't see anyone. He took a few steps forward, his eyes panning around the room.

Still no one, but the sounds were coming from the bedroom area. A movable wall partition divided it from the rest of the living space, so Lawrence could only see the foot of the bed. He strode onward to see past the wall partition. A part of him already knew, and only had to see to be sure, but the conscious, thinking part of him hadn't even allowed the thought to fully form. He was looking for the mechanic to get his car fixed. That was all . . .

But his heart was pounding wildly in his chest, for reasons he was unable to explain. He rounded the corner of that paper-thin wall partition—

And quickly shut his eyes, covering them with his hand. He *had* walked in on the mechanic at an inopportune moment.

Most inopportune.

Somehow he'd allowed himself to be overwhelmed by his curiosity. "Ah—sorry, I'll, um . . ." He started backing away and stumbled backward over something—

Instinctively, he opened his eyes again and put out his hands to cushion his fall. As he fell, he was given another regrettable glimpse of the scene he had walked in on. But this time his eyes locked with the woman's. Hers were wide and staring, and *intimately* familiar.

He couldn't look away.

Thud. He hit the ground and almost didn't notice. For him, the world had just stopped turning. He felt a sharp pain travel up his spine and then go straight through his heart. For a minute he thought he'd impaled himself on something when

he'd landed. He couldn't imagine a worse way to die.

His shocked expression was mirrored on the woman's face. *It can't be. It can't be!* He thought. *I'm dreaming. This is just a horrible nightmare. I'm going to wake up. Any minute now . . .*

I'm going to wake up.

But he knew it wasn't a dream. The scene was too lucid. Every revolting detail stabbed him repeatedly through the eyes and seared into his memory. His gaze traveled to the mechanic and settled on the man's face like flaming cinders. The man flinched, as if only now realizing what he'd done.

Lawrence's fury built into a firestorm, his hands balled into fists, and he briefly entertained the notion of jumping to his feet and beating the man senseless.

But he knew that if he started that, he wouldn't be able to stop. He had to get out. He had to—

"Lawrence, I—"

He looked away, unable to stand the sight of her. With all the self-control he possessed, he levered himself off the floor, brushed off his clothes, and without daring to look at either of them, he turned and walked away, heading with brisk strides for the open door by which he'd entered.

"Lawrence!" the woman called after him, her voice cracking from the strain.

There was no reply. He disappeared from view as the wall partition interrupted her line of sight. Then came the sound of Lawrence tromping noisily down the stairs.

After a long moment, the mechanic spoke. "Your husband."

Incapable of a reply, Rebecca merely nodded.

* * *

When Lawrence got to his car, he cursed his stupidity. There was his wife's car, sitting right next to his in the parking lot. He hadn't even noticed. Furious, he kicked the rear wheel of her car and was immediately sorry that he had. His foot exploded in pain—again. He'd used the same foot to kick the rock.

Lawrence opened his car door and slammed it behind him; then, he just sat there, dazed and confused. How had he missed it?

"You bloody fool!" he screamed and pounded the steering wheel with his fist. Unable to stand it anymore, he started the engine, put the car into reverse, and spun the tires in his rush

to get away. Gravel shot out in all directions, some of it flying up and chipping the paint on his wife's car.

He didn't care.

Lawrence poured all of his fury into driving home, barely noticing the shrieking whine of metal scraping against metal, which had brought him to the garage in the first place. All he could think about was getting home and scouring his mind of any conscious thought with a bottle of brandy.

When he got home, he slammed the front door behind him and strode purposefully to the liquor cabinet in the living room. Fishing his keys from his pocket, he searched briefly among them. Finding the one he wanted, he fit it to the lock in the liquor cabinet, reflecting bitterly as he did so that installing a lock on the liquor cabinet hadn't done much to curb his wife's drinking habit. And now here *he* was, opening the cabinet with every intention of getting mind-numbingly drunk—and all because of her.

Lawrence reached into the cabinet and withdrew a bottle of brandy. He started to unscrew the cap, but then thought better of it. As badly in need of a drink as he was, he still couldn't bring himself to drink straight out of the bottle. He went to the kitchen and retrieved a glass from the cupboard. Just as he was starting to pour, he heard someone approaching behind him.

"Daddy! You're home again! You kept your promise!" From the sound of her voice, he knew it was Lydia. Of all people to catch him at this particular moment, it had to be the last cheerful, innocent soul in the house.

He turned slowly to face her, and she recoiled. He must've looked as bad as he felt.

"Daddy! You're crying!"

He reached a hand up to his cheek. It came away wet. *So I am*, he thought, frowning down at his hand.

He smiled at her. "It's okay, honey. It's just water." She looked about to argue with that, and his smile broadened. *Not willing to accept everything your daddy says anymore? My little girl is growing up.* His smile faded. "Go to your room, darling. Daddy has some things he needs to think about."

"But—"

"Please."

His voice must have sounded as pitiful to her ears as it did to

his, because an anguished look came over her face, and she gave no further protest. As he watched her leave, he was sorry that he'd been unable to keep up the pretense that everything was fine. He supposed that was inevitable. Nothing was ever going to be fine again.

* * *

Standing at the window of the clubhouse, Edwin checked his watch again. Lawrence was late. It was unlike him to be late for golf. Something must have happened to delay him. Another car pulled into the parking lot. Edwin watched it carefully until he was sure that it bore no resemblance to either of Lawrence's two vehicles. He sighed. He wasn't going to wait around forever. Then a thought occurred to him: he could just as easily wait for Lawrence in the bar. The idea of a nice, cold beer made his mouth water . . .

With a curt nod of his head, his mind was made up. One beer wouldn't throw off his game too badly. *Besides*, he thought as he made his way toward the bar, *it's not as if I don't already know who's going to win*. Lawrence always won. Edwin considered that that was probably part of the reason his friend enjoyed the game so much—there was still somewhere he could triumph, where all the variables were his to command, and where the outcome was always positive. Edwin just enjoyed the company and the opportunity to disengage from his responsibilities for a while. That, and he reasoned that Lawrence couldn't *always* win.

Edwin settled in behind the bar to wait. Catching the eye of the bartender, he signaled to him.

"What will you be having, sir?"

"A draft beer, please—any will do."

The bartender nodded and returned a moment later with his drink.

Twenty minutes later, Edwin was on to his second drink and beginning to worry. He checked his watch and frowned. Lawrence was more than an hour late. Getting up from the bar, he headed to the payphone standing in the corner of the room. Edwin fished through his pockets for some change and then dialed the number. The phone rang and rang and rang, until finally, someone picked it up.

It was the maid.

When Edwin asked her where Lawrence was, there was a

long pause on the other end of the line. Mary explained that Lawrence was sick and apologized on his behalf. Frowning, Edwin thanked her and hung up the phone. *Sick? How can he be sick? He was fine just a couple of hours ago when I saw him at the office . . .*

* * *

Constance sat on the swing bench on the back porch, her posture rigid, eyes unfocused—motionless as a statue. Her mind, however, was in anything but repose. Upon returning from Siesta, things had quickly returned to the way they'd been before they'd left: Edwin was spending nearly every evening away from home, out with Lawrence instead of with her. Did he suppose that she liked to stay home and mind the house, only ever seeing him for breakfast? She hadn't minded so much when he was spending just one or two evenings a week away from home, but now she was lucky if he spent one or two evenings a week *at* home. To make matters worse, Edwin returned every night with more than a few drinks in him . . .

Constance had never known her husband to be as insolent as he was after a few beers. If she wasn't careful, he was going to become an alcoholic. And what would the neighbors have to say about that? No, that would never do. Something had to be done. *But what?* she wondered. She knew what the result had to be—Edwin didn't have so many friends that he could simply replace Lawrence, so getting rid of him was the surest solution. But how was she to accomplish that? *And without Lawrence, would he spend more time at home, or would he just go out golfing by himself?* She'd never played golf before, but she knew a number of men who could just as easily play the game by themselves as they could with others.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she heard a sudden noise behind her. Startled, she jumped and jerked her head around to look.

It was Edwin.

Her eyebrows shot up. It was still light out! How could he be home?

"Hello, dear," Edwin said.

"But—but . . ." Few things could reduce Constance to incoherence, but surprises were among them. Edwin looked mildly amused. She took a moment to compose herself.

“Weren’t you planning to go golfing with Lawrence?”

“I was, but—” He hesitated. It wouldn’t be accurate to repeat what Lawrence’s maid had said to him. That was obviously a lie. No sickness Edwin knew of could take a person from healthy to infirm in just a few hours. Edwin shook his head. “Something must have come up. I waited for him for more than an hour and then decided to come home.”

And here she’d just been wondering what Edwin would do without Lawrence . . .

She had her answer.

Constance began nodding. “Come, sit down, Edwin.” He took a few steps forward and then filled the empty space on the bench beside her. They sat in silence for a few moments. Bored, Edwin began swinging the bench.

Constance flicked her eyes in his direction. “Kindly, stop that. Gentlemen don’t swing on benches.”

He grinned boyishly back at her. “They do if the benches were made for it.”

She shook her head. “Like this.” She showed him, pushing gently off with her feet. “We *sway*. Softly, like willows in the wind.”

Killjoy, he thought and looked the other way. The silence resumed.

After a moment, Constance asked, “How is Lawrence these days?”

“He could be better, I suppose.”

“Because of his wife?”

Edwin nodded. “Among other things.”

“Really? What other things?”

“Some problems he’s having at work.”

“What kind of problems?”

Edwin turned to face his wife. “Why so curious?”

She blinked. “I’m just concerned, that’s all.”

Edwin smiled and nodded. “So am I, dear.” His smile faded and he looked away again. “So am I.”

* * *

Lawrence sat in the living room in a plush, leather chair, his eyes glazed, half-closed, and out of focus. A bottle of brandy lay—mostly empty—on the table beside him, and in his hand was the glass which had served to empty the greater portion of that bottle. His mind was blank, his body blissfully numb. He

pretended that he couldn't remember what had brought him to this chair and subsequently left him there, staring at the wall, periodically emptying and refilling his glass.

It was almost working. Despite being exhausted and despite the lateness of the hour, he could not sleep. Every now and then his eyes would drift closed only to abruptly pop open again. What was the time, anyway? He brought his watch up to his face, but the hands of the clock were blurry and wouldn't keep still. He let his arm fall back to the armrest of the chair.

As he sat there, staring at the far wall of the living room, an image rose into his mind—a horrible, lewd, heart-wrenching image. Something out of a nightmare. He gritted his teeth to make it go away. When that only made it come into sharper focus, he lifted his glass unsteadily to his lips and drained it.

The image still wouldn't go away. He couldn't deny what he'd seen, and he couldn't scour it from his mind with a bottle of brandy as he'd hoped. Even barely conscious, he was still aware of what he'd been trying so hard to forget. He laughed at that. It seemed somehow funny to him that the harder he tried to forget, the easier it was to remember.

Then, as though from a great distance, he heard a sound. He concentrated, trying to determine what it was. *A creaking sound*, he decided. Silence. Then, there it was again, more softly now. He strained his ears to listen . . .

Nothing. Maybe he had imagined the noise. He glanced suspiciously at the bottle of brandy sitting next to him, and then reached for it to pour himself another drink. His hand missed the bottle and he knocked it over. It fell to the floor with a solid *thunk*. He frowned down at the bottle where it now lay on a variegated Persian rug and considered picking it up, but when he leaned forward to do so, his head swam, and he abandoned the idea.

* * *

Rebecca stood outside in the darkness, her breath coming in shallow, anxious gasps, her heart racing. She glanced back the way she'd come. Seeing her convertible in the driveway, she was torn between going inside and running back to the safety of her car. She'd put off coming home as long as she could, and now . . . now she didn't even know what she was doing back at her house. *Her* house, she laughed silently at the thought. It had never been *her* house. First Constance's, then

Mary's; no, *her* house had been taken from her. So what was she doing back here, standing on the doorstep of someone else's home? Would Lawrence take her back? Did she even want him to?

Unable to stand the indecision any longer, she opened the door, just a crack at first. Then she began easing it further open, trying to be as quiet as she could. Suddenly, the door began creaking loudly and she stopped. She cursed under her breath. Her heart was hammering in her chest. She considered it unlikely that Lawrence was still awake and even less likely that the children were out of bed, but she had no desire to face anyone just now—especially the children. She felt guilty enough as it was. No, she would sleep in the spare room tonight, unless Lawrence was already there. Then, after he went to work tomorrow, and after the children had gone to school—she would still be sleeping when they left—she would decide what she was going to do.

Bracing herself, she decided to open the door as quickly as possible. Easing it open would only make the creaking louder. She opened it in a rush, satisfied that this time only a small noise issued from the hinges. She closed the door in the same fashion, with only a whisper to accompany the movement. The door now closed, she eased the deadbolt into place and thanked her luck that it was better oiled than the hinges.

Turning around, she noticed light spilling into the hallway from the living room and subsequently froze. Either Lawrence was still awake or he'd forgotten to turn off the light. She grimaced and looked to the staircase. She could go upstairs to the master bedroom, but if Lawrence was already asleep, she would probably find him there. Her gaze returned to the light spilling into the hallway. On the other hand, she would have to go through the living room to get to the spare bedroom, and if he was in the living room, still awake, that would be worse.

After another moment of indecision, she decided that he couldn't possibly *still* be awake. He had to go to work tomorrow. With that in mind, she started down the hall. When she reached the end, she peered around the corner, just in case.

Thunk. She was just in time to see a bottle of brandy fall to the floor. Lawrence *was* awake, sitting with his back turned to her. She watched, frozen, as he leaned forward in an attempt

to recover the bottle which had fallen. With a groan he leaned back again.

He's drunk. She bit her lower lip. How could he still be awake? He was never going to make it to work tomorrow morning . . . which meant she would have to decide what she was going to do *tonight* if she wanted to avoid a confrontation.

A confrontation with him would be more than she could handle. What could she say? That she was sorry? Was she sorry? Even if he could forgive her, she couldn't go back to the way things had been before she'd met Mike. Waking up every day, wishing she hadn't, passing the time with a bottle as her only companion—*well, that, and Mary*, she thought bitterly. Mary, who'd stolen the last few pieces of her shattered life. It was all she could do to stay under the same roof with the woman and not strangle the life out of her. But she couldn't fire the maid, no, because there was no way she'd be able to handle a house full of chores by herself. Not anymore.

She'd been tricked. Lawrence had said he was getting a maid to help her cope, but the truth was he'd hired Mary to replace her. Even then he'd known just how useless she was. But Mike had given her her life back—a purpose, a reason for being. He *needed* her. He'd been given up for adoption shortly after birth; she was all he had; and now, he was all *she* had, too.

Hearing Lawrence groan again brought Rebecca back from the murky depths of her thoughts. Lawrence might decide at any moment to go stumbling up the stairs to bed. And since she plainly couldn't get past him to go to the spare bedroom, she was without a place to sleep for the night.

Well, not without a place to sleep. Before she'd reluctantly left Mike to come here, he'd reminded her that she would always be welcome to stay with him in the *flatlet* above his garage. She'd smiled at that, her eyes shining brightly. It was plain to her that he loved her, and she loved him as well, but her situation was more complicated than his. He was single and alone, with no family and few friends. Younger than her by almost a decade, she supposed that he saw her as a kind of mother figure—the mother he'd never had. She, on the other hand, had a husband and two children. Mike had known about that from the start. He'd said it didn't matter, and it *hadn't* mattered. She'd even managed to get over her guilt. *Until today, or rather*—She glanced at her watch. —*yesterday.*

Rebecca heard Lawrence's voice come out in a hoarse whisper and her pulse quickened. "Why, why, *why?* Rebecca . . ." Hearing the agonized way he said her name, her breath caught painfully on a lump in her throat. She watched as a tear slid slowly, glistening in the yellow lamplight of the living room, down her husband's cheek. *You stupid fool*, she thought, *you really don't know why?* She shook her head and reached up a shaking hand to wipe away the tears that had sprung to her own eyes. She knew what she had to do. Having Mary in the house only made it easier.

"*You've wike my mommy now, awen't you?*" Lydia's innocently spoken words echoed through her mind, and she wiped a fresh set of tears away from her eyes. *Yes, darling, she is. Mary is your mommy now.* Her children no longer needed her. They would get by. *And you, my dear husband, you'll be better off without your drunken wife.*

She debated whether or not to say goodbye to the children before she left. Of course, waking them to say goodbye was out of the question, and looking in on them would only make what she had to do harder on herself. But perhaps she should write each of them a letter explaining why she had to go?

No, Lydia was too young to understand, and even if Julia could, she would only try to fight it. *But you can't change the truth, sweetheart. No matter how hard you try, you can't change the truth.* And Lawrence . . . could she leave him without ever saying goodbye, without even trying to defend herself?

She had to. If she managed to redeem herself in his eyes, he might be tempted to take her back, and that could never work. It would destroy them both. But maybe she could write him a few words. *Something to keep him from wondering. To give him closure.* She owed him that much. And in there she could give him a few words to pass on to the children. *I love you, at least.* She wasn't sure if he would tell them, but perhaps it would be better that way.

Rebecca blew her husband a silent kiss before leaving. Then she turned and walked back down the long, dark hallway, the darkness growing thicker with every step she took from the shallow light spilling out of the living room.

She hoped she would have enough time to gather her things into a box—only the most important things could go—and to write her husband a final goodbye before she left.

She needn't have worried. By the time she made it back downstairs with a mid-sized box containing all of her most precious things clutched tightly to her chest, the light was still spilling into the hallway and there was not a sound to be heard in the entire house. Rebecca gave a shaky sigh of relief, thinking that Lawrence must have fallen asleep in his chair.

Upon reaching the door, she cast a final glance back down the hallway. Her eyes blurred, and she blinked to clear them. Knowing she couldn't afford to delay any longer than she already had, Rebecca unlocked the door and creaked it open. She winced, having forgotten about the noisy hinges. She closed the door hurriedly behind her with a noisy *click* and raced down the walkway to her car.

* * *

Lawrence's eyes popped open. There it was again, that creaking noise he'd heard before. He listened intently, his pulse racing. *What could it be?* he wondered, his head throbbing painfully with the concentration. A different noise came then. It sounded like the front door closing. With a tremendous effort, Lawrence heaved himself out of his chair and made his way unsteadily toward the hallway, one hand pressed to his throbbing head, and another held out in front of him to grab onto anything strong enough to support his weight. Once he reached the hallway, he leaned heavily against the wall. The front door was still shut. *I must have imagined the noise.*

He was just about to go back to his chair when he heard a car start, followed promptly by the sound of it pulling out of the driveway. He blinked, peering down the darkened hall to the front door. He saw a brief flash of headlights shine through the curtains at the windows around the front door, and then it was gone, and he heard the car drive off. *So she returned after all . . . but she didn't stay.*

He frowned at the hollow ache in his chest and the sharp pain in his throat. *Good riddance*, he thought, turning from the door and walking unsteadily back to his chair. When his eyes grew too blurry to see, he reached a hand up to see what was obscuring his vision. His hand came away glistening in the half-lit darkness of the room, and Lydia's words came echoing back to him: "*Daddy! You're crying!*" and then his reply: "*It's okay, honey. It's just water.*"

Chapter 16

Edwin was sitting in his office, pouring over one of the files on his desk, when the phone started ringing. Leaning forward, he reached out and answered it.

"Edwin Smythe, assistant managing director speaking. How may I help you?"

"Mister Smythe, this is Martha. I just wanted to let you know that it looks like you'll have to fill in for Mister Stevens today."

Edwin sat up straighter, worry creasing his brow. "He hasn't come in yet?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Did you try calling his home?"

"I just got off the phone with his maid. She says he's sick and won't be able to make it to work today."

Sick? Edwin repeated silently to himself. The same excuse Mary had given him the day before. Could Lawrence really be sick, or was his maid just covering for him? Edwin's mind ran through possibilities . . .

"Sir?"

"Sorry, I got distracted for a moment."

"Would you like to take over for Mister Stevens in his office, or shall I just patch his calls through to you?"

"No, in his office. It's better if people aren't constantly being redirected to me."

"Very well, sir."

Edwin hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair. *What's really going on over there?* he wondered.

* * *

"Mister Stevens?"

Lawrence cracked one eyelid open and was immediately sorry that he had. The light streamed in, assaulting his eye, and through it, his brain, which was pounding mercilessly to the beat of a sadistic drummer. He groaned and shut his eye

again. It wasn't good enough. The light was shining like a bright orange supernova, straight through his eyelids. He brought a hand up to shield his eyes.

"Mister Stevens? Would you like something to eat?"

Lawrence's stomach turned over at the thought and he groaned again. He tried to respond, but found his throat too dry to talk.

"Water," he croaked.

A minute later: "Here you go." Lawrence opened his eyes to slits and found his maid standing beside his chair—a chair, not his bed? Then he realized where he was. The living room. Mary was holding a glass of water out to him. He accepted the glass from her and drained it to the last drop.

"Thank you," he managed, handing the glass back to her. She nodded and hurried away, having decided that he was uninterested in food.

Lawrence closed his eyes and pressed a hand to his forehead. What had happened yesterday? He couldn't seem to remember. A sudden thought occurred to him—

What time was it? His eyes flew open. His pulse quickened, and the pounding in his head intensified. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he checked his watch. It was half past ten. He was late for work.

Very late.

"Mary!" His voice reverberated in his ears, making him wince.

"Yes?" her voice came from behind him. He turned to look and saw her standing in the entrance to the kitchen, her face pinched with concern.

He paused, forcing his voice to be softer this time. "I need you to call the office. Tell them I'm sick and—"

"They called a moment ago, and I told them exactly that, sir."

"Oh . . . thank you."

She gave him a wan smile, then disappeared into the kitchen.

Lawrence turned back around. He sat there for a moment, dazed, blinking against the sunlight. What had happened? He was still wearing his suit from yesterday. His tie hung loosely around his neck, his jacket was unbuttoned at the front, his shirt was thoroughly wrinkled . . .

He pieced the clues together—the pounding in his head, the

aversion to food, the sensitivity to sunlight, his strange attire and the even stranger place in which he'd woken up—and realized that he had a hangover.

He stared down at the variegated Persian rug at his feet, thinking that a bottle of brandy should be lying there. Or had he picked it up again? He frowned, trying to remember . . .

His head throbbed with the effort and he gave up. One thing was for certain, he had to get out of this blasted light—and maybe, get some more sleep while he was at it. He heaved himself out of the chair to stand on shaky legs. His stomach lurched with the movement and he paused to let it settle. He started forward again, shuffling toward the hallway, and then paused in the opening of the hall, staring at the front door. He felt the faintest stirrings of memory . . .

And then it all came rushing back. He winced and sagged against the wall. After a long moment, he staggered down the hallway and slowly climbed the staircase to his room. He felt like he hadn't slept in days. He needed to lie down.

He tripped on the last stair, but caught himself from falling by grabbing onto the railing. He found the door to his bedroom closed and wondered for a moment if Rebecca might be inside. Maybe it had all just been a bad dream. Turning the doorknob with a suddenly sweaty hand, Lawrence cracked the door open.

The bed was still made—empty, save for the plain white rectangle of an envelope sitting ominously on his pillow. Unable to help himself, Lawrence shuffled forward until the envelope was within reach. Written on the front, in his wife's handwriting, were the words: *To Lawrence*. He stood there staring at the envelope for a long moment, agonizing over whether he should open it.

Knowing he would get no sleep until he did, Lawrence reached for it. It wasn't sealed. He sat down on the bed and withdrew the letter with a shaking hand. He began to read:

My dear Lawrence,

I don't expect you to understand what I can barely understand myself. I'm sorry that I've hurt you. I'm sorry that I couldn't be the wife you needed. You deserved better. But time changes us in ways we cannot expect, and sometimes, all that's left is to move on.

I'll understand if you can't forgive me. Please don't come looking for me. You can't fix this. I'm happy now. Happier than I have been of late, but nowhere near as happy as I used to be. You, all of you, were the best I ever had . . . but that's over now.

You don't need me anymore. We've been strangers living under the same roof, and the time has come for us to say goodbye.

Goodbye, Lawrence. Please tell the children that I love them . . . or maybe it would be better if you didn't. I don't expect to be a part of any of your lives anymore. I wouldn't be able to bear it. When the children are old enough, please try to make them understand.

-Rebecca

Lawrence couldn't move for a long time. He just sat there, unblinking, staring down at the letter in his hands, his tears falling silently to the page. *I'm happy now . . .* the words repeated mockingly inside his head. Lawrence angrily swiped his tears away with his sleeve. *Happy? You stupid, selfish woman! What have you done? What have you done?* His eyes teared up again, and he crumpled the letter in his hands and threw it against the wall.

* * *

Edwin's lunch hour brought him to the Bastiaans Restaurant at the Grande Montagne Hotel in Paarl. Lawrence had scheduled a business luncheon there with Lucas Atherton, the owner of Berg River Textiles—also located in Paarl. Unfortunately, Lucas Atherton had been unreachable all morning, and his secretary didn't know where he was, so Edwin had been unable to reschedule the appointment. Even more unfortunately, Lawrence's secretary didn't know anything about the appointment other than the time and place, so Edwin was going with absolutely no prior preparation. Edwin shook his head with annoyance as he parked his car outside the restaurant. *What a day for Lawrence to be absent from work.* Lucas Atherton was one of Western Tanning's most important clients.

Getting out of his car, Edwin crossed the parking lot and started toward the restaurant. Enormous, leafy green trees rose up out of long, grassy, rectangular islands, blanketing the

parking lot in shade. In the distance, the restaurant was an old T-shaped manor house, with pristine, white walls and a roof that was brown-shingled and peaked along the axis of the T. As Edwin drew nearer, he saw a red brick patio with tables and white umbrellas. The courtyard sprawled out from the foot of the patio, with finely cut grass and neatly trimmed islands of flowering hedges. In the distance, Edwin could already see what the view would be from the restaurant's patio: soaring mountains, turned a hazy blue from the distance and interrupted by a line of tall, stately palms along the front of the courtyard. To one side, the luscious greens of the Grande Montagne vineyard were sparkling in the midday sun.

Edwin whistled softly to himself as he walked down a red brick pathway through the courtyard and up to the patio. The manor house was easily three stories high, but in evidence there was only one, with six, impressively tall, lattice-framed windows, each flanked by a pair of dark wooden shutters.

At the top of the stairs, Edwin was greeted and asked where he would like to sit by a young, black waiter in a pitifully sweltering tuxedo with long coattails.

Edwin explained that he was meeting someone for lunch. He supplied Lucas Atherton's name for the reservation, and the waiter informed him that Mister Atherton was waiting for him in the private dining room.

After leading him there, the waiter opened the door to the private dining room, releasing a welcome burst of air conditioning, and then promptly closed the door behind him without entering the room himself. There was already a waiter in the room, standing quietly to one side.

Lucas Atherton rose from his chair as Edwin strode toward him. Edwin nodded to the older man, then allowed his eyes to wander around the room. There were three tables—but only one occupied—antique fittings, a golden chandelier, and two of the tall, lattice-framed windows he'd seen from outside. The windows looked out on a leafy green corner of the vineyard and a broader slice of the hazy mountain vista beyond. Black and gold patterned drapes bracketed the windows, and the entire room had a soft golden tone, from its beige, suede-like carpet to its finely textured tan and yellow walls.

Edwin's impression of the hotel and restaurant was of distinct charm and character—a colonial, old world elegance

that hailed from a time not yet fully distant in South Africa's past. All in all, it was the perfect atmosphere for a very memorable lunch—were he not so woefully unprepared for it.

What had Lawrence and Mister Atherton been planning to discuss?

Edwin's eyes rested on Atherton's face as he walked toward the older man. Mister Atherton was smiling, but his bushy, silver eyebrows were raised in question. Edwin was not who he'd expected to see.

Stopping in front of the table, Edwin held out his hand. Lucas promptly enfolded it in a meaty grip. He was a large man with a prodigious waistline and thinning, gray hair that was fast turning white. His suit was a spotless black and looked expensive.

"Hello, Mister Atherton. I'm Edwin Smythe, assistant to the managing director of Western Tanning. As you've no doubt guessed, Mister Stevens is regrettably indisposed today."

"Oh? I hope it's nothing too serious."

Edwin shook his head. "He's taken ill, but should be back at work again soon."

Lucas nodded faintly and gestured to the chair opposite his own. "Well, I'm sure we can still accomplish what we came here to do. Please, take a seat." Edwin did so, but only after Lucas had retaken his.

Edwin watched the older man make a gesture to a waiter who'd been standing to one side of the room. The waiter promptly came to their table, and Lucas ordered a bottle of red wine of a type and vintage Edwin didn't recognize. The vintner was equally unrecognizable. In a quiet flash of his white apron and black vest, the waiter left to fetch their wine from the cellar.

"Well, I suppose Lawrence has briefed you on the purpose of this lunch."

"Actually, I'm afraid he hasn't had the chance."

"I see." Lucas's expression flickered into a frown. "Well, it was to discuss the sale of some of Western Tanning's raw hides to Berg River Textiles. Evidently your company acquired a surplus of American cattle hides last year and now needs to get rid of them."

Edwin's eyes widened in sudden comprehension as he remembered a conversation he'd had with Lawrence a few days

ago. "Ah. Of course."

"So you're aware of the situation?"

Edwin nodded. "Mister Stevens has briefed me on it, yes."

"Good." Lucas Atherton proceeded to explain to Edwin his company's requirements and expectations, should the deal go through. All the while, Edwin listened, adding a few reassurances and scattered comments. The discussion went on through lunch—which for Edwin was a fresh Caesar salad followed by Italian Fettuccine in a tomato-cream prosciutto sauce. It would have been delicious, but for the gnawing, acid dread in the pit of his stomach that grew with every word Lucas Atherton spoke. When he finished eating, Edwin took a giant sip of his wine in an effort to ease his indigestion.

The gist of Lucas Atherton's offer was that Berg River Textiles could only buy the hides at a significant discount from current market prices—68 cents—and Edwin already knew that Lawrence had purchased the hides last year at a high of 98 cents. That would be almost a 30% loss for the company. Even at current market prices, the picture wasn't pretty. As of today the hides were valued at 78 cents—and falling. So far, more than a 20% loss, and that was assuming they could find a buyer before the hides lost even more of their value.

The problem for Berg River Textiles, as it was for Western Tanning, was that the hides had to be shipped from America all the way to South Africa in order to be of any use, and that just wasn't feasible, unless they'd been bought at a real bargain.

Edwin set his wine glass down. He didn't know what Lawrence had been hoping for, but he was pretty sure this wasn't it. "Well, Mister Atherton—"

"Please, call me Lucas."

Edwin acknowledged that with a nod. "I understand your dilemma, but I believe we'd be taking an unacceptable loss at the price you specified. I'll relay the information to Mister Stevens, however, and have him get back to you by tomorrow." Lawrence's answer would be the same, Edwin knew. Rather than sell the hides for an even lower price than market value, Lawrence could get a broker to sell the hides in America in or around the current price. All things considered, that was probably the best way out.

Lucas nodded. "I'm sorry I couldn't offer a better deal."

The business part of the lunch now settled, Lucas gave greater attention to his food—a filet of salmon, breaded with asiago cheese and fresh breadcrumbs. He hadn't finished eating yet, since he'd spent most of the time talking. Edwin stayed to keep Lucas company while he ate. He took up the conversational ball and rolled it toward lighter topics. They discussed family—Lucas was divorced, newly remarried, and his son and ex-wife lived in England. From there the conversation strayed to sports and Edwin soon found out that both he and Lucas were avid fans of golf. He also found out that Lucas and his wife liked to play tennis on Sundays.

Edwin mentioned that he and his wife also used to play, many years ago, when they were in school, and Lucas promptly invited them to play with him and his wife on Sunday. Edwin explained that he'd love to, but would have to check with his wife. Lucas gave him his home number to call, and Edwin said he'd let him know before tomorrow.

Lunch now over, each paid for his meal. They bid one another farewell, and Edwin left the Bastiaans Restaurant having gained a friend, if not a buyer for Western Tanning's hides. When he got back to the tannery, he was immediately swamped by more of Lawrence's pending business. There were more appointments with associates and clients of Western Tanning. All of the appointments, as it later turned out, were to discuss selling the tannery's investment in hides. None offered favorable terms, but again Edwin assured them that he'd convey the details to Lawrence and have him get back to them tomorrow.

By the time the day was over and he had to go home, Edwin was more tired than he'd been all week. The managing director certainly didn't have it easy.

When he got home, Edwin found his wife in the kitchen, preparing supper. He told her about Lucas Atherton's invitation to play tennis. She hesitated, thinking it over for a minute before giving her reply.

"It's been a long time since we played tennis, Edwin. Do you even remember how to play?" She raised an eyebrow at him over a bowl of salad as she tossed in some freshly-diced tomatoes. Edwin shrugged, and Constance said, "I didn't think so."

"I doubt if it will matter that we're a little rusty," Edwin

replied, chuckling.

“Oh? And why is that? Because you don’t mind losing?”

“No. You only need one look at Mister Atherton to realize that he’s not exactly a professional sportsman.”

“Indeed? Looks can be deceiving, dear. You said he plays tennis every Sunday with his wife. I doubt he’d do that if he wasn’t any good at it.”

Edwin sighed. “Regardless, we can’t afford to decline. Lucas Atherton owns Berg River Textiles, the biggest textile manufacturer in South Africa.” Constance abruptly stopped tossing the salad and her gaze slowly elevated until she fixed Edwin with an irritated look. Edwin went blithely on, “He’s a very important client of Western Tanning, a good man to know, but also one we can’t afford to take the risk of offending.”

“Well why didn’t you say that in the first place? Given the man’s importance, you should have already known what I would say. Now Mister Atherton might have time to reconsider his invitation. Or worse, he’ll think you rude or indecisive for having put him off. What sort of man has to ask his wife before accepting an invitation?”

Edwin sighed again. *What sort of man indeed. The sort who’s married to you, that’s what.* He just couldn’t win.

At Constance’s urging, he promptly called Lucas Atherton to accept the invitation, and then it was settled: they’d be going to Lucas Atherton’s home at 1:00 o’clock on Sunday.

Later that night, gazing up at the ceiling of the master bedroom while trying to follow his wife’s example and fall asleep, Edwin found himself wondering at Constance’s sudden change of heart about Mr. Atherton’s invitation. He knew about his wife’s favorable bias toward people of more *privileged* socioeconomic standing, but he certainly didn’t feel the same way.

In his opinion, people deserved the same consideration regardless of how much money they had, or how well-regarded they were. After all, he’d once been a member of those lower classes his wife now universally snubbed.

Edwin frowned. His circumstances hadn’t seemed to matter to Constance when she’d agreed to marry him, so what had changed? Had she simply made an exception for him back then in light of his other attributes, or was she really a different woman now than the one he’d married?

It was disconcerting to wonder whether his wife now loved him for who he was . . .

Or for what he had.

* * *

By the time Edwin got to the tannery the next day, he was twenty minutes late. As he passed by Lawrence's office, he noted that Martha was already there, at her desk in front of his office, answering a call. Overhearing snippets of the conversation, Edwin grew curious and stopped in the hallway just beyond her desk to listen.

" . . . I'm sorry, sir, but Mister Stevens isn't here yet. Yes, I know what time it is. Would you like me to take a message for him?"

Edwin frowned. That wasn't good. If anything, the managing director needed to be early to work, not late. Crises were probably piled to the ceiling by now. He sincerely hoped that Lawrence wasn't planning to use two sick days in a row, and so early in the year. It wouldn't look good.

He turned around and walked up to Lawrence's secretary just as she was putting the phone down. As the assistant managing director it was his job to take up the slack.

"Hello, Martha," Edwin greeted. "What've we got for today?"

She looked up from where she was scribbling notes on a piece of paper. Her face registered relief upon seeing him.

"Good morning, Mister Smythe. Here," she said, handing him a stack of papers, "these are the departmental reports that Mister Stevens requested. I'm sure he'd appreciate you looking through them so that you can give him a summary later. After that phone call, I doubt he'll have time to read them himself—if he comes in today, that is."

Edwin frowned. "You make it sound as though he won't."

"He might yet. It's still early."

"Let's hope so," Edwin said, nodding slowly. He paged absently through the report which was sitting on top of the pile that Martha had handed him, then looked up. "What was the call about?" he asked.

"There's going to be a board meeting on Monday, and the chairman wanted to remind Mister Stevens that he still has to present the company's sales strategy for this quarter."

Edwin grimaced, looking down again at the reports he was holding. *The chairman! Lawrence should've been here to receive*

that call.

“You wouldn’t happen to know anything about Mister Stevens’s sales strategy, would you?” Martha asked, her voice taking on a hopeful tone.

Edwin’s head came up sharply. “What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “Well, I don’t know anything about it. For all I know, he hasn’t even started.”

“He’s had a month to work on it!” Edwin said, remembering that Lawrence had told him about the sales strategy before he’d gone to Siesta.

Martha shrugged. “I’m sure that if that’s the case, he’ll have it ready by now. Perhaps he’s just not keeping me in the loop.”

Edwin looked doubtful. “Please inform me when Mister Stevens arrives.”

“I will do that, sir.”

Edwin strode away from Martha’s desk, his brow deeply furrowed.

Chapter 17

“There’s no way we can finish it in time for the board meeting,” Lawrence said, staring blankly at the wall, his chair turned away from Edwin.

“We can,” Edwin insisted from where he was seated in front of Lawrence’s desk. “But you need to focus.”

There was no reply.

“Lawrence! You’re going to lose your job if you go in there with nothing.”

The chair swiveled slowly around, and Edwin was shocked again by his friend’s appearance: dark circles beneath his eyes, two days’ worth of stubble on his face, uncombed hair, wrinkled clothes . . .

Still, Lawrence said nothing.

He’s lost the will to fight. What happened? Edwin began shaking his head. “I realize you’ve been sick, but we’re just going to have to tough it out and get this done.”

Lawrence’s eyebrows elevated a few degrees. “Sick?” he asked, almost to himself. “Sick . . .” He barked a short laugh.

Edwin gritted his teeth. “Give me what you’ve got so far.”

Lawrence nodded toward the black leather briefcase on top of his desk. “The blue folder.”

Edwin opened the briefcase and dug through it until he found the folder. He grabbed it, pulled it out, and looked briefly through its contents.

Edwin gasped. “There’s almost nothing here!”

“I told you we don’t have enough time,” Lawrence replied, sounding almost smug.

“Lawrence, snap out of it!” Edwin abruptly stood from his chair and began pacing in front of the desk. “This is no time to be nonchalant. What’s been going on? First you missed our game of golf, then you didn’t come in to work, and now you show up looking like this—” Edwin stopped pacing and

gestured to Lawrence's unkempt appearance. "—and acting blasé about a matter which could very well cost you your job!"

Lawrence's eyes glittered, and Edwin watched his friend swallow hard. Edwin waited, but Lawrence seemed incapable of a reply.

"Well, whatever's been going on, we can still do this, but I need your help."

Lawrence sniffled and Edwin watched as he pressed a hand to his forehead and tightly shut his eyes, as if to ward off a headache. "Just forget about it, Eddie. I couldn't help you if I wanted to. I don't have it left in me."

Edwin just stood there, staring at Lawrence for a long time. Finally, he said, "Well, I do. I'm not giving up on you." Lawrence's eyes opened—they were red and lifeless.

Edwin hefted the blue folder, turned on his heel, and started for the door of Lawrence's office. "I'm going to take this home with me and finish it over the weekend." He stopped in front of Lawrence's door, his hand on the doorknob, and turned to face his friend. "I'll brief you on it Monday morning, so you can still be the one to deliver the presentation."

"Eddie, even if you *can* finish it in that time, it's going to need to be bloody *spectacular* to save my job. This past month I've been . . . distracted."

Edwin knew just how dangerous that was for a managing director. As a rule, even a hint of weakness, whether real or imagined, was enough to get a managing director fired. Too much of the company's welfare rested in Lawrence's hands for the board of directors to take a chance that he might start making all the wrong decisions—or *stop making them altogether*, Edwin thought.

"What've we got to lose by trying?" Edwin asked.

Lawrence cast his eyes downward to avoid meeting Edwin's gaze and then slowly swiveled his chair to face the wall again.

* * *

Constance was busy setting the table for dinner when she heard the front door open. Her brow creased in confusion, and she went to see who it was.

Of course, it could only be Edwin, but that did nothing to lessen her confusion. *It's Friday, and he's home early . . . again?* Sure enough, when she came within sight of the front door, she spotted Edwin locking it behind him. He turned

around to see her standing there in the hallway, blinking at him in shock.

"Hello, dear," he said.

"What brings you home so early?"

He hefted his briefcase with a grimace. "I have a presentation to prepare for Monday. Unfortunately—" He gave her an apologetic look. "—it's going to keep me very busy this weekend." *If only I had all weekend to work on it*, he thought. Just yesterday he and his wife had made plans to spend Sunday afternoon playing tennis with Lucas Atherton and his wife.

"I see. Well, I'm just about to serve supper, so go get washed up and then come and join us."

Edwin hesitated, then nodded. "I suppose the work can wait until after dinner."

"Good," Constance said as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Edwin encountered Thandiwe, his family's part-time maid, on his way to the master bedroom and gave her a brief nod as he passed her in the hall.

"Hello, Mister Smythe. If you want to give me your suit, I can press it for you."

Edwin half turned to address her. "That would be splendid, Thandi, thank you. I'll have it for you in just a moment." He reached the door to the master bedroom and opened it with a quick turn of his wrist. He tossed his briefcase onto the bed, went over to the closet, and changed into something more comfortable. Draping his work clothes over one arm, he went looking for Thandiwe.

"Thandi?" he called, coming out of the bedroom and heading back down the hall toward the kitchen.

"Sir?" The answer came from behind him, and he turned to see her standing outside Elizabeth's bedroom with a basket of laundry. Her hand was on the doorknob, and she was on her way out, but she'd stopped halfway through closing Elizabeth's door to see what Edwin wanted.

"There you are," Edwin said, striding down the hall toward her. He raised his arm with the clothes draped over it. "I've got my suit for you to press." Stopping in front of Thandiwe, he handed her the clothes.

"Thank you, sir."

"Dad?"

Edwin looked past Thandiwe to the half-open door of Elizabeth's bedroom. He managed to catch a glimpse of his daughter before the door swung wide and she came out into the hallway, smiling.

"Hello, Elizabeth," Edwin said, returning her smile.

"You're home!" she said, coming right up to him and enfolding him in a hug. Edwin was taken by surprise, and for a moment he didn't know what to do—his arms held awkwardly up and away from his sides. Thandiwe looked on, her features chiseled in amusement. From where she was standing, behind Elizabeth's back, facing Edwin, the maid motioned to Edwin, using her arms to imitate a hug. Edwin took the cue and returned his daughter's hug. It still looked awkward.

Thandiwe took the opportunity to leave, and as she left, Edwin heard her making faint clucking noises with her tongue. Edwin frowned, thinking, *well, what does she expect? We're not a very demonstrative family. Why shouldn't I be caught off guard when my daughter gives me a hug?*

Elizabeth broke the hug and looked up at him. "What's the occasion?" Edwin's eyebrows went up in question. "You're home early."

"Oh, that. I have a lot of work to do over the weekend, and I need to get an early start on it."

"Oh." Elizabeth's face fell and she looked away. Edwin felt a pang of guilt and was tempted to add that it wouldn't prevent him from spending some time with her, but he stopped himself, realizing that that would be a lie. It was bad enough that he was going to have to take time out from preparing Lawrence's presentation to play tennis on Sunday.

Elizabeth's gaze returned to his. "Will you be joining us for supper at least?"

He nodded, and she smiled. They heard the dinner bell ring, and both of them turned toward the sound.

"We'd better go," Elizabeth advised, "that's the second time mom's rung it."

"Is it? I must've missed hearing the first ring. We'd better hurry, then," Edwin said and began striding down the hall. Elizabeth hurried to catch up with him, remembering that if her mother had to ring the bell for a third time, parties absent from the table were obliged to skip that meal.

When Edwin and Elizabeth reached the dining room table,

they found Hattie and Constance already there, seated and waiting. They moved silently to take their seats.

"Hi, Dad," Hattie said as Edwin took his seat at the head of the table.

Edwin looked up from spreading a napkin across his lap. "Hello, Hattie."

"Well, now that we're all seated," Constance said, "Edwin, would you say grace, please?"

* * *

Saturday morning came, and Nicholas found himself sitting in class, writing a letter to Elizabeth. *Déjà vu*, he thought. It felt like just yesterday, rather than last year, that he'd been sitting here writing a letter to Elizabeth.

What should he write? He'd already written one draft and promptly crumpled and discarded it. Part of his dilemma stemmed from the fact that he was caught in the fuzzy realm between friend and boyfriend. He was well aware of the fact that she had a boyfriend at home. That—combined with the distance between them—relegated their relationship to something that was more platonic than anything else. And yet, a week ago they'd been in Siesta, inseparable, so much more than just friends. He remembered sitting with her in the Siestuary, looking up at the stars, both his hands holding hers . . . kissing her in the moonlight, talking until the last possible second before the clock struck nine . . . dancing at Fairy Knowe . . .

He sighed, trying to decide what would be the proper tone for his letter. If he was totally honest in what he wrote, he'd tell her how much he missed her, how much he wanted to hold her again . . . how much he wanted to kiss her again. But none of that would be appropriate now that she was back with Pieter. The most he could do would be to tell her that he missed her; the rest would have to be innocuous small talk.

He thought about his return to boarding school for inspiration. He was in *standard 10** now, and it was the start of his last year at Saint Andrew's; she probably already knew that, but it was something he could use to fill the page.

Nicholas glanced at his watch and noted that he was

* *standard 10*: grade 12 in the South African system

running out of time to write his letters. There was no time left to deliberate. He sighed again, and began writing.

* * *

It was 1:00 o'clock on Sunday, and instead of working on Lawrence's presentation as he'd have liked, Edwin found himself obliged to take some time off. Incredibly, he'd already finished most of the presentation, but with so little time left, he foresaw himself having to stay up late to get it done before tomorrow.

Very late.

Taking a right turn off of an old, rural road in Paarl, Edwin began driving down a long, tree-lined driveway which ended in a lasso-shaped turn-around. In the middle of the lasso was a grassy island with a cascading fountain that was crowned at the top by a pair of stone cherubs. The house at the end of the driveway was three stories high, broad and rectangular—enormous. Rows of flowers and bushes ran along the base of the home and some of the upper level windows had balconies that would no doubt give a spectacular view of the mountains and vineyards around Paarl.

Parking his white Mercedes at the end of the driveway, Edwin and Constance got out of the car. Both were wearing their old tennis clothes: Constance dressed entirely in white from her cap down to her unflatteringly clingy top and over-short shorts, and Edwin in shiny black. He found himself self-consciously sucking in his stomach as he walked. His tight-fitting T-shirt was clinging in all the wrong places, making his beer belly seem twice as large.

As they walked up to the entrance of Lucas Atherton's home, Edwin was awed by its grandeur—a high set of stairs, semicircular at the base, rose to greet oversized double doors, with a pair of Grecian columns on either side, nearly rising to the full three-story height of the home.

Edwin gulped back a surge of anxiety. Lucas Atherton made him look like a pauper. When they reached the top of the stairs, Edwin rang the bell. There was a few second wait, and then a black-skinned, black-suited butler appeared and ushered them into an echoing en-trance hall. The butler left them in order to fetch Mister Atherton, and Edwin found himself admiring his surroundings as he waited.

An enormous, crystal chandelier hung high above a shiny,

white marble floor. Ahead of them was a double staircase that curved up and around to either side of a second floor balcony that looked down on the entrance hall. Rising from the back and middle of that balcony was a third staircase that shot straight up to the final level of the home. Beneath the balcony, in the far back of the entrance hall, was a broad wall of windows which looked out on a terrace the size of a tennis court. Edwin couldn't help gawking, and Constance had to elbow him in the ribs to get him to stop when Lucas Atherton came striding in from the left-hand side of the hall with—

Edwin almost frowned in distaste. The young, leggy woman with long, straight, blond hair, and milk-white skin who was walking beside Lucas Atherton was no doubt his wife, but she was so much younger than him that Edwin only needed the space of a second to guess why she'd married the old industrialist.

"Welcome!" Lucas stopped in front of Edwin, his face lit by a beaming grin. "You're punctual, I see." Edwin nodded and returned the smile. Lucas Atherton extended his hand and they shook. "Good. I like that. Says a lot about a man's character."

As predicted, he introduced the young woman as his wife—Loretta. In turn, Edwin introduced Constance.

"Well, shall we go out onto the terrace for some refreshments before we play? I always find that I feel less guilty if I have my tea and biscuits *before* playing tennis. Afterward, we can all sit down to a nice, cold beer."

Edwin's eyes lit up at that suggestion. Atherton's wife gazed smilingly up at him, amused. Constance, however, was not, but she kept her displeasure to herself. "Sounds like a good idea to me," Edwin said.

Lucas gestured to the broad wall of windows at the back of the hall, then returned his gaze to Edwin, belatedly noticing that neither Edwin nor Constance had tennis rackets with them. "Did you forget to bring your rackets?" he asked, pointing to their empty hands.

"No, they're in the *boot*.^{*} Shall I go fetch them?"

Lucas waved a hand and gestured to his butler, who having

* *Boot*: British English for the trunk of a car

overheard, immediately started for the door. “No need.”

Edwin grinned and tossed his car keys to the butler.

Later, out on the terrace, with a cup of tea in his hand, Edwin found himself admiring Lucas Atherton’s sprawling backyard. He couldn’t see the end of it! Besides the immaculately kept grounds, there was an enormous pool at the foot of the terrace and a tennis court to one side. Noting that Atherton’s pool made his look like a teacup, Edwin turned his attention from the view and back to the conversation that had been going on without him.

“So, tell me about yourself—and your company,” Constance said, her eyes on Lucas. “What’s the secret of your success?”

“Well, as for my company, there’s really not much to tell.” He shrugged. “We produce textiles—quite boring really. And as for myself, I’m originally from England. I moved to South Africa with my parents when I was just a teenager and lived here for a handful of years before going back to England to study. I met and married my first wife there. We had a son, got divorced, and I moved back here to take over the family business.”

“Oh dear, I’m sorry to hear about the divorce.”

Lucas took a sip of the tea that was sitting on the table in front of him, then lowered his cup to the table again. “Don’t be. The truly sorry part was the marriage, not the divorce.”

Constance was taken aback. “That’s even sadder.”

Lucas shrugged and stole a biscuit from the plate in the center of the table. “Lucky in business, not so much in love.” Belatedly, he sent his current wife a glance and smiled at her. “Until recently, that is.”

Loretta smiled back at him, and he took a bite from his biscuit, holding out his hand to catch the crumbs.

“And your son?” Constance asked. “Is he still in England?”

Lucas waited until he’d swallowed, then said, “Yes, he goes to school there. As a matter of fact, he goes to school with Prince Andrew.”

“Really?” Constance asked and saw Lucas’s wife, Loretta, nodding slowly and exaggeratedly, as though that was a particularly impressive statement. And it was—to Constance anyway. To Edwin it seemed self-aggrandizing, or at least vicariously so.

Lucas smiled. "He's in *matric** right now, but he's planning to come here in July, once he *matriculates*,† to spend the rest of the year with us, and to decide whether he wants to attend university here in South Africa or in London next year . . ." The owner of Berg River Textiles trailed off as though a thought had just occurred to him. "I'm sorry; I must be boring you with all of these details."

"Not at all," Constance assured. "I find it quite interesting. But I'm curious—with such a great distance between you and your son, and with him going to school in England, how do you manage to see him?"

"He comes to visit during his school holidays. In fact, he gets a week off at the end of this school term, so he's coming in just about a month to spend some time with me." Lucas took another sip of his tea, now all but draining the cup.

"I see. Well, that's good," Constance said to fill the silence as Lucas drank his tea.

"And what about you?" Lucas asked as he set his teacup back down. "Do you and Edwin have any children?"

Constance smiled. "Two girls, actually. Our eldest, Elizabeth, is going on seventeen, and her sister is fourteen."

"Interesting. Your eldest daughter is nearly the same age as my son. Perhaps we should introduce them sometime."

The way Lucas said it, he made it sound like an idle suggestion, not a serious proposal, but Constance wasn't about to give him that kind of latitude. "That's a splendid idea! We could have them meet when your son—what did you say his name was?"

Lucas raised his eyebrows. "Actually, I didn't say, but his name is Charles."

"Ah. Well, when Charles comes to South Africa, we should introduce them."

A reluctant look crossed Lucas's face. He glanced to his wife, then said, "That's certainly a possibility."

Constance caught the exchange and smiled again. "Edwin, show Mister Atherton a picture of Elizabeth."

Edwin obliged, taking out his wallet, and then a picture he'd

* *Matric*: grade 12

† *Matriculates*: graduates

recently taken of Elizabeth. He handed the photo to Lucas, whose eyes promptly widened upon seeing it.

"*This, is your daughter?*"

Constance smiled. *Now, he's interested.*

"Indeed she is," Edwin said.

Lucas's wife leaned over to see the photo. "She's beautiful."

Constance just went on smiling and watched as Lucas handed the photo—almost reluctantly—back to Edwin.

"And your son? Do you have a picture of him?" Constance asked.

"Of course." Lucas reached for his own wallet. After a moment of fumbling, he handed a photo to Edwin, who barely glanced at it before passing it on to Constance.

Constance braced herself as she reached for the photo. In light of the other things he had going for him, it almost didn't matter what Charles looked like, but she knew it would matter to Elizabeth.

Upon receiving the photo, Constance's own eyes widened. *Handsome and rich! What luck!* Now Elizabeth could dump that *Afrikaner* boy she was dating. There was still the problem that Lucas had mentioned his son might decide to study in England rather than South Africa, but there were ways to ensure he'd stay. *When it comes to persuading men, there is nothing like a woman to do the job.*

Constance smiled and nodded as she passed the photo back to Mister Atherton. "I'm sure your son and my daughter will get along splendidly."

Chapter 18

Edwin arrived at work on Monday morning exhausted, but triumphant. He'd worked all weekend—with the exception of his trip to Lucas Atherton's house—on the presentation that Lawrence had to give. At the expense of sleep he'd finally finished it, an hour before he would have had to get up for work. He'd spent that final hour drinking cup after cup of stale, over-brewed coffee and reviewing his work. Now, he strode down the hall to Lawrence's office to deliver the good news in person.

"Hello, Martha, is Lawrence in yet?"

Martha looked up from studying some paperwork on her desk. "Good morning, Mister Smythe . . ." she trailed off, noting the dark circles under his eyes. She quickly covered her reaction with a smile. "Yes, he arrived just a few minutes before you did. Would you like me to check if he's available?"

"Please. Tell him it's urgent."

Martha dialed in to Lawrence's office, had a brief conversation with him on the phone, and then nodded to Edwin.

Edwin opened the door to Lawrence's office and stepped inside, closing the door quietly behind him. He grimaced as he started toward Lawrence's desk—his friend's appearance was no better than it had been at the end of last week: dark circles that rivaled Edwin's own rimmed Lawrence's puffy, bloodshot eyes; his hair was uncombed; a beard was growing in on his cheeks; and his suit was wrinkled as though he'd been sleeping in it.

"Well," Lawrence began, "you ready to take over as managing director?"

Edwin stopped in front of Lawrence's desk and frowned down at his friend. "What are you talking about?"

Lawrence gestured for him to sit and Edwin did so. "When I

go into the boardroom today, looking like this, to make a half-baked presentation . . .” Lawrence trailed off, as if the result should be obvious. Edwin stared blankly back at him. “They’re going to fire me, Eddie, and when they do, you’ll take my place.”

Edwin was shaking his head. “Lawrence—”

“You’ll do well, Eddie. I have faith in you.”

“*Lawrence!*” Edwin said, more forcefully now. Lawrence raised his eyebrows. “The presentation is finished.”

Lawrence blinked. “Impossible.”

“No, quite possible. And if I have to say so myself—” Edwin allowed a thin smile. “—I think it’s going to knock their socks off.”

Lawrence leaned back in his chair, his brow creased in thought. After a long moment, he leaned forward again. “Show me what you’ve come up with,” he said.

When Edwin had finished summarizing the sales strategy, he was pleased to see that Lawrence was impressed. Lawrence reclined in his chair again, staring up at the ceiling and fiddling absently with the stubble on his chin.

“You came up with that in two days?”

Edwin nodded.

Lawrence began shaking his head. “I was given a month to prepare that presentation, and you finished it in two days.”

Edwin cleared his throat. “Well, the chairman probably expected you to take some time off in between.”

“Incredible,” Lawrence said, shaking his head again.

Edwin grinned. “I told you I would do it.”

“You know, Edwin, if this works, I’m really going to owe you one.”

“Don’t worry about it. Seeing you pull through this crisis will be thanks enough for me.”

“You’re a good employee, Edwin, and an even better friend. If I weren’t so sure of the latter, I’d be afraid of the former. It’s almost a shame you won’t be replacing me. You’d make a far better managing director than me right now.”

“Thank you. That’s high praise, but you’re not out of the woods yet. Do you need me to go over the key points of the presentation with you again?”

Lawrence shook his head. “No, I believe I can manage from here. Now I think my time would be better spent making myself

look more presentable.” Leaning forward, he checked his watch. “There are a couple of hours left before the board meeting, but I’ve still got to drive to Cape Town for it. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

Taking that as his cue, Edwin got up from his chair. “Good luck.”

Lawrence inclined his head. “Thanks again, Eddie.”

* * *

When Lawrence entered the boardroom and took a seat at the table, he drew a number of worried looks from the board members, and a low murmuring spread through the room. It wasn’t because he was late—apparently everyone else had simply arrived earlier than him—rather it was because his efforts to tidy his appearance hadn’t been quite good enough. There’d been nothing he could do about his dark circles and bloodshot eyes, and unfortunately, he hadn’t had a less wrinkled suit. But he was now very glad that he’d at least managed to shave and comb his hair before going to the meeting.

“Well, now that we’re all here...” William Gaines—the chairman of Western Leathers International, parent company for Western Tanning—turned to the assembled board members, his gaze drifting around the room until it settled uncomfortably on Lawrence. “Stevens, if you’re ready, we’d like to start with your presentation of the new sales strategy for Western Tanning.”

Lawrence nodded and stood up from the table. He opened his briefcase and pulled out the blue folder containing the presentation that Edwin had prepared for him. With a shaking hand, he withdrew his notes along with some slides from the briefcase. He handed the slides to the projectionist, and someone turned out the lights. When his first slide came up on the wall behind him, Lawrence began.

All through the presentation, the chairman was nodding thoughtfully, occasionally raising his eyebrows, but never once did the serious look on his face flicker. Lawrence had thought Edwin’s ideas were brilliant, but as he finished his presentation, he found himself fearing the worst. He tried to swallow, but found his mouth too dry to do so. No one at the table was smiling. There wasn’t even a stray comment, just deathly silence. Calmly, with as much dignity as he could

muster, Lawrence took his seat again. Looking down at the table, not wanting to meet the chairman's steely gaze, he shuffled his notes for the presentation back into the blue folder. Then, to his astonishment, he heard something—

Clapping. He looked up. It was none other than the chairman, William Gaines. Slowly, steadily, like the meandering flow of water through a stream bed, the sound was carried around the table as others joined the chairman in applause. Lawrence was frozen in shock. Now, everyone at the table was smiling.

When the applause died away, the chairman spoke, "I'll be the first to admit it, Stevens: I didn't think you could pull this off, but your presentation has definitely put my mind at ease. Good job. I look forward to seeing you put your strategy into action. By the sounds of it, Western Tanning is going to have a record first quarter."

Lawrence didn't know what to say. He worked some moisture into his mouth, then swallowed past the lump in his throat. It felt as though an enormous weight had lifted from his shoulders.

"Thank you, sir," he managed.

The chairman smiled. "But, Stevens, promise me one thing."

"What's that, sir?"

"That you'll get some more sleep," the chairman replied, gesturing to him. "You look bloody awful."

Lawrence gave a tight smile. "I'll do my best, sir."

* * *

"Cheers, Eddie!" Lawrence said, holding up a frosty mug of beer. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Cheers!" Edwin returned, clinking glasses.

They each took a hearty gulp from their drinks. When Edwin set his mug back down, he was left with a foamy mustache. Feeling the moisture clinging to his upper lip, he pulled the handkerchief from his top pocket and wiped it away.

Edwin grinned. "So they really liked it?"

"You wouldn't believe it," Lawrence replied, shaking his head. "They actually applauded when I was done giving the presentation. They *applauded* me, Eddie. I don't think that's *ever* happened in a board meeting—certainly not in any of the ones I've been to."

"That's magnificent! Truly splendid."

Lawrence nodded. "You saved my job today, Eddie."

"Well, I'm just glad I could help."

Lawrence gave a halfhearted smile and stared down into his drink for a long moment before raising it to his lips again. Edwin watched him curiously. *The man should be ecstatic, but already he's drifting back into despair.*

"So . . . how's the family?" Edwin asked, taking a stab at what was bothering his friend.

Lawrence paused, his mug of beer frozen halfway to his lips. Then, jerkily, he took another gulp and put the drink down again. A long silence followed while Lawrence toyed with his drink on the counter.

"Lawrence?"

"I heard you."

"Well, I mean, it's really none of my business, but it might help for you to talk about it."

Lawrence just peered into the golden depths of his beer. When he finally spoke, his voice was so soft that Edwin had to strain his ears to hear.

"She left me, Eddie. She abandoned all of us, the girls, too." Edwin opened his mouth in a silent gasp and fumbled for an appropriate response.

Lawrence shot him a wry smile. "Sorry you asked?"

Edwin swallowed hard. "When did this happen?"

"Last week—" Lawrence gave a short, mirthless laugh. "—right after I caught her having an affair with the local mechanic."

Edwin found himself struggling for words again. Suddenly, it all made sense: why Lawrence had failed to show up for the game of golf they'd scheduled on Wednesday afternoon, why he'd failed to come to work the next day, and why he'd suddenly lost all will to fight for his job. Edwin didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry," he blurted, wincing even as he did so. It sounded horribly trite.

"So am I."

"What about the children?"

Lawrence just shook his head. "She left a note asking me to explain it to them when they're old enough to understand."

Edwin blinked. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I'm so sorry, Lawrence. If there's anything I can do . . ."

Lawrence shrugged and picked up his beer mug again.

“What’s to do? Life goes on—” Edwin watched as Lawrence drained his mug, and winced as he slammed it down on the counter. “—whether she wants to be a part of it or not.” Fury blazed in his friend’s eyes as he signaled to the bartender for a refill. Once the bartender had come and gone, Lawrence spoke again, his voice barely a whisper: “At least I still have my job. I have you to thank for that, Eddie. I won’t forget it, you know. I may not be able to return the favor just yet, but one day—” Lawrence nodded and turned to him with shimmering eyes. “—one day, I will.”

* * *

Elizabeth was sitting at the desk in her room. Her brow was furrowed and her eyes narrowed in thought as she peered out the window, to the amber circles of streetlight on the road beyond her front lawn. She was brooding over the letter she’d received when she’d arrived home from school. It was from Nicholas. She’d already read it, but now she was trying to decide what to *do* about it.

It’s just a lot of fluff, she thought. He wrote about boarding school, he mentioned how much he missed her, but nowhere had he thought to mention Claire. He’d made no attempt to explain himself. He probably thought she hadn’t seen him kissing Claire. And why shouldn’t he think that? His back had been turned when her dad had driven past. He had no way of knowing that she’d seen, so he was content to just go on pretending.

Well, I’m not, Elizabeth thought, disgusted. She folded Nicholas’s letter, putting an angry diagonal crease in it, and stuffed it back into its envelope. Opening the bottom drawer of her desk, she placed the letter at the very bottom of the others she’d saved there. For a moment, she wondered why she was even keeping it. She was tempted to throw it in the trash. But no, it made sense to keep it, if only to remind herself of how stupid she’d been. *Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.*

* * *

Edwin turned the key in the ignition, simultaneously killing the rumbling of the car’s engine and the twin yellow circles of the car’s headlights upon the garage door. The interior of the car was dark and silent. *Oppressively silent.*

He made no move to leave the car, despite having arrived

home. His gaze was fixed unblinkingly ahead. Try as he might, he couldn't forget what Lawrence had revealed. *First his son, and now his wife . . . I don't know how he manages to get out of bed in the morning. There must be something I can do . . .* His mind churned through possibilities. *What if I talked to Rebecca? I could convince her to go back. Surely she would see reason . . . but would Lawrence take her back?* Edwin's frown deepened. *Probably not.*

Edwin's eyes began to burn, reminding him to blink. He did so, breaking himself out of his dour thoughts. Shaking his head sadly, he finally got out of his car and followed the cobblestone pathway to his front door. *Maybe Constance will have an idea of how we can help Lawrence.*

After fumbling around in the dark for a second, he found the right key and opened the door to reveal an even thicker darkness inside the house, but at the end of the hallway that led from the front door, there was a pool of light spilling from the living room.

Edwin headed straight for that light, not bothering to shed his suit jacket first. Upon reaching the living room, he found his wife seated in an armchair across the room from him. On an end table to her right, next to a shining lamp, sat a steaming cup of what was probably tea.

"Hello, dear," he greeted.

After a moment, her eyes found his and she smiled. "Good evening, Edwin. How was your day?"

Edwin took a seat on the couch opposite his wife before replying. *Where to begin?* "It was—" Edwin grimaced. "—tiring." Having had no sleep the night before, that was definitely an understatement. He raked a hand back through his thinning brown hair and sighed.

Constance arched an eyebrow over her teacup as she raised it to her lips. "I can imagine. How did your presentation go?" She took a sip from the cup and then lowered it carefully to her lap.

Edwin blinked, for a moment confused by the question. *My presentation?* Then understanding dawned, and he explained: the presentation he'd been working on all weekend had been for Lawrence, not him. Edwin further explained how well that presentation had gone, but ended with the disturbing revelation of how Lawrence's wife had left him for another man.

Constance's face remained an expressionless mask throughout, and she offered no comment, either during or after Edwin's summary of the day's events.

The silence grew awkward, but Edwin was too tired to wonder at his wife's apparent serenity. He idly studied her expressionless face, noting how the lamp beside her clearly lit one half of her face and shadowed the other, bringing her features into sharp relief. One eye sparkled pale blue, while the other shone blackly from the shadows. *It makes her look quite chilling*, he thought.

"You didn't tell me that you were working on a presentation for *Lawrence*."

Edwin hesitated, then shrugged. "You never asked. Besides, it wasn't really relevant. Work is work. It scarcely matters who it's for, just that it gets done."

"I see." Constance lifted her teacup to her lips. After taking a short sip, she lowered it back to her lap. "Did Lawrence ask you to do his work for him?"

Edwin shook his head. "No, but I don't see how that is—"

"*Relevant?* Of course *you* don't." Her mouth pressed into a thin line and her eyes narrowed fractionally. "What you do and do not find relevant has no bearing on the facts, my dear. And the *fact* is that Lawrence has been using you."

Edwin blinked in shock, then snorted. "Nonsense. I *offered* to help him prepare his presentation; he didn't have to ask."

"And you don't think he anticipated that you would do so? He left all his work for the last-minute so you'd be duty-bound to help."

"No. He was wholly indifferent that I should even *try* to help him. He'd resigned himself to being fired for his negligence."

"Then perhaps you should have left him to his fate."

Edwin's jaw dropped a few centimeters. "Constance, you can't really mean that."

"You needn't look at me that way, Edwin. I'm not being callous, just realistic. How long do you suppose you can go on covering for Lawrence?"

Edwin set his mouth in a grim line. "For as long as he requires my help."

Constance huffed. "Your loyalty is admirable, my dear, but misplaced. God, in his wisdom, has directed the course of events to this point, and you interfere with His will at your own

peril.”

Edwin shook his head. “God does not approve of all that happens on this earth, and He certainly won’t object to my helping a friend in need.”

Constance raised her eyebrows. “No? As goes Lawrence, so goes Western Tanning, and along with it, everyone who works there. Who will thank you for your good intentions when thousands are put out of work, just so that an incompetent managing director can hold on to his job for a little while longer? You must weigh the lesser evil of allowing Lawrence to be fired against the greater good of all those who are at the mercy of his decisions.”

Edwin bristled. “I wouldn’t say he’s *incompetent*, just terribly distracted.”

Constance raised her eyebrows. “Is that any different?” Edwin opened his mouth to object, but she stopped him with a hand. “Well, of course, if he’s still the best man for the job . . .” She let that thought go unfinished as she took another sip from her tea. Edwin frowned. *Well, maybe not the best man for the job, but . . .*

Edwin shook his head as though to clear it, and opened his mouth to reply, but before he could speak—

Constance did: “Don’t you think *you* could do better? Don’t you want to find out? I, for one, think you could, and that the company would be the better for it.”

Edwin sighed. “I *would* love to be the managing director.” Constance inclined her head to him, smiling faintly as she returned her teacup to its place on the end table. “But not at Lawrence’s expense.” Edwin watched his wife’s smile fade to a scowl. He simply shrugged. “Maybe I *could* do a better job, but together we can surely lead the company as well and better than I could all by myself.”

“But surely his judgment will supersede your own. And given his current distraction, I would’ve thought, working as closely with the man as you do, that you would have ample cause to doubt his judgment by now.” Edwin opened his mouth to object once more, and Constance quickly added, “Of course, if you did, it would be no slight against him personally. After all he’s been through, one can hardly blame him for losing focus.”

Edwin frowned, remembering his friend’s ill-fated investment in American cattle hides that the company had yet to sell. *Well,*

it hasn't proven to be ill-fated yet. Market fluctuations are to be expected.

But, he couldn't honestly disagree with everything his wife was saying. Her argument that he might be jeopardizing the company by covering for Lawrence was particularly disturbing. He knew as well as anyone how easily a bad managing director could doom a company, and whilst under normal circumstances Lawrence was very good at his job, circumstances were far from normal. Edwin's brow furrowed, and his wife, watching him carefully, nodded solemnly.

She got up from her chair and took the teacup and saucer with her as she did so. Walking up to him, she laid her free hand on his shoulder, and said, "I understand that it's hard for you to be objective about your best friend, Edwin." She smiled down at him. "But for what it's worth, I trust you will do the right thing—for the company, for our family, and for yourself, regardless of your personal feelings."

With that, Constance left, carrying her dishes to the kitchen and leaving Edwin alone with his thoughts.

The right thing? And what might that be? To let Lawrence be fired? After everything that's already happened, to lose his job on top of everything else would destroy him. Edwin shook his head and massaged his temples with his hands in an effort to drive off an encroaching headache. *How can that be right?* Even if it was for the greater good of the company, he wasn't sure that he'd be able to live with himself.

Chapter 19

—ONE MONTH LATER—

Constance was at the front window, peeking around the corner of the burgundy-colored drapes, watching as Pieter and Elizabeth said goodbye at the base of the doorstep. It was dark outside, but the presence of streetlights and the fact that no lights were on in the foyer, made it easy for Constance to see. A frown creased her brow as she watched Pieter kiss Elizabeth goodnight.

Elizabeth could do better than a middle-class, *Afrikaner* boy. Lucas Atherton's son had to be in South Africa by now. *All it would take for him and Elizabeth to meet is a phone call from me.* A month ago, after she'd shown Lucas Atherton a picture of Elizabeth, he had warmed considerably to the idea of introducing his son to her; at that point, he had been more interested in *when* they should meet, rather than *whether* they should.

Ever since then, Constance had been looking for a way to tell Elizabeth about Charles. She knew her daughter would protest on the grounds that she already had a boyfriend, but Constance planned to diffuse her daughter's protests by saying that she and Charles need only be friends. They wouldn't remain that way. *You might not know it yet, my girl, but Pieter is on his way out. It's time to set your sights a little higher.*

As Pieter started back down the walkway to his car, Constance let the drapes fall back into place and began walking to the living room so that she would take an appropriate amount of time to answer the door. The sound of Elizabeth knocking and Pieter driving away came just as she reached the living room. Constance smiled and turned around.

* * *

As usual, the mail came on Monday, during lunch hour, just before lunch was served. Champion Hall was alive with the ruckus of hundreds of boys all trying to talk at once. Who had

ever thought to stick so many kids in one place? For lunch, breakfast, and supper. It was enough to give anyone indigestion. Worse yet, they'd built the hall with high, echoing ceilings that magnified the noise. Nicholas shook his head as he received his mail from the boy next to him. Staring at the bundle of letters in his hands, he found that he was unaccountably able to tune it all out. He wouldn't open any of them. He knew better than that after the incident where he'd received a photograph from Elizabeth, and promptly seen it passed around to every boy in the school. No, it would be enough for him to see the return address on the envelope that contained the letter he'd been waiting over a month to receive.

He was sure it would arrive today. In fact, he'd been sure it would arrive last Friday, and before that, Thursday. It had to. It had been a long time since he'd written to Elizabeth.

Nicholas eagerly untied the string that held his parcel of letters together. Then he began flipping through them, carefully checking the return address on each before putting one behind the other and looking at the next. Eventually he came back to a letter he recognized, and he stopped, frowning.

It's not here.

Over a month, and still no reply from Elizabeth. Had his letter been lost in the mail? It was rare, but he supposed that it did happen. Well, he'd just have to send her another letter, then. He smiled at the irony. She was probably wondering what had taken *him* so long to write to *her*. *She told me to write to her as soon as I could, and now she's been left waiting for over a month . . .*

Nicholas shook his head and retied the string around his letters. He'd write her another letter tonight after classes.

* * *

Elizabeth gazed at her reflection in the mirror, tugging at her dress in places, looking it up and down with a critical eye. Her mother had told her to wear something nice tonight and had even made a few suggestions as to what, but nothing she tried on felt right.

Truthfully, the problem wasn't with her wardrobe. It was with the fact that she was going out with Charles—alone, and without Pieter's knowledge. A date in all but name. Her mother had denied it, but Elizabeth wasn't fooled. She had initially refused, but apparently she *couldn't* refuse because Mister

Atherton was an important client of Western Tanning, and refusal would cause problems for her father.

So it was that Elizabeth stood in front of her full-length dressing mirror, frowning at her dress and falsely attributing the uneasy feeling in her stomach to what she was wearing.

Her bedroom door cracked open and her mother peeked in.

"He's here," Constance said.

Elizabeth sighed. "Tell him I'm not ready yet."

"You look ready to me."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't like this dress."

Constance frowned and stepped inside Elizabeth's room. She looked the dress up and down critically for a moment, then said, "It suits you well enough."

"I don't like it. It's too green. It makes me look ill . . ."

Her mother gave a long pause.

"This is about Pieter, isn't it?"

Elizabeth balked at that. Somehow, her mother always knew what she was thinking. "Well . . ."

Elizabeth watched as her mother appeared behind her in the mirror and set a hand on her shoulder. "My girl, there's nothing to feel guilty about. You're only going to dinner with Charles as a favor to your father. Besides, don't fool yourself that Pieter isn't going out with other girls without *your* knowledge."

Elizabeth frowned. "I'm sure he isn't." She turned to face her mother. Constance's patiently raised eyebrows made Elizabeth wonder in spite of her certainty.

"Does Pieter have any girls that he is friends with at university?"

"A few."

"And don't you suppose that he goes out with them?"

"That's different."

"No, my dear, it's not. You needn't be anything but friends with Charles, but don't limit yourself to that. Keep an open mind. Remember, he stands to inherit his father's fortune one day—and given the old man's age, probably not so long from now." Elizabeth opened her mouth to object, but her mother raised a finger to stop her. "Even more important, you and Charles share something that Pieter will never be able to: a common English heritage."

"But none of that matters to me," Elizabeth said, sounding

exasperated. "You know that. I could care less how much money he has, or that he's a snooty English gentleman." Elizabeth thought she saw something flash in her mother's eyes. *Anger? Or disappointment?* Elizabeth's frown deepened and she lowered her eyes to avoid her mother's gaze.

"You must trust me, Elizabeth. Have I ever steered you wrong?" Elizabeth shook her head. "Come on, then. Let's go say hello to Charles."

* * *

"You must be Elizabeth," Charles said with an easy grin.

Elizabeth's mouth opened but no sound came out. Her mother had told her that Charles was handsome, but that didn't even begin to describe his rakish good looks. He was tall—not quite as tall as Pieter at 6 feet and 2 inches—but not quite as lanky either; he was thicker around the chest and arms in a way that made her suspect his hobbies weren't quite as cerebral as Pieter's. And from his thick, dark hair, stylishly swept back from his forehead, to his devil-may-care grin and dimpled cheeks, he was the very picture of charm and confidence. She felt as though she were falling, getting lost in those mysterious, dark brown eyes and that sparkling smile. He looked like he belonged in a movie, playing opposite some stunning beauty, not standing here in the entrance of her house, waiting to take her out to dinner.

Elizabeth realized she was gaping and quickly closed her mouth. "Yes . . ." she managed, wincing as she did so. Charles raised his eyebrows, his grin still in place. *Yes? Is that all I can manage?* "I mean, yes, I am—" She swallowed. "—Elizabeth." She felt as though she were tripping over her tongue.

"Good. I'd hate to think that you weren't. After seeing you, I doubt if any other Elizabeth could compare."

Smooth, Elizabeth thought.

Charles held his hand out to her. "Shall we?" he asked, stepping aside to reveal behind him, through the open doorway, a large, black Mercedes sedan with chauffeur standing beside it, dressed in matching black.

Elizabeth's eyes widened. She sent Charles a disbelieving look. He just grinned, his hand still held out to her. After a significant pause, she took his outstretched hand and they walked out the door together.

Constance watched, smiling as they left. *There's nothing*

wrong with a little ambition, my dear.

* * *

Elizabeth climbed into the plush, beige leather interior of the Mercedes and Charles shut the door behind them. The engine thrummed to life, and the chauffeur pulled the car out into the street.

Charles turned to Elizabeth and smiled.

She shook her head. "Where are we going?"

His smiled slyly. "I'd prefer to keep that a surprise."

"Well . . ." Elizabeth's eyes flicked to the tinted window which separated the back of the car from the front, giving passengers privacy from the chauffeur. Then her eyes traveled around the spacious passengers' compartment, taking in its soft, beige leather seats, royal-red floor mats, and rosewood trim. "I think I can rule out The Spur."

Charles's face fell, and he looked away, leaving Elizabeth feeling like she'd just popped a child's balloon.

"Oh my goodness! That's where we're going, isn't it?"

Charles met her gaze with dull eyes and a blank expression.

Elizabeth mentally kicked herself. She hadn't meant to sound like a snob; the Spur was really a very nice restaurant, a steakhouse with delicious, yet affordable meals—it's *just not the kind of restaurant one goes to in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes*.

Suddenly, Charles's sullen expression flickered and sprang back to life. His eyes sparkled mischievously.

Elizabeth's mouth dropped open. "You rat!" She gave him a shove.

He started laughing, a surprisingly melodic sound.

"We're not going to The Spur, are we?"

He just shook his head, smiling. "But that's all you're getting out of me." He reached to one side and a compartment popped open to reveal a frosty-looking bottle of champagne, along with two glasses. "Would you care for an aperitif?"

Elizabeth blinked. "An aperitif?"

He withdrew the bottle and glasses, handing one of the glasses to Elizabeth. Reaching into the compartment again, he withdrew a silken red cloth that had the initials *L-A* monogrammed on it in gold thread and a fancy script.

Charles answered Elizabeth's question as he undid the foil and wire cage surrounding the cork. "An aperitif is a drink you

have before a meal as an appetizer.”

“Oh . . .” Elizabeth replied, watching as Charles wrapped the silken cloth around the cork and popped it with an effortless twist.

* * *

Hours later, when the chauffeur stopped in front of Elizabeth’s house again, her date with Charles now over, Elizabeth reached out to open the door, but Charles stopped her with a hand on her arm.

“Let him get the door for us; that’s what he’s paid for,” Charles said, nodding toward the driver’s compartment, even as they heard the driver’s side door open.

“Us?” she asked, turning to him with a curious smile.

“Of course, you didn’t think I was going to let you walk to your front door alone, did you?”

The car door opened, cutting off her reply, and they climbed out of the back seat. Elizabeth started up the walkway to her front door, with Charles keeping pace beside her.

As she walked, Elizabeth felt her breath catching in her throat. What was he expecting when they got to the front door? She knew how this part of the date went. So far everything about the evening had been perfectly innocent; there was nothing for her conscience to bother about—apart from the fancy restaurant they’d gone to, and the fact that it had just been the two of them . . . alone.

But if there was ever a time for Charles to make a move, this would be it. Her heart began thudding in her chest as she saw that they had almost reached the front door. Did he know that she had a boyfriend? Elizabeth searched through her memories of the evening . . . and silently gasped when she realized that she hadn’t even mentioned Pieter.

They climbed a short set of steps and stopped in front of her door. She saw Charles turning toward her, but she quickly knocked on the door before he could speak—or do anything else. She waited for it to open. He wouldn’t make a move with the threat of one of her parents coming to the door at any moment.

Would he?

Elizabeth sent him a surreptitious, sideways glance and found him looking at her. She swallowed anxiously, and thought: *Come on, hurry up—open the door!*

* * *

Edwin heard a knock on the door and got up from the couch where he was reading. "I'll get it," he called. He made his way down the hallway; only to find that his wife had beat him to it. The foyer was dark, but he could see his wife's silhouette in front of the door. He came to a stop behind her—and frowned. Instead of opening the door, she was standing on tiptoes, peeking through the peep hole.

He cleared his throat noisily, and she jumped. She turned from the peep hole to glare at him.

"Shhh!" she said, holding a finger to her lips.

"Who is it?" he asked, whispering.

"Elizabeth," she whispered back, and returned her attention to the peep hole.

Edwin's eyebrows drew together in confusion. "Well? Don't you think we should open the door for her?"

Without turning from the peep hole, she waved an impatient hand in his direction, as if shooing a fly. "Not yet."

* * *

What's taking them? Elizabeth thought, feeling uncomfortable beneath Charles's unrelenting gaze. She was doing her best not to meet his eyes.

"Looks like no one's home," he said.

"No, they're here. They should be coming any minute..." She sent him a quick smile, and immediately regretted it. He took the gesture for all it was worth and stepped closer to her. In spite of herself, she was transfixed, unable to look away. She knew what was coming, but felt almost powerless to stop it. *Come on, open up!* she thought, impatiently glancing at the door.

It didn't.

Instead, Charles drew closer still, until she felt his breath piling hotly on her lips. Her head spun. He smelled of aftershave and the coffee they'd drunk with their dessert. Her mother never allowed her to drink coffee, but she'd done it anyway. Being with Charles made her feel reckless.

A brush of his hand across her cheek brought her back to the here and now, and she felt his hand travel to the nape of her neck and stay there, gently stroking through her hair. Her skin tingled at his touch, and a frisson of shivers went speeding down her spine. She felt suddenly dizzy. Her mind

was screaming *no*, even as her knees weakened. She was fighting with every ounce of her will to resist—

And losing.

How could she resist those eyes? She tried desperately to remember what color Pieter's were, and realized with a sudden panic that she couldn't. She was struggling even to remember his face. *Déjà vu*. The same thing had happened when she'd seen Nicholas again.

"Don't . . ." she whispered.

"Don't what?" he breathed, his lips drifting to within an inch of hers.

"That—" Elizabeth stopped breathing altogether, and her eyes stared helplessly up into his. She had to do something. He wasn't going to stop. He'd seen the contradiction between what was spoken and what wasn't. He'd seen her weakness.

He began to close the rest of the gap between them, just as she finally succeeded in summoning an image of Pieter to mind. Drawing strength from that, she turned her head aside. Disappointed, he withdrew and stared at her in puzzlement.

"I'm sorry," she managed. "I really should have told you—" Her eyes flicked to his. "—I have a boyfriend."

His puzzlement turned to surprise, then to understanding. "Ah. In that case, I'm sorry, too." A grin dimpled his cheeks. "I hope we can still be friends, though?" he asked, raising his eyebrows in question.

She nodded, thinking, *nothing fazes him*.

"Goodnight, Elizabeth. I hope we can do this again soon."

"Goodnight," Elizabeth said and watched as Charles walked down the steps from her front door, setting a leisurely pace back to where his chauffeur was waiting with the car.

He's not even in a hurry to leave! I would be. She turned back to the door and knocked again, wondering if her parents had even heard her knocking the first time.

A few seconds later, the door opened. It was her mother.

"What took you so long?" Elizabeth asked, feeling suddenly irritated. This was all her parents' fault. She never should have gone out with Charles. She hadn't wanted to.

"I'm sorry?" her mother asked.

"I've been waiting out here for several minutes already. Didn't you hear me knock?"

Her mother opened the door wider, allowing Elizabeth to

enter. She saw her father standing a dozen feet away in the entrance of the hallway, backlit by light spilling from the living room. Despite the darkness of the foyer, she could still see his frown.

"No, we didn't hear a thing," Constance said, closing the door.

Edwin's frown deepened, but Constance shot him a warning look. He decided to change the topic. "Did you have a good time, Elizabeth?"

Constance hit the light switch next to the door just in time to see her daughter storming off.

"Your father asked you a question, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth turned, walking backwards now. "It was fine, just *fine*." She turned around again.

Edwin sent his wife a questioning look. "What's got into her?"

Constance scowled. "A lot of nonsense, that's what."

* * *

Constance gave Elizabeth ten minutes to cool down before following her to her room. Secretly, she was just as mad as Elizabeth. Perhaps madder. She had watched the whole scene unfold through the peep hole, and had even heard Elizabeth explain to Charles that she already had a boyfriend. *Yes, my girl, you have a boyfriend, and what a catch he is! Penniless, from a middle-class family, and an Afrikaner, no less! Foolish girl!* Something had to be done. Elizabeth couldn't be allowed to live in a dream world any longer. *She'll ruin her life if I let her.*

Constance knocked softly on her daughter's bedroom door, a gesture which belied her irritation. Without waiting for permission to come in, she opened the door and stepped inside. She found Elizabeth sitting on her bed, staring pensively out the window into the inky blackness of the night—only the orange glow of the streetlights made it possible to see anything. Constance walked over to the bed and took a seat beside her daughter. She took a moment to affect a compassionate tone. "I'm not sure you answered your father's question earlier, so I'm going to ask it again. How was your little outing?"

Elizabeth gave her mother a dry look. "You can call it a date, you know."

"If you prefer. I didn't want to make you feel uncomfortable

by insinuating anything.”

“I’m already uncomfortable.”

Constance tilted her head curiously. “And why is that, dear?”

“Because I already have a boyfriend, Mom! I’m not looking for another one, certainly not while Pieter and I are still together.”

Constance began nodding sagely. “Then perhaps you shouldn’t *still* be together.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows shot up and her mouth dropped open.

Constance held up a hand to forestall her daughter’s protest. “You need to stop living in a fairytale world, Elizabeth. There are just three things that get a person anywhere in this life: money, looks, and status—and money can buy status.”

Elizabeth couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Seeing her daughter’s look of shock, Constance smiled. “Whether you wish to believe me or not, it’s true. Trust me; I had to learn the hard way. I got lucky with your father in the end, but it took a lot of patience and effort to get this far. Why take that risk? You only have one life, Elizabeth, and everything going for you. You don’t have to settle for Pieter. Charles has everything. What does Pieter have? Good looks, no—” She shook her head. “—average, perhaps. And when he’s old and fat, with less hair on his head than in his ears, where will that leave you?”

Elizabeth shook her head as if to clear it. “What about personality? Character? Things we have in common?”

Constance shrugged. “All secondary concerns. No amount of personality or character can make up for a lack of means, but money can go a long way to making up for deficiencies in a man’s personality and character. And as for things in common—well, Pieter is an *Afrikaner*; you’re British by heritage. That’s one very important commonality between you and Charles, which you can never share with Pieter.”

“Does that really matter? I’ve never objected to his culture, and he’s never objected to mine.”

“You poor, foolish girl,” Constance said, giving her daughter a patient smile. Elizabeth frowned and mentally added her mother’s patronizing tone to her list of grievances. “When your husband comes home late every night from drinking with his friends, instead of spending time with you; when he takes more interest in rugby than his job and family; when he insists that your children go to an *Afrikaner* school so that they can learn *Afrikaans*, not English; and when you have a fight with him

and he looks you in the eye and says that you're just a bloody *Rooinek* anyway—then you'll know just how important your British heritage was.

"It's been my experience that it's much easier to find an English gentleman than an agreeable *Boer*. So, of course, your heritage is important. You don't want to marry an uncultured brute, do you?"

Elizabeth frowned. "I don't think you can generalize . . . and besides, I'm not looking to get married. Not yet, anyway."

"Then why look at all? Marriage is the inevitable result, so why tempt fate with lesser options?"

Elizabeth had nothing to say to that. Instead, she resumed staring out the window, her eyes traveling out from the dark and shadowy green of the front lawn to the amber-lit street beyond.

"Sooner or later, my girl, you'll see that I'm right. I just hope for your sake that it's sooner rather than later."

With that, Constance got up from the bed and crossed the room to the door. She paused in the doorway, turned back to her daughter, and said, "I understand that it's hard for you to move on, but you really do have a chance with Charles. Don't squander it by being sentimental about Pieter."

Elizabeth heard the door click shut behind her as if from a great distance. Her head was swimming with confusing thoughts and conflicting emotions. Charles was incredibly handsome, charming . . . rich—no doubt about that—but she flinched at the thought of being so mercenary as to break up with Pieter just because she'd found someone better. And how did she even know that Charles was better? From her *mother's* point of view he was, but what did either of them really know about him? If Nicholas could fool her as thoroughly as he had, what was stopping Charles from doing the same?

Elizabeth sighed. Her mother had far more experience to draw on, so she was probably right, but somehow she just couldn't believe everything that her mother had said. She didn't want to. *The world can't possibly be that shallow, can it? Money, looks, and status? That's all that matters?*

That's it?

Chapter 20

Charles called Elizabeth twice in the following week, asking her out each time. Both times she made an excuse that she was too busy with school. It was partly true, but during that week she went out with Pieter three times—and each time endured a steady stream of reminders from her mother that she would lose her heritage by staying with him. That simple warning had come to embody all of her mother's feelings on the subject of Pieter and Charles—her reservations about the former and her praises of the latter. *Heritage, heritage, heritage!* Elizabeth was sick of it.

Her mother was being unreasonable. If she really knew Pieter, how sweet he was, how well-mannered, how kind, then she would have to admit that not all gentlemen are *English*.

When Charles had gone back to England, Elizabeth had hoped that that would be the end of her mother's nagging.

It hadn't been.

Which was why—as Elizabeth hurried from her room to answer the door, knowing that it would be Pieter come to pick her up for their date—she fervently hoped that she wouldn't encounter her mother along the way.

It was a futile hope. Elizabeth entered the living room to find her mother sitting in her favorite chair, reading a magazine. She walked briskly by, trying to sneak past. Perhaps her mother was too focused on what she was reading to take notice of her?

Elizabeth had almost made it through the living room when she heard her mother's voice issue calmly from behind her: "Is that Pieter at the door?"

Elizabeth stopped and half turned to face her mother. "I think so," she replied, looking as though she'd like nothing better than to run for the door.

"All ready for your date I see," Constance said, noting

Elizabeth's appearance.

Not wanting to say anything that might provoke her mother, Elizabeth simply nodded.

"Well, have fun, but don't be back too late. Remember, you have school tomorrow."

Elizabeth blinked in shock. *Have fun? Don't be back too late? That's it? No—"you'll lose your heritage, my dear"?* Elizabeth stared disbelievingly at her mother. Another series of knocks came at the door, but Elizabeth made no move to answer.

"Shouldn't you get that, Elizabeth?"

"What?"

"The door," Constance said, nodding her head in that direction.

"Oh, that . . . yes, I should."

* * *

On the way to Paarl and its drive-in theater, Elizabeth was still wondering about her mother's unusual response. It wasn't like her mother to give up on an issue so quickly, or to keep her opinions to herself.

As Pieter pulled into the drive-in, Elizabeth noticed that it was relatively empty and that it was still dusk, not yet dark enough for a movie.

"It looks like we've come too early," Elizabeth said.

"Better than too late," Pieter replied as he parked the car. He turned the key in the ignition and killed the engine's rumbling. "Besides," he said, turning toward her, "I was hoping we might have a chance to talk before the movie."

"Sure, what would you like to talk about?"

A reluctant look crossed Pieter's face and he averted his gaze. "My mother told me something the other day, but I wasn't sure whether to believe her, so I wanted to ask you . . . in order to be sure."

Confusion etched Elizabeth's brow. "What did she tell you?"

"She told me that you've been seeing another other guys."

Hearing that did nothing to lessen Elizabeth's confusion. "What? I haven't been . . ." The certainty in her voice faltered as she remembered her "little outing" with Charles a week ago.

"You haven't?" Pieter asked, turning back to her, his eyebrows elevating a few degrees.

"Well . . ." Elizabeth frowned.

"I see," Pieter said, looking away again, his voice cold.

"It wasn't like that, Piet. I did go out with another guy last week, but it wasn't really a date."

"And the Titanic wasn't really a disaster—yes, I understand perfectly."

"No, you don't."

Pieter's face turned back to hers, looking painfully disbelieving. "Explain it to me, then."

"Nothing happened, and I didn't want to go out with him. My parents made me."

"*Nee wat, Lizzie, ek glo jou nie.*"* There was enough venom in that statement to make Elizabeth wince. "Your parents can't make you do anything. You could have said no."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I *did* say no, but he's the son of an important client of my father's."

"So?"

"So, I had no choice." Pieter remained unimpressed. "Piet—"

"Was he handsome?"

Elizabeth hesitated, realizing as she did so that she'd never be able to lie convincingly. "Yes."

"More so than me?"

Elizabeth opened her mouth to reply, but felt the words catch in her throat. Even in the dusky gloom she could see Pieter's eyes narrow angrily. She swallowed past a painful lump in her throat. It was like she'd already been condemned—like nothing she said would make a difference. She tried anyway: "Even if he was, it wouldn't matter. I'm not that shallow."

Pieter snorted. "I hear he came to pick you up in a Mercedes . . . with a chauffeur."

Elizabeth shook her head incredulously. "How does your mother know all this?"

"Don't change the topic."

All of a sudden, Elizabeth felt like crying. She bit back the tears. "Yes, he came to pick me up in a Mercedes, but so what? I'm with you, aren't I?"

"Until something better comes along," Pieter looked away again. "Something with a fatter wallet and dreamier eyes, I suppose."

*

Nee wat, Lizzie, ek glo jou nie: no way, Lizzie, I don't believe you

"That's not fair . . ."

Pieter sent her a cold look. "Isn't it?" He broke eye contact again, shook his head, and cursed under his breath. Elizabeth blinked in shock: it wasn't like Pieter to use foul language. "I can't believe you, Lizzie. I thought you were more mature than that, but I guess I was wrong. You're just a *dof meisietjie*,* and I'm your latest fashion—great for a while, old and boring by the time the next *boykie*† comes around."

Elizabeth couldn't take it any longer, and despite her fervent wish not to, she started crying. Hearing her, something in Pieter's expression flickered, as if he'd just realized he'd gone too far. His eyes swept over to her.

"Lizzie . . ."

Elizabeth shook her head, refusing to meet his eyes. She reached up a shaking hand to wipe the tears away. Pieter took a deep breath and mentally prepared his apology, but Elizabeth spoke before he did.

"Take me home, Pieter."

"Elizabeth, I'm—"

She stopped him with a hand. "Please. Just take me home."

Pieter hesitated for a second, wondering if he could convince Elizabeth to stay. He frowned, realizing that even if he could, Elizabeth couldn't possibly forgive him that quickly. Reluctantly, he started the car again and pulled out of the drive-in, forfeiting the money he'd spent on their tickets.

It was a long, silent drive home in which his argument with Elizabeth played out over and over in his head—his words seeming colder, and his attitude more heartless every time it did. He winced—he felt terrible, but what could he say to repair the damage he'd done? Didn't she know that the only reason he'd been angry was because he cared?

And that was just the trouble: he cared *too much*. It made him insanely jealous. He knew she wasn't shallow enough to dump him just because she'd found a guy who was better looking and had more money . . .

So why had he said she was?

* * *

* *Dof meisietjie*: stupid little girl

† *Boykie*: guy

The car stopped in front of Elizabeth's house. She reached for the door handle and opened the door.

"Elizabeth . . ." Pieter began.

Being careful not to meet his gaze, she climbed quietly out of the car.

"Elizabeth!" Pieter said again, leaning over her now-empty seat, his eyes searching desperately for hers.

Without sparing him a glance, she slammed the door in his face. As she turned and ran toward her front door, she heard his muffled voice: "Don't leave things like this!"

Upon reaching the door, she knocked three times and then began ringing the doorbell, anxious for the refuge of her room. She felt sick to her stomach. Her mother had been right about Pieter. He *was* a brute. *A stupid, unfeeling brute.*

When she heard Pieter's car begin to pull away from the house, Elizabeth wasn't even tempted to turn and wave goodbye.

She never wanted to see him again.

Constance opened the door. "Oh dear, what happened? Did you and Pieter have a fight?"

Elizabeth nodded and took a quick step forward, enfolding her mother in a hug and sobbing pitifully against her shoulder.

Constance hid her unease with a smile. She could forgive her daughter for the emotional display, especially in light of how exceptionally well things had turned out.

"I'm sorry, Mom. You were right." Elizabeth's voice came soft and muffled to Constance's ear. "You were right about Pieter."

"There, there," Constance said, patting her daughter on the back. "No need to worry about all that. It's as good as forgotten."

Chapter 21

Edwin felt a growing sense of dread as he walked down the hall to Lawrence's office. Things had been relatively quiet at work for the past month, and Edwin had fervently hoped that they would stay that way—at least until Lawrence could recover enough to deal with the pressures of his job.

Under the circumstances, Edwin considered that Lawrence was faring remarkably well, but if the phone call he'd just received from Lawrence was any indication, that was about to change. Lawrence wanted Edwin to join him in his office "immediately." More significant than his friend's choice of words, had been the flat, emotionless way he'd said them. *What could be so urgent?* Edwin wondered.

He reached the end of the hallway, turned, and found Lawrence's secretary, Martha, at her desk. He walked up to her desk and stopped in front of it. Seeing him in the corner of her eye, she looked up and acknowledged him with a smile. "Please, go right in. Mister Stevens is expecting you."

Edwin did so, closing the mahogany wood door to Lawrence's office behind him. Reluctantly, Edwin turned to face his friend—

And almost winced. If appearances were anything to go by, then this would be bad: Lawrence's face was drawn and his expression would have made inmates on death row look happy. Edwin started forward and had to catch himself from tiptoeing. As he drew nearer, he began to make out the other features of his friend's countenance: red eyes and stubble-covered, sunken cheeks. Edwin grimaced. His friend had lost a lot of weight since last year.

Lawrence indicated the chair in front of his desk. "You might want to be sitting down for this, Eddie."

Edwin blinked, and his pulse started hammering in his ears. He had a sinking feeling. *That's the sort of phrase that*

precedes, "I'm very sorry, but we're going to have to let you go." Edwin swallowed past the growing lump in his throat and took a seat in front of Lawrence's desk.

Lawrence frowned and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk and folding his hands. "As you already know, I purchased a large quantity of cattle hides last year. Since then, they've been going down in value. Right now they're hovering around sixty cents per pound. As I bought them at ninety eight cents per pound, that represents a loss of more than thirty percent . . ." Lawrence took a deep breath and Edwin braced himself. *Here it comes, he thought. My wife was right. Lawrence is cutting corners because of his poor judgment. Naturally, he'll fire the most highly-paid employees first—starting with me.*

"I'm going to be blunt about this, Eddie. We need to get rid of those hides *now*, before they fall any further in value, and I want you to do it for me. I have a potential buyer in Canada and . . ." Lawrence trailed off at the look of sheer relief on Edwin's face. "What?"

"Oh, nothing." Edwin waved a hand. "I just thought that you were going to say something else, that's all."

Lawrence frowned and raised his eyebrows, but didn't inquire. "As I was saying, I have a potential buyer in Canada. George Colton, he's an old associate of mine, who now runs a large group of tanneries in Canada—not unlike Western Leathers International. He's agreed to purchase the hides we have for better than their current market value in order to repay a favor he owes me.

"However, he has a few reservations, and he's asked me to meet him in Toronto to work out the details." Lawrence shook his head. "But, quite frankly, I can't leave my children so soon after their mother abandoned them." Lawrence's eyes drifted from Edwin's and went out of focus. After a long moment, he shook himself, and his gaze found Edwin's again. "Besides that, I think you'll do a better job of convincing him to take those hides off our hands than I would right now, so I want you to go to Canada in my stead."

Edwin's brow was furrowed in thought. "I'm grateful for your faith in me, but does Mister Colton know about the change of plans?"

Lawrence nodded. "I just got off the phone with him."

"And he's okay with it? If he's planning to repay a favor he owes *you* . . ."

"That won't be a problem. He's expecting you there in three days. I've already booked the flight. You'll be flying first class out of Cape Town International, tomorrow evening at five thirty. I left the tickets and the rest of the details for your trip with Martha. You can get them on your way out."

Edwin was taken aback. "This is very sudden."

"Is that a problem?"

Edwin shook his head. "It shouldn't be."

"Good, because time is of the essence. One of Mister Colton's main reservations is that we need to be able to get the hides to him sooner rather than later. We also need to get him signed off on the deal before they fall any further in value."

Edwin nodded. "I understand."

"I really appreciate this, Eddie. You have no idea." Lawrence took a deep breath. "You have the rest of the day off to get ready for your trip—" He looked at his watch. "—and given the time, I'd recommend you be on your way."

Rising from his chair, Edwin said, "I'll go straight away, then."

Lawrence met his eyes and held his gaze for a long moment. "Make no mistake, Edwin, the fate of my job, and even the fate of this company rests on the outcome of your trip."

Edwin did his best to give a reassuring smile. "Don't even give it a second thought. By the time you see me again, there'll be cause for celebration."

"I'm counting on it."

* * *

Constance felt sure she'd just heard the sound of the front door closing over the clank and clatter of the dishes she was washing. Stopping for a moment to listen, she turned an ear toward the sound . . .

And heard footsteps.

She checked her watch. It was just a little too early for either of the girls to be home from school, and it was far too early for Edwin to be home from work—let alone from golf. Curious, she pulled off her dish gloves and walked to the entrance of the kitchen. She arrived there just in time to see Edwin enter the living room.

Stopping inside the empty door frame between the kitchen

and living room, she raised her eyebrows and said, "It's not even half past three. What are you doing home so early?"

"I've been given the rest of the day off."

Constance's face flashed with concern. "Why?"

Edwin smiled, realizing that his wife had just made the same assumption he had. "No, nothing like that. I'm being sent on a business trip tomorrow, so I was given the rest of the day off to make preparations." Edwin loosened his tie and made his way to the couch. Constance followed his cue and crossed the living room to take a seat in the armchair opposite him.

"That's very little notice. When did you find out about this?" Constance asked as Edwin was sitting down.

"About an hour ago."

"Oh. Where are you going?"

"Canada."

Constance's eyebrows shot up. "That's a very long way."

Edwin nodded. "It is. I imagine I'll be spending the better part of the next two days in the air."

"What are you expected to do over there?"

Edwin grimaced. "I've got to convince an old business associate of Lawrence's to buy a stockpile of cattle hides that Lawrence invested the company in last year."

"I see . . ." A suspicious frown crossed her face. "Why the rush?"

Edwin opened his mouth to reply, then hesitated. If he told her the truth—that Lawrence's poor investment was the reason for the rush—he knew she would only say, *I told you so*.

But better that than get caught in a lie . . . He'd never been very good at lying.

"Well?" Constance prompted.

Edwin sighed. "Cattle hides have been falling in value ever since Lawrence purchased them last year. The investment has lost the company a lot of money, but this trip has the potential to reverse some of that; a lot depends on its success."

Constance began shaking her head. "I told you that Lawrence was bad for the company, didn't I?" Her eyes flashed angrily at Edwin. "Now do you believe me?"

"I admit that he hasn't exactly been on top form lately, but—" Edwin hesitated again. "—I've thought a lot about what you said a few months ago, about the dangers of allowing an 'incompetent' managing director to persist, and I've decided

that part of my job description is covering for the managing director. How else would you interpret, *assistant* to the managing director? Lawrence will get through this, of that I am sure, and when he does, Western Tanning will be far better off for having kept him."

Constance was frowning. "I disagree. Your job is to help him, certainly, but not to spend all your time fixing his mistakes. Does the chairman know about Lawrence's bad investment?"

"Of course not. If Mister Gaines knew, he'd probably fire Lawrence. That's one of the reasons why this trip is so urgent. Lawrence has a friend in Canada who owes him a favor and is willing and able to purchase the hides at better than their market value. This way, we'll only be taking a small loss."

Constance snorted. "A fine lackey you've turned out to be."

Edwin's expression hardened. "Constance, really, sometimes you go too far. The man's my friend. He, and what little is left of his family, need our help. I owe him that much, if you'll recall. I was just a leather chemist until he promoted me to middle management and from there to his assistant. I owe him my job; the least I can do is help him keep his."

Constance huffed and was silent for a long moment. Edwin watched with a frown as her eyes went out of focus and she appeared to be looking straight through him. Eventually, she began nodding slowly, and when she finally spoke, her voice came out very softly. "I'll trust your judgment in this, Edwin."

He couldn't have been more surprised if she'd slapped him. In all the years that he'd known his wife, he couldn't recall her having ever conceded a point—not to him, anyway.

Recovering from his shock, Edwin inclined his head and said, "As well you should," trying to sound more authoritative than he felt.

Constance smiled. "Well, I suppose you'd better start packing for your trip."

"In a minute. I think I'd like to relax for a little while first."

"Certainly." She rose from her chair. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Now there's an idea; thank you, Constance. That would be splendid."

As Constance left to make the tea, Edwin raked a hand back through his ever-thinning hair and tried to calm his racing heart. Arguing with his wife always left him feeling like he'd

been in a battle. He'd forgotten why he went to such lengths to avoid disagreements with her. More than that, though, he was struck by the callousness of her words. She was all but demanding that he let Lawrence take the fall for his own mistakes, but how could he do that to his best friend?

Of course, her reasoning made perfect sense to him. Lawrence *had* been bad for the company lately. *Were it not for me, he'd already have lost his job*, Edwin thought, remembering the sales strategy he'd prepared for Lawrence just a month ago. *But after all he's been through, losing his job now would destroy him, and what kind of friend would I be if I stood by and watched that happen?*

He sighed. Despite his wife's pragmatic reasoning, he knew what felt right to him. He was going to help Lawrence in any way he could.

Edwin opened his briefcase and started digging through it for the folder containing the details of his trip to Canada. He had already glanced through the folder before leaving his office; besides his airline tickets, it had appeared to contain some supplemental material that gave a background on George Colton and his company. *Information which could be critical to making this sale . . .* Edwin's thoughts trailed off as he came to the end of the assorted documents in his briefcase, not having found the folder. He frowned and began rifling through the assorted papers, files, and folders in reverse order, searching more carefully this time. He reached the end again, still not having found the folder.

It's not here! I must have left it in my office! How could I be so stupid? He pressed a hand to his forehead and closed his eyes, trying to remember where he'd last seen it. A fuzzy image of the folder lying on a chair to one side of his desk appeared in his mind's eye. His eyes popped opened, he snapped his briefcase shut, and stood up from the couch.

"Constance?" Edwin called. She appeared from the kitchen a second later, her eyebrows raised in silent question. "The tea will have to wait. I've left something important at the office and I need to go back and get it."

Constance smiled pleasantly at him. "That's okay. I'll have your tea ready for you when you get back."

* * *

The muffled sound of a car starting reached Constance's ears,

even as she drew back a corner of the burgundy-colored drapes at the front window. She watched Edwin's car pull out of the driveway. Her head swam with a giddy rush of anxiety, and her pulse pounded, making her temples throb. She watched from the window until Edwin's car disappeared from sight. Once she was positive that he was gone, she let the drapes fall back into place, and took a deep breath to calm herself.

She couldn't afford to be emotional at a time like this. She wasn't usually so ill-at-ease in moments of crisis, but she was faced with a dilemma, and there wasn't much time for her to make a decision. *If Edwin manages to redeem Lawrence's mistake, I'll have to wait for another opportunity, and one can't always be certain there will be another opportunity.*

It would've been an easy decision but for one thing: she had revealed too much to Edwin in the hopes that either through action or inaction he would decide to do the right thing. She hadn't anticipated that Edwin would be too weak to do what had to be done, or even just to stand back and let it happen. Now it fell to her to do what he could not, but she had already explained her reasoning to Edwin, and she was afraid that if she acted now, he might suspect what she had done. *He would never understand. But . . . he'll be in Canada, far away, and out of touch. By the time he gets back, he'll have forgotten the things I said to him; the news at work will be stale; and my part in events will be lost in the abbreviated version that he gets from his co-workers.*

And, if he asks me if I had anything to do with it, I'll deny everything. Constance allowed herself a grim smile. *I'll feign indignation that he would even suggest it of me! He'll be so busy crawling back into my good graces that he won't have the time or energy to wonder if he'd been right.*

The risk to herself would be minimal. She felt her heart rate dropping again. She turned and headed for the kitchen. Once there, she dug through one of the drawers until she found what she was looking for.

The phone book.

She held it in slightly trembling hands. Paging through the book until she got to G, she traced her finger down the page until she found the name she was looking for. She read the name and its associated information, just to be sure that she had found the right number:

Gaines, D. William

Chairman of the Board, Western Leathers International

Office: 864-8300, Extension 12

She allowed another grim smile, then dialed the number. It rang twice before she heard a young woman answer on the other end. She waited until the young woman had finished identifying herself and the company she worked for.

“Yes, could you connect me with Mister Gaines, please? I have some important information for him.”

“May I ask who’s calling, and what this is in reference to?”

Constance hesitated. “It’s Amelia,” she said, using her second name, “and I’m calling in reference to a serious matter which involves the managing director of Western Tanning.”

“Just a moment, please. I’ll see if Mister Gaines is available.”

As she waited to be put through, Constance heard someone knocking at the front door. Her heart froze in her chest. Could it be Edwin? Maybe he’d forgotten something at *home*, too. The keys to his office, perhaps. She started to put the phone down, but then another thought occurred to her, and she checked her watch.

It was four o’clock. Smiling with relief, she put the receiver back to her ear.

* * *

Elizabeth was shuffling down the sidewalk in the hot, mid-afternoon sun. She felt the heat closing in around her like a tourniquet. Being only February, the weather was still that of summer.

Jarred by her shuffling steps, her school bag slid lazily down her shoulder. She leaned the other way and reached around to set the strap higher on her shoulder. By contrast, Hattie was practically skipping along up ahead. Elizabeth didn’t notice. Her eyes were glued to the ground, drifting in and out of focus, her thoughts doing the same. Today was the second day since her fight with Pieter. They hadn’t spoken since, and while part of her was glad that he hadn’t had the nerve to call her, the other part of her was desperately afraid that he wouldn’t.

“Hey, come on, slow poke.”

Elizabeth looked up from the pavement to see her sister stopped up ahead, staring impatiently back at her. Elizabeth

said nothing, but picked up her pace until she had caught up. Hattie gave her a curious look, but Elizabeth ignored it.

A few minutes later, Elizabeth and Hattie came to the door of their house. Elizabeth knocked three times, and they waited for their mother to get to the door. Half a minute passed, and they were still waiting. Elizabeth knocked again, louder this time, and waited another half a minute. When still no one came, she tried the door knob. It turned easily and the door clicked open.

"You should've tried that sooner," Hattie said as they walked inside.

And what was stopping you? Elizabeth thought. She closed the door behind them, while Hattie continued on down the hallway toward the living room. As Elizabeth followed her sister down the hallway, she began to wonder where her mother was that she hadn't been able to get to the door. Then she heard her mother's voice coming from the kitchen. Elizabeth wondered briefly who her mother was talking to, but when she heard no one else, she realized that her mother was on the phone.

When Elizabeth came to the living room, she experienced a moment of indecision: go to her room, set her books down, and get changed out of her school uniform; or go to the kitchen to get a drink first?

The hot walk home from school made the decision a little easier. Elizabeth cut left to the kitchen. As she entered, she saw her mother standing next the phone, tapping her foot impatiently. Elizabeth flashed her mother a smile and received a curt nod in return. She crossed the room to one of the cupboards, withdrew a glass, then filled it at the sink, and sat down on one of the bar stools that were arrayed along the island counter in the kitchen. As she drank, Elizabeth found herself listening with one ear to her mother's telephone conversation . . .

* * *

Constance waited impatiently, the receiver cold and silent against her ear. After talking with the operator, she'd been put through to Mr. Gaines's secretary and had had to explain herself yet again. Now she was waiting for the secretary to put her through to Mr. Gaines.

She watched as Elizabeth came into the kitchen. Elizabeth smiled, and Constance returned the smile with a nod.

After what seemed like an eternity, Constance heard a click and a deep male voice spoke on the other end of the line. “This is Mister Gaines. I understand you have some information for me about one of our managing directors?”

“Hello, yes, that’s correct. It’s about the managing director of Western Tanning, in fact.”

“You mean Mister Stevens?”

“That’s the one.”

“Well, what is it?”

“I understand that he presented a sales strategy at a board meeting a few months ago.”

“You’re unusually well-informed, miss . . .”

“Amelia,” Constance replied, using her given name. It was anonymous enough: “Amelia” hadn’t been her legal name since she’d married Edwin (then Patrick) Smythe. She didn’t bother correcting the chairman’s mistake of calling her “miss” by telling him that she was married. The less Mr. Gaines knew that could point back to her, the better.

Constance went on, “Anyway, as I was about to say, I’ve recently heard that that sales strategy wasn’t actually prepared by Mister Stevens. It was, in fact, entirely prepared by his assistant, Mister Smythe.”

There was a pause at the other end of the line. “Hmmm. That makes a lot of sense, actually. There’s just one problem: I have no way to verify what you’ve told me. And, even if what you’re saying is true, I’m not sure why I should care. While it was Mister Stevens’s responsibility to prepare the presentation, it was within his power to delegate that responsibility to his assistant.”

Constance scowled. Fortunately, she’d expected such a reaction. “I understand, but that was actually the less serious part of what I had to tell you.”

Another pause.

“Go on.”

“I’ve also heard that Mister Stevens has invested the company in a large quantity of hides, which I’m told have since lost a lot of value. Being ignorant of such things, I was not concerned until I was further told that the situation has become very serious, possibly even serious enough to jeopardize the welfare of the company. I asked if you knew about this and was promptly informed that you did not, and

nor should you be told. Well, I felt it only my duty to inform you of the situation before it became too late."

There was another, longer pause this time—so long that Constance began to wonder if Mr. Gaines was still there.

"Hello?"

"Yes . . . I've just been thinking about what you said. May I ask what interest you have in all of this, and how it is exactly that you came by your information?"

"My interest is simply that I wouldn't be able to live with myself, if the information I possessed turned out to be crucial to the fate of Western Tanning and I, out of a misguided sense of confidentiality, failed to do what I could to avert a tragedy."

"I see. Well, that's very . . . noble of you."

"As to how I came by this information, I would prefer not to divulge that, lest I get someone else into trouble."

"Well, I congratulate you for your concern, and I assure you that I'll look into the matter as soon as I get off the phone with you. If I find that all is as you say, I will take the necessary steps."

"That is all I can ask. Thank you, you've been most patient with me."

"Goodbye, Miss Amelia."

Click.

Constance smiled as she set the receiver down. She turned around to see Elizabeth sitting at the kitchen counter, her back was turned, an empty glass sat on the counter in front of her. *She heard the whole conversation . . .* Constance's smile flickered, and her breath caught in her throat. Had Elizabeth grasped the significance of the conversation?

No, she's just a child. She can't possibly understand any of it. One day she will, though, and by that time she'll know that I was right.

Constance gave a triumphant nod. "There, it's done! Remember that, my girl. One day you'll have to do the same for your husband. Men are mice; they don't have the guts to do it for themselves."

Elizabeth swiveled around to face her mother, a puzzled look on her face. Constance's smile returned, reassured.

Just a child.

* * *

At two o'clock the following afternoon, Lawrence Stevens was

sitting in his office, reclining in his plush, black leather chair, his eyes closed, his feet up—feeling like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Soon, Edwin would be leaving for Cape Town, if he hadn't left already. From there he would fly to London, and from there—to Canada. He was confident that Edwin could redeem the situation before it jeopardized his career—not to mention the company.

Unfortunately, Western Tanning would still be taking a loss on the cattle hides he'd purchased, but thanks to the favor George Colton owed him, the loss wouldn't be substantial. With some careful investing, and Edwin's brilliant ideas to increase company revenues, he would make it all back and yet some. *The board might raise an eyebrow when it finds out, but if everything goes according to plan, I'll come out looking like a genius. Recovering from a serious loss by doing the impossible—selling the hides for more than they're worth—that will say more about my capabilities than an ill-advised investment.* Lawrence smiled—

And then the phone started ringing, interrupting his thoughts. Leaning forward, he lowered his feet from the desk and picked up the receiver. "Hello? Mister Stevens speaking."

"Stevens," came a harsh male voice on the other end of the line. "Gaines here. We're calling an emergency board meeting. How soon can you get here?"

Lawrence frowned. "I could probably be there a couple hours from now."

"I don't want to hear *probably*, Stevens. Be there. Two hours is all you're going to get. Don't keep us waiting."

"Certainly. May I ask what the meeting is about?"

There was an irritated growl on the other end of the line. "We'd rather discuss it in person. All I can say is there've been some rumors that we're very keen to get to the bottom of."

"I see."

"I'm not sure you do, but we'll discuss it further when you get here."

Click.

He hung up on me. Lawrence lowered the phone slowly from his ear, feeling shaken. *An emergency board meeting? What could it be about?* And had it been his imagination, or was the chairman in a very bad mood?

Chapter 22

“Have a good trip, Edwin,” Constance said, smiling at him from just inside the front door.

Looking back at his wife from the doorstep, his hat in one hand, his briefcase in the other, he returned her smile with a more rueful equivalent. “Well, it will be if I’m successful.”

“Don’t be so negative, dear, of course you’ll be successful.”

Edwin acknowledged that with a nod. “I’ll call you when I arrive in Canada.”

“I shall wait eagerly for your call.”

“Well, goodbye, then,” Edwin said, leaning forward to give his wife a quick kiss on the cheek. “See you in a week’s time.”

Constance nodded. “Goodbye.”

With that, he turned around and started down the cobblestone path from his house. A moment later, he heard the door click shut behind him.

* * *

Lawrence sat rooted in place at the long, oval table. He blinked once, twice, his eyes traveling around the boardroom, gauging the solidarity of the board members. They were all staring at him, waiting for his reply. But what could he say? He swallowed hard, feeling a sudden wave of dizziness wash over him as the sinking feeling in his stomach got worse. He was sweating, his heart was racing, and there was a tightness in his chest that hadn’t been there an hour ago.

Someone had told the chairman about his investment.

Lawrence wondered for a second who it could possibly have been. *Someone from accounting? Someone who thought they were doing the company a favor by selling me out?*

Working some moisture into his mouth, Lawrence finally found the courage to speak: “May I ask who told you about this?”

“No, you may not. Frankly, it should have been you who told

us—at the beginning of this year when you were presenting your sales strategy.”

“Current investments didn’t seem relevant to sales, Mister Chairman.”

The chairman raised a finger to stab it in Lawrence’s direction. “No, but they were relevant to the company’s profitability, which, if I recall correctly, was what you were originally tasked with improving at the end of last year.” The chairman began shaking his head. “When I heard about this, I was prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt—until I discovered that you had in fact invested almost all of the company’s savings. To date, your investment has made Western Tanning a loss of—” the chairman’s eyes turned in question to the chief financial officer.

The financial officer took a moment to consult an open binder on the table in front of him, then said, “As of this morning, Mister Stevens’s investment is down thirty-six point seven percent.”

The chairman’s gaze swept back from the financial officer and settled on Lawrence again. “Down almost *forty* percent, and at a time when Western Tanning needed strategies for becoming more profitable—not less.” William Gaines frowned and shook his head.

“I can explain, sir—”

“Can you? Can you really? I want to tell you something, Stevens. At the beginning of this year it was the decision of the board to fire you if your sales strategy wasn’t suitably impressive. We were all pleasantly surprised to find that it was everything we’d hoped for and more. But now I find out from the same person who told me about your *investment*—if one may even call it such—that you had nothing to do with preparing the sales strategy, that it was all your assistant’s work. Is that true?”

The sinking feeling in Lawrence’s stomach turned to bile and started burning its way up his throat. There was only one person that knew about both his investment, and that Edwin was really the one who had developed the company’s new sales strategy.

Lawrence’s eyes blurred. Suddenly, it all made terrible sense. *He wants my job. He’s wanted it all along. He’s just been waiting for the right opportunity, waiting to be able to give just*

cause for the board of directors to fire me. The realization hit Lawrence like a sucker punch to the gut. How could you, Edwin? Of all the people to betray me, it had to be you—my best friend.

After a long moment, his eyes downcast, not meeting any of those around the table, Lawrence replied, "Yes, that's true," and with those three words, sealed his fate.

* * *

Edwin stood in line, waiting to get his boarding pass. He checked his watch and let out a sigh. It was just past 4:00. He had over an hour to spare. He'd even had some spare time to review the information for his trip—particularly Lawrence's personal notes about Mr. Colton—while he waited. Apparently, the Canadian business tycoon had a number of idiosyncrasies that could be exploited by a good salesman. Chief among them was the man's penchant for rare, expensive wines. Edwin planned to pick up a couple such bottles of wine in the duty-free store after he got his boarding pass. South Africa produced some of the finest wines in the world, and Edwin was sure that Mr. Colton would appreciate adding a new nationality to the wines in his cellar.

Noting that the line in front of him wasn't moving, Edwin frowned. He resisted the urge to start tapping his foot. While he wasn't in a particular hurry, he wouldn't be able to relax until he reached the departure gate—

Suddenly, Edwin heard a familiar voice. His surprise manifested as an involuntary twitch of all his muscles that nearly lifted him off the floor. His head ratcheted around in search of—

"Hello, *Eddie*. By the way you jumped, one might think you were feeling guilty about something."

Edwin frowned and blinked in confusion. "Lawrence, what are you doing here?"

"Surprised to see me?"

"Yes, but—"

Lawrence was striding steadily toward him, a lopsided smile on his face. "Of course you are. You probably thought you'd never have to face me again, that you'd never have to join me for another of those oh-so-tedious games of golf, which you secretly loathed—" Lawrence stopped in front of Edwin and smiled down at his erstwhile friend, his eyes shimmering

dangerously close to tears. “—that you’d never again have to sit listening in the bar afterward while I regaled you with tales of woe from my pathetic life.”

Edwin’s mouth hung open, and he found himself momentarily speechless.

“Lawrence, what on earth are you talking about?”

“You can drop the act, Eddie. I know what you did—” Lawrence broke off as his throat constricted and began to strangle his words.

What I did? The words seemed to echo in Edwin’s mind. *What did I do?*

“You’re really quite a piece of work, you know that?” Edwin stared blankly back at him. “All those years, you had me fooled.”

Edwin’s brow furrowed and he began shaking his head. “Had you fooled? About *what?*!”

Lawrence’s eyes flared and he took a quick step forward. Reaching down, he grabbed Edwin by the collar and hoisted him onto tiptoes until they were face to face, their noses bare inches apart. “Don’t play dumb with me, you bloody bastard! Disgusted, Lawrence let go of Edwin’s collar, shoving him backwards as he did so.

Edwin tumbled to the floor, his hat and briefcase going one way, and he the other. For a moment, Edwin just sat there on the dirty floor of the airport, confused and stunned. Eventually, he picked himself up and dusted himself off. In all directions, people had turned to see what the commotion was about. The line Edwin had been standing in had spread to make room for the developing confrontation, and people were staring open-mouthed at them, some with shock, others with anticipation. Lawrence didn’t appear to notice, but Edwin did.

“I’ve had just about enough of this, Lawrence. You’re making a scene. I don’t know what I did to provoke this, but after all these years of friendship, I think I deserve a chance to explain myself with a little dignity.”

Edwin had thought that Lawrence couldn’t get any angrier, but he was wrong. He watched as Lawrence’s face turned red and veins bulged in his neck. “*Friendship?*”

Edwin shook his head, uncomprehending. “Yes, *friendship*. Or have you forgotten that I saved your job when you didn’t have the strength left to do it for yourself?” He pointed to his

chest, allowing his indignation to rise to the surface. “I developed the sales strategy for which you were so lauded.” Something in Lawrence’s expression flickered, and his face twisted into a hideous smile. Past the point of caring, Edwin barreled on despite the warning in his gut. “And now, I’m going on a business trip to save your job yet again!”

Lawrence went on smiling for a long, silent moment.

“You unconscionable worm. Are you taunting me?” Tears sprang to Lawrence’s eyes once more, but he spoke through gritted teeth. “Maybe *you’ve* forgotten, but when I met you, you were just a leather chemist. *I* promoted you. *I* trained you. You were my best friend, Eddie! My only *real* friend. Or so I thought.”

Edwin gave an exasperated shrug. “I’m *still* your friend!”

Lawrence’s jaw bunched, his nostrils flared, and his hands balled into fists. Edwin knew what was coming even before he saw it, but he just stood there watching, as if he couldn’t really believe it. Lawrence took a quick step forward, and his right arm blurred with sudden movement.

Edwin tried to duck at the last second, but only succeeded in catching the punch with his eye instead of his jaw. His left eye exploded in pain, and then he was falling backwards again. This time he felt the impact at the base of his skull rather than the seat of his pants. Splayed out on the floor, Edwin just lay there, looking up at a blurry ceiling through one eye, his other fast swelling shut.

Then, he thought he heard a voice—Lawrence’s voice—say, “*Serves you right, you backstabbing bastard,*” and then other voices reached his ears and Edwin was sure he heard one of them say, “*Stop! You’re under arrest.*” He tried to sit up to see what was going on, but his head swam and then everything went dark.

* * *

Pieter was sitting on his bed, staring intently at the phone on his desk, as if he expected it to move. It was a quarter after four. *She should be home.* She hadn’t called him. He hadn’t called her, either. He was still trying to figure out what to say, how to apologize. What words, if any, would make a difference? He wasn’t sure, but he knew he had to say something. It had been three days since he’d either seen or talked to Elizabeth, and the last time he had, had been the night of their fight.

He couldn't let her think that he wasn't sorry. He was. Truly, he was. For the past three days, he'd worn an expression so heavy that it was painful to smile. It was time to do something about it. He closed his eyes and slowly counted to five, trying to calm his racing heart. *One, two, three—*

The phone started ringing. He opened his eyes, expecting to find that his ears were playing tricks on him. The ringing continued to assault his ears. Dare he hope that it was Elizabeth? Slowly, his arm seeming to creak with the movement, he reached out and picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Piet."

"Elizabeth! I was just about to call you." Pieter's face lit up, his frown abruptly disappearing.

"You were?" she asked, sounding suddenly uncertain.

"Yes, I . . ." he trailed off. He couldn't just say he was sorry, could he? There needed to be more to it than that.

He heard Elizabeth sigh. "Piet, I've been thinking a lot lately." A hint of Pieter's frown returned as he noticed Elizabeth's tone of voice. "I don't think we're really right for each other," she finished.

Now Pieter's frown was back in full force. It felt as though it would drag him through the floor.

"You can't mean that, Lizzie."

"I do, Piet. I think it's for the best. For both of us."

Pieter felt a dark haze descending over him, and his heart was beating so wildly that he wasn't sure it would last. "If this is about that stupid fight we had—you have to know how sorry I am. I was just jealous, Elizabeth, I was an idiot, a—"

"It's not *just* about that, Pieter," Elizabeth said, interrupting his self-deprecating tirade. She paused, and Pieter took the moment to pull himself together.

Elizabeth continued, "We're just too different from each other. We're not compatible."

"Not compatible?" he echoed. "How can you say that? We're great together!"

Elizabeth hesitated, and when she spoke again her voice was pained. "I'm sorry, Piet. I really am."

Pieter opened his mouth for a reply but found that none would come. His head was spinning. It was like a nightmare: something horrible was happening and he was powerless to

stop it; he couldn't even speak.

"Goodbye, Pieter—" He heard her snuffle through the receiver. "—I'll always remember you fondly."

Click.

"Wait! Elizabeth!" he yelled into the receiver, his face twisting with pain and frustration, but it was too late.

* * *

Constance smiled as Elizabeth hung up the phone. Nodding to herself, she crossed the kitchen floor to her daughter, where she was still standing with her hand on the phone, her back turned. The way Elizabeth had frozen there, it was easy to see that she was still having doubts—perhaps more now than ever. She needed some reassurance.

Constance put a hand on Elizabeth's shoulder. "You did the right thing, Elizabeth."

For a long moment there was no reply. Elizabeth just stood there, gazing down at the phone . . . but at length, she nodded and turned away. Her mother's hand fell from her shoulder as she quietly left the kitchen.

Constance watched Elizabeth go, hearing her daughter sniffing as she went. *Painful, yes; unfortunate, no. It's for the best, my dear, and in time, you'll see that, too.*

Turning away now herself, Constance went to the refrigerator and began withdrawing the ingredients for a salad: carrots, lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes . . . As she placed the ingredients on the counter beside the fridge, Constance remembered again what Lucas Atherton had said about his son: *"he's planning to come here in July, once he matriculates, to spend the rest of the year with me and to decide whether he wants to attend university here in South Africa or in London next year."*

Smiling, Constance thought: *there'll be just enough time for her to get over Pieter before then.*

Chapter 23

Edwin's eyes cracked open, or rather, one of them did, the other merely exploded in pain. He awoke to find a number of people standing over him, but nearest at hand was a police officer shining a flashlight into his eyes.

"Shut it off," he groaned, his good eye squinting shut.

The police officer obliged. "Are you all right, sir?"

Edwin opened his eye again, wincing as he did so, and sat up.

"Careful, sir," the policeman said, reaching out with an arm to guide him to an upright position. "We wouldn't want you to black out again."

"How long was I out for?"

"A couple of minutes. *Hy het jou goed gebliksem!*"*

Edwin grimaced. "It would appear that way."

"Would you like to press charges?"

"What?" Edwin blinked in momentary confusion, then shook his head. "No." So that was what he'd heard before blacking out. *The police were arresting Lawrence.* "Where is he?"

"The bloke who punched you?" Edwin nodded and the policeman shrugged. "Probably on his way to the station by now."

Edwin sighed. "Will he be there long?"

"Well, since you're not going to press charges, we'll just keep him there for a few hours to cool off, while we file the necessary paperwork."

"Ah. Well, see that it's filed quickly."

The policeman frowned. "I'd have thought you'd want him to stay there for a while."

Edwin sighed. "No, he's actually a good friend of mine."

The police officer eyed him skeptically. "It didn't look that

*

Hy het jou goed gebliksem: he really thumped you

way from where I was standing.”

Edwin gave the policeman a smile that was equal parts grim and ironic. “Nor from where I was standing. But . . .” Edwin sighed. “He’s been through a lot lately.”

“I see . . . well—” The policeman hastily cut himself off as Edwin began climbing to his feet. “Easy!” he said, then grabbed Edwin’s arm to help him up. When it was apparent that Edwin wasn’t going to fall over, the policeman let go.

“Thank you for your assistance,” Edwin said.

“No problem. How are you feeling? Any dizziness? Confusion? Nausea?”

Edwin shook his head in turn to each of the questions. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“Appearances can be deceiving.”

“Well, if things change and you start feeling poorly, give me a holler, I’ll just be over there—” The policeman pointed to a security station a dozen meters distant.

Edwin nodded. “I will, thank you.” He watched as the policeman headed back to his station, then turned around to find his hat lying crumpled on the floor beside his briefcase. Walking over to it, he bent down, picked it up, brushed it off, and popped the dent out of it before placing it on his head again. Then he picked up his briefcase and went back to stand in line for his boarding pass. No one objected when he cut in.

The airport was noticeably quieter now. And all the while, as he stood in line, robotically shuffling forward a few steps each time the line got shorter, he kept wondering what on earth had got into Lawrence. The details of the fight were hazy, but they were coming back to him in short, incomprehensible snippets. He shook his head as if that might clear it. He knew his confusion wasn’t a sign of concussion; the events had made no more sense to him at the time than they did in hindsight.

After Edwin had received his boarding pass from a painfully sympathetic airline worker, he had the presence of mind to remember the wine he was going to pick up as a present for Mr. Colton. He stopped in at a likely looking duty-free store, which boasted *South Africa’s Finest Wines* in the window. He found two of the most expensive bottles of wine he could and charged it to the company’s expense account. That done, he left the store in search of his departure gate.

As he walked, his mind returned to wondering what had provoked Lawrence. Apart from the confrontation itself, something didn't make sense: Lawrence shouldn't have even been in Cape Town. What had brought him all the way from Wellington? *Did he come all this way just to knock me senseless?*

Having found the departure lounge, Edwin walked up to security—just an open doorway with a policeman standing there—and stood in line again. As he stood there, periodically shuffling forward as people cleared the policeman's basic security checks, Edwin began to wonder what he was doing. Here he was going to Canada on an emergency business trip to save Lawrence's job, and what thanks did he get?

A black eye. Given that, he wondered whether he should still be going on this trip. Why should he do Lawrence such a big favor now? Moreover, had something changed? Had George Colton changed his mind? Was that why Lawrence was acting so crazy? He had no way of knowing and no way to find out. Only he and Lawrence knew about the trip, so he couldn't call anyone at the tannery to find out if he still had to go. Edwin sighed. The tickets were already purchased, and as far as he knew, Western tanning still had a rapidly depreciating investment. The safest course of action would be to go, and figure out what was going on with Lawrence when he got back. He still had a sale to make.

So that's what I'm going to do.

When Edwin got to the security gate, the guard gave him a funny look. "Rough night last night?" The guard asked, pointing to his swollen eye.

Edwin shook his head. There were a couple of seconds of awkward silence as the guard waited to hear the details, but Edwin wasn't about to elaborate. Seeing this, the guard shrugged and got on with his job. Edwin endured the policeman's security check, then passed into the departure lounge. In front of him and to his right were rows of seating, all facing ground-floor windows which looked out on the tarmac.

As Edwin started toward the nearest row of seating, he noticed a small cafeteria to his left. He decided to go there in search of a bag of ice for his eye.

* * *

The trees outside Elizabeth's bedroom window were writhing in

the wind, their leaves clapping together in thunderous applause. Despite being hours before sunset, it was growing darker by the minute. It wouldn't be long before the rain started.

Elizabeth was sitting on her bed, watching the storm, but it was only adding to her melancholy. Her eyes panned to the phone on her bedside table. It had been two days since she'd broken up with Pieter. It felt like forever. She struggled to remember *why* she had broken up with him in the first place, but nothing came to mind. She had had her reasons, and they had made sense at the time, but for some reason, now it seemed more like it had been her mother's idea.

Elizabeth sighed. Why was she feeling so miserable? She had broken up with *him*. Studying the phone with restless indecision, Elizabeth bit her lip, fighting the urge to call Pieter. She spent a handful of seconds just staring at the phone and listening to the screaming wind. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore. She sidled over to the phone, reached for it, and—

Heard a knock at the door.

"Elizabeth?"

It was her mother.

Elizabeth's hand fell back to her lap, and she twisted around to face the door. "Yes?"

* * *

Pieter was pacing back and forth in his room. It was the only thing that kept him from going mad. He wanted to go outside and run until he passed out from sheer exhaustion, but the howling wind warned against that idea.

With each successive rut he wore into the floor, his gaze fell upon the phone on his desk. He wanted to call Elizabeth to apologize—to tell her that he hadn't given up on them, that he'd never give up, that he felt like a part of him had been cut away, and that he'd never feel whole again until they were back together. But if he called, would she even answer?

Pieter stopped pacing, his eyes locked on the phone. He stood there for a long time, unmoving, his face drawn, thoughts spinning through his head.

Is this how it ends?

That thought silenced all the others, leaving his mind blank. His eyes went out of focus and suddenly he felt overcome by fatigue. There had to be *something* he could do!

His eyes snapped back into focus and his jaw clenched. *It's not over yet*, Pieter thought, and crossed the room to his closet. He withdrew his coat and left his room at a run, pulling the coat on as he went.

* * *

Constance was sitting on the bed beside her daughter. Elizabeth flinched as a sudden clap of thunder split the sky overhead and rattled the room's solitary window in its frame.

Unperturbed by the sound, Constance turned to her daughter and said, "You did the right thing, Elizabeth."

"Then why am I feeling like this?" Elizabeth met her mother's gaze, her tears coming in time to the at-first-gentle patter of rain on her windowsill.

Constance smiled sympathetically. "It's perfectly natural. After breaking up with someone, one always feels confused and lonely."

Elizabeth shook her head, remembering other boyfriends she'd broken up with—Thomas, Charley . . . "Not always."

"You and Pieter were together for more than a year. That's a long time; of course you're going to be sad, but you will get over him," Constance said, nodding. "Sooner than you think."

Elizabeth's eyes traveled to her phone. "I keep hoping that he'll call."

"You mustn't think that way. Even if he does call, you can't take him back. Now that you've seen his true colors, you can't afford to let him get close enough to hurt you again."

"But it was just a stupid misunderstanding . . ."

Abruptly, the wind picked up, and the rain went from gentle pattering to a thunderous roar.

Constance frowned. "No, my girl, it was a rare glimpse of his true nature—jealous, unreasonable, suspicious, insensitive. What happened once can happen again."

"Everyone makes mistakes."

Constance snorted. "Some more than others. You need to keep this in perspective, Elizabeth. It hurts now, but in time you'll be glad that you broke up with him."

Elizabeth looked back at her mother. "I see him everywhere—on the street, in the park, at the supermarket—everyone seems to have his face! I know it's just my imagination, but every time I mistake someone else for him, my heart skips a beat. I find myself hoping that it *is* him, even if only so that I can see him

one more time . . .”

“Sometimes one’s heart plays tricks with one’s mind.” Constance’s expression softened. “But you can’t let that bother you. Don’t let yourself forget why you broke up with him.”

“What if he apologizes?”

Constance’s frown returned. “Elizabeth . . . you’re two very different people, from two very different worlds. It is those differences that caused the fight in the first place. A gentleman would’ve given you the benefit of the doubt before jumping to conclusions. Afrikaners don’t think like that. They haven’t the same degree of control over their emotions. It makes them rash and impulsive, given to fits of temper . . . even violence.

“You must be strong. Now come on, dry those eyes—”

The wind and the rain died down for a minute, and a sound like knocking, barely audible above the storm, drew Constance’s attention toward the open door of Elizabeth’s room. The sound continued and Elizabeth’s head turned, too.

“What’s that?” Elizabeth asked, sniffing.

They listened quietly for a moment. Between gusts of the wind they heard it again. “It sounds like someone’s at the front door.”

Elizabeth sniffled and cast her mother a questioning glance. “Who’d be out in this weather?”

Constance’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “I don’t know. Strange. I’d better go see who it is. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Elizabeth watched her mother go, then returned her gaze to the window at her desk. She was just in time to see a jagged white fork of lightning split the sky in front of *Gröenberg* Mountain’s hazy blue-green silhouette.

* * *

Pieter stood waiting under the eaves, with the thunder rolling ominously overhead. The wind was buffeting him, chipping away at his resolve. Water was running from his hair down his face and neck, dripping off the tip of his nose and chin, and rolling down beneath the collar of his coat. Despite having run the whole way from his house, he was drenched, and now his wet clothes were clinging to him, stealing what little warmth he had left.

Just as he was wondering if he should knock again, he heard a click and the door began to open. Thinking that it might be Elizabeth come to answer the door, Pieter’s face brightened—

And promptly darkened again as he saw that it was Elizabeth's mother who'd answered.

"Is Elizabeth home?" he asked.

Constance's face was sketched in shock, and for a moment she gave no reply. Then, seeming to grab hold of herself, she cast a furtive glance over her shoulder, as if expecting someone to be behind her. Apparently satisfied that there wasn't, she stepped out onto the doorstep and all but closed the door behind her. Pieter watched as Constance crossed her arms against the chill wind and shook her head sadly.

"I'm afraid she isn't."

Pieter despaired. He felt like a fool. *I ran two blocks in the pouring rain, and for what? She isn't even here!*

Constance watched Pieter with apparent concern. "Is there a message you would like me to pass on to her for you?"

Pieter shook his head and began turning away. "No, thank you. Just let her know that I was here, please."

Seeing him turn his back and start down the steps from the door, Constance warred with herself over what she should do. Pieter would be back, and she knew that her daughter wouldn't be strong enough to resist him. On the other hand, she couldn't afford to keep him around for long—Elizabeth might come to see who was at the door. Or glance out her window . . .

She decided to take a risk. "Pieter," she called, causing him to stop and turn at the bottom of the steps.

Pieter regarded her through half-lidded eyes. He wasn't under the eaves anymore, and the rain was pelted him mercilessly. He didn't seem to notice.

Constance took a few steps toward Pieter, wincing as doing so brought her within range of stray raindrops. "I understand that you are upset about what happened between you and Elizabeth, but you need to know that you weren't far wrong."

Pieter's expression turned from lifeless to frowning. "What do you mean?"

"This isn't the first time Elizabeth has gone out with other boys. She has a boyfriend in Siesta—Nicholas—she's known him for two years now." Pieter's eyes widened and his features turned angry. Constance felt the need to defend her daughter, lest Pieter be suspicious of her motives for telling him. "She's young, Pieter, and not ready for a serious relationship yet."

“Elizabeth never told me about him.”

“Of course not, because she knew that you were more serious about her than she was about you. She didn’t want to hurt your feelings by telling you so.”

Pieter’s gaze dipped to the ground and he began slowly shaking his head. He was silent for a long moment, his eyes unfocused, staring at the ground. Constance resisted the urge to tell him to go home. This was taking too long . . .

There was a distant flash of lightning, followed a few seconds later by an earsplitting crack of thunder. Pieter snapped out of it then, and without looking up from the ground, he said, “Thank you for telling me, Mrs. Smythe.”

* * *

Elizabeth heard the crack of thunder like the snap of a circus trainer’s whip. It proved just enough to yank her out of her thoughts. She turned away from the window and looked back to the open doorway of her room, expecting her mother to come walking through. Already several minutes had passed since her mother had gone to answer the door. Elizabeth frowned, wondering who it had been. Hattie was already home, and her father was likely just arriving in Canada, so it couldn’t be him.

Who would be out in such a storm? And for what reason? What could be so urgent? With a sigh, Elizabeth stood up from her bed and went looking for her mother.

Upon reaching the living room, Elizabeth realized that the house was strangely quiet, only the howling wind and pouring rain filled that silence. There was no sign of her mother anywhere. Frowning, she started across the living room toward the kitchen. When she entered the kitchen, she found Hattie there, jimmying the lock on the candy cupboard—their mother rationed them to one candy a day, but Hattie had long since found a way around that.

“Where’s Mom?” Elizabeth asked.

Hattie started with adrenaline and turned from the cupboard. Seeing that it was only her sister, she visibly relaxed. “I think she’s still at the front door.”

“Oh. Who is it?”

Hattie shook her head and shrugged.

Taking that to mean her sister didn’t know, Elizabeth left the kitchen and started for the front door to find out for herself.

Chapter 24

Constance watched Pieter walking down the pathway to the sidewalk. Despite the rain and the thunderstorm, he didn't seem to be in a hurry, as though he was oblivious to the storm around him. Even though she knew she'd only acted in her daughter's best interests, Constance couldn't help feeling a little sorry for him. She watched him start across the street. He didn't even bother to skirt the puddles, splashing through them as he went. *Perhaps he's not so bad, after all.* She turned from the scene—

And came face-to-face with Elizabeth. Constance jumped as a jolt of fear lanced through her. How long had Elizabeth been standing behind her? What had she seen? What had she overheard? Her heart was beating wildly as she followed her daughter's gaze, which rather than being directed accusingly at her, was staring after Pieter—now a thumb-sized speck, walking through the driving rain with his back to them. He was almost on the other side of the street.

Constance watched with growing horror as the rain began to slow, bringing Pieter into sharper focus. *When he reaches the other side of the street, he'll have to turn and start down the sidewalk. His back won't be turned to us for long. What if he sees Elizabeth? What if she sees him? Without the rain to prevent it . . .*

Her eyes shot back to Elizabeth as she realized the urgency of the situation. *If she doesn't already know who it is, she's going to know soon.*

* * *

Elizabeth peered through the rain, willing it to part so she could get a better look at the man crossing the street. He looked so much like Pieter that her heart ached from just the sight of him. Even his clothes looked familiar. But, then again, everyone had begun to look like Pieter lately. Earlier today, she

had even mistaken her science teacher for him.

She narrowed her eyes, squinting through the rain as though that might help her to see. Then, to her surprise, the curtain of rain began to lift. Now the man looked even more like Pieter, but it was hard to tell with his back turned to her.

Of course, it couldn't really be Pieter. What would he be doing at her house after she'd broken up with him? And in the middle of a storm?

It didn't make any sense. She kept watching the man as he receded into the distance. In just another second, he would reach the other side of the street and turn to walk down the sidewalk. She would get a glimpse of his face then—

At just the wrong moment, Elizabeth's mother stepped in front of her, obscuring her view. Before she knew what was happening, her mother had taken her by the arm and whisked her back inside the house, saying, "Come on, dear, you'll catch a death of cold out here."

Elizabeth had just enough time for a glance over her shoulder before her mother closed the door, but the glance was so fleeting that she was unable to make sense of what she saw. Blinking in confusion, Elizabeth asked: "Who was that?"

Constance seemed to hesitate for a moment as she locked the door. "Oh . . . just a traveling salesman."

Traveling in the rain? "He picked a strange time to work."

Elizabeth saw her mother shrug. "He was a rather strange man. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he's on drugs."

"What was he selling?"

"Hmmm?" Constance turned slowly from the door to face her daughter.

Elizabeth frowned. "I asked what he was selling."

"Oh, something small and inconsequential; I can't really recall what. I was more focused on the man than his wares."

Constance walked past Elizabeth and started down the hallway. "Come along, dear. I need to start dinner, and I'd like you to help me set the table."

Elizabeth stared after her mother for a long moment, wondering about what she had seen. Then she shook herself: *Just a coincidence . . .*

* * *

Pieter turned to look behind him when he reached the sidewalk on the other side of the street. He was just in time to see the

front door close. Elizabeth's mother must have been watching him go. Perhaps she felt sorry for him.

He scowled. He didn't want people to feel sorry for him. To Constance he'd probably looked dejected as he'd left, but the truth was he was furious. He'd been right to be jealous; he'd been right to get angry with Elizabeth—only he'd taken too long to do so. She'd been dating other guys all along.

Nicholas. The name burned like acid in his brain. She could have at least told me about him. At least then I would've known where I stood. Instead, like an idiot, I thought she felt the same way about me as I did about her. He grimaced. *Meanwhile, I was just an interesting diversion. Someone she could brag to her friends about—that university guy she was dating.*

Pieter stood staring at Elizabeth's house for a long while, barely noticing when it stopped raining. He felt even more foolish for having run out in the middle of a storm to see her. Constance would no doubt tell Elizabeth that he'd come by, and she would probably think that meant he wanted to get back together.

Good. Let her think that. And then let her wonder why she never sees me again. His only regret was that he'd never have a chance to tell her to her face how glad he was to be rid of her . . .

A letter would have to do.

Finally, Pieter tore his gaze away and started home.

* * *

Edwin landed in New York at around midday local time. There, he'd had his first glimpse of snow. Of course, he'd seen it in movies, but it was another thing entirely to see it in person. The tarmac was blanketed in white, and the sky, an overcast gray, was blurred with lazily falling snowflakes. Edwin thought it was beautiful.

Two hours later, the scene in Toronto wasn't much different, though the snow wasn't falling and the tarmac had been cleared.

The real shock came when he had to go outside to get a taxi. So far all his experiences with this new climate had been from the safety of a hot and stuffy airplane, or an equally stuffy airport. Now, as he stood shivering on the curb in front of the airport—one tweed-jacketed arm raised, trying desperately to hail a cab—every breath he took turned into an icy cloud of

water vapor as it left his mouth; his lungs were burning; his eyes were tearing; his nostrils seemed to stick together; and his fingers and toes . . .

He believed they were the source of the painful stinging sensation he felt at the ends of his hands and feet. He'd brought all of his warmest clothing, but that amounted to little more than a three-piece suit, some leather driving gloves, and a thin windbreaker—none of which he was wearing because he'd deemed them too hot and uncomfortable for the plane. He was beginning to regret that decision.

After a seeming eternity, a yellow taxi pulled up to the curb in front of him. The driver got out—on the wrong side of the car. It was disconcerting, but Edwin had already known to expect it. In North America people drove on the left-hand side of their vehicles and right-hand side of their roads.

The cab driver was bundled in a bulky, blue jacket; a yellow toque; and some thick, gray gloves. He rounded the cab to Edwin, who had begun breathing into his stinging hands.

Seeing this, the cab driver grinned as he took Edwin's luggage. "New to Canada, 'ey?" Edwin heard muted laughter as the cabby trundled and thumped his luggage into the trunk. Edwin sent the man an ill-humored look and then hurried to the passenger's side of the cab. His hand shivering with the rest of him, he reached for the door handle—

Only to yelp and jerk away, leaving the door unopened. The metal door handle was so cold, it had seemed to burn his hand.

More laughter from the cabby. Edwin scowled and waited for the door to be opened from the inside. It wasn't much warmer inside the cab, but the heater was on, so Edwin kept his hands glued to the ducts in the dashboard. His hands began to tingle uncomfortably.

As they drove away from the airport, Edwin noticed that the pristine, white snow which he'd seen covering the expanses between landing strips at the airport had now turned to a dirty black and brown filth which lined the edges of the streets and sidewalks. Passing cars sloshed through whatever vestiges lay in the street, throwing equal parts to the curb and the side of the taxi. In all the places he would have expected to see grass, Edwin saw flat, bald patches of snow; and wherever he saw trees, their branches were piled high with snow and stripped

bare of leaves, sticking out like the enamel-white bones of a skeleton.

Here, as in New York, the sky was overcast and gray. Between that, the freezing cold weather, the disconcerting lack of color, and the dirty, brown slush that seemed to predominate the urban setting, Edwin found that the novelty of North American winter was wearing off.

The silence in the cab suited Edwin's sheer exhaustion, but apparently the cab driver was not as content with it.

"So, where'd you get the shiner?"

"Cape Town," came Edwin's monotone reply. He didn't look away from the window.

The cabby whistled. "That's in Africa, right? Long way from here. That where you're from?"

Edwin nodded.

"Your wife give it to you? The black eye, I mean?" Edwin turned slowly from the window and gave the cabby a strange look. The cabby shrugged. "Not as uncommon as you'd think." The cabby laughed and shook his head. "They say men are the violent ones. Don't you believe it." Edwin just blinked. "So what was it? Missed supper one too many times? Got caught with your secretary?"

Edwin frowned. "No. My best friend gave it to me."

"Oh."

Edwin went back to staring out the window. There were a few moments of blessed silence, and then the cabby asked something else. Edwin wasn't listening, and he gave no reply. He'd disappeared into his thoughts. He was aware of silence returning briefly as the cabby's question went ignored, but then the man's chatter resumed. This time it was just a string of meaningless, one-sided conversation—about Canada, Toronto, the weather. Apparently, the cab driver was content to fill the silence with or without Edwin's help. Edwin was equally content to spend the journey drifting in and out of sleep.

After an indeterminate time, the cab stopped. Edwin's eyes popped open and he blinked to clear them. The cab driver quoted a price, and tapped a meter on his dash to corroborate it. Edwin glanced out the window to see where they were. He didn't want to get out in that deathly cold only to find that he'd arrived at the wrong destination and there wasn't a hotel in sight. But no, he could see the hotel that had been described

to him at the airport: a Holiday Inn of about 15 floors, diagonally opposite the University of Toronto and facing an 18-floor high-rise. The cabby said something about the high-rise being the Rochdale College. Edwin nodded mechanically as he paid his fare and got out of the cab. Perhaps such details should have been interesting, but he'd barely slept at all in the past 30 hours, and for the last 10 he wasn't even sure whether he'd been awake or dreaming.

The cab drove off with a sloshing, splashing sound and sprayed Edwin's beige trousers and brown leather shoes with wet, black filth. He gazed dispassionately down at them, then started up the sidewalk to the entrance of the Inn. Check-in went by in a blur, and before he knew it, he was standing at the window in his room, gazing down from the 10th floor to the slushy street below. The bellhop who'd helped him with his luggage came up beside him and fiddled with something below the window sill. Edwin's gaze followed the boy's movements.

"The heater," the bellhop explained with an easy grin. "Guess you're not used to those in South Africa, huh?" Edwin frowned. He couldn't remember having told the boy where he'd come from, but then again, right now he couldn't remember much of anything. Having apparently finished his job, the bellhop looked expectantly at Edwin, who just stared blankly back at him. The boy shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "Uh . . ." He looked at the ground.

Suddenly Edwin figured it out. "Oh, sorry—" He reached into his pocket and withdrew a few dollars. "—you'll have to excuse me; I haven't had much sleep in the past two days."

The bellhop nodded and folded the tip into his pocket. "That's all right, sir." With that, he left the room. Edwin watched the door click shut, then returned to gazing out the window. It was surreal—so completely different from anything he was used to. The Rochdale College soared up across the street from him, casting a shadow long enough to engulf his room. A few flat, snowy spaces were peeking out to his left from in-between the high-rises. Edwin guessed they were parts of the U of T campus.

He noted how dark it was getting and remembered his promise to call his wife when he reached Canada. He checked his watch—only 4:30 PM. The last time he'd set his watch had been in New York. He'd been too tired by the time he'd arrived

in Toronto to do the same. What time was it here? He glanced behind him to the alarm clock on the bedside table: 4:34.

The same time, then. Still early. Edwin considered that the encroaching darkness probably owed more to the heavy gray clouds hanging overhead, than the angle of the sun . . .

He shook his head. He was getting sidetracked. If he was going to call his wife, he'd have to know what time it was in South Africa. His eyes squinted shut in concentration, and a hand went unconsciously to his forehead, as if to massage the answer from his brain. He thought it was about a seven- or eight-hour time difference. That would make it between 11:30 and 12:30 there—too late to call. Just as well. He hadn't figured out how much he was going to tell his wife about what had happened between him and Lawrence in Cape Town. He wasn't even really sure how much he knew. It would be better to sleep on it.

Edwin eyed his bed, for a moment too tired even to walk over to it. Eventually he shambled over and flopped down on top of the covers. He barely had the energy to crawl inside, but even the hotel room was cold, so he summoned one last burst of strength and peeled back the sheets. Five minutes later, he was asleep.

* * *

It was four in the morning.

Lawrence sat up in bed, unable to sleep. He ran a hand back through his unwashed, tangled mass of dark brown hair. It was little wonder why he couldn't sleep; he'd spent all the previous day sleeping. After all, what else did he have to do? But there was more to it than that, more than boredom which kept him sleeping through the day. If he had his way he would sleep around the clock. Unfortunately, his body wasn't cooperating.

A pained expression crossed Lawrence's face, twisting it grotesquely in the darkness of his room. He wanted to scream, to cry, to run—to run as far and as fast as he could, to get away from it all, and find some rock at the end of the earth to crawl under. He'd lost his son, then his wife, and finally, his job and his best friend—who, as it turned out, had never really been his friend at all. What did he have left?

His two daughters, Lydia and Julia. But what good was he to them now?

Jobless.

Useless.

What else was left?

Revenge. The thought surprised Lawrence, yet proved to be strangely seductive. *But how?* Lawrence frowned and shook his head to clear it. How could Edwin do this to him? He hadn't even had the decency to admit what he'd done. Perhaps he'd distanced himself from his actions, had allowed himself to forget—had *willed* himself to forget, hiding from even his own conscience. *He always was a coward . . .*

Well, if that's the case, then someone needs to remind him. Lawrence found himself nodding, and his mind began churning over the possibilities. The minutes ticked by in long, meandering seconds of half-formed plans and discarded notions, but after a while, he kept coming back to the same ones, and found that they were beginning to coalesce. He knew what to do. Edwin wasn't going to get away with what he'd done.

Chapter 25

Edwin woke up sweating and threw the blankets off of himself with a heavy swish and rustle of fabric. It was dark outside. He checked his watch, but it was too dark to read the time, so he fumbled for the switch to turn on the lamp beside his bed. It sprang to life with a blinding flash, and his eyes automatically squinted against the glare. When his vision had cleared enough to see, he checked his watch again—it read: 9:47 PM. *Great!* Edwin thought. *I slept for over five hours, right through the evening.* He rubbed his eyes and sighed. At least now he'd be able to call home.

He sat up in bed and dialed the number. It took a while for the call to be put through, but eventually he heard his wife pick up on the other end of the line.

"Hello? Constance Smythe speaking." There was an unusual, girlish tremor to his wife's voice, as if she was anxious or worried about something. Edwin didn't miss it, but he attributed it to distortion.

"Constance!"

"Edwin? Finally. I was wondering when you'd call. I'd thought you were due to arrive yesterday."

Yesterday? Then it clicked: the time difference. He smiled. "I did arrive yesterday, but by the time I arrived you would've been asleep, so I decided to wait to call until morning."

"Well, good then."

"I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, I just got up."

"So it must be—"

"Almost five in the morning."

"Oh." He'd thought it would be six. "You're up early."

"Only by an hour."

The conversation went on for a while, drifting through reams of small talk. Anything and everything Edwin could think of to

distract from telling his wife about the fight he'd had with Lawrence. Eventually, she must have realized that he was prattling out of nervousness and she asked: "Edwin, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You just finished telling me how many cars you've counted below your window in the last five minutes."

"Well, it's unusual for me to see so many cars this late at night. I'm not used to big cities, after all."

"Mhmm. Something you might have waited to tell me when you're not paying a small fortune to convey the information halfway around the world. Now tell me what's the matter."

Edwin sighed and was silent for a handful of seconds.

"Lawrence met me at the airport in Cape Town."

Now there was silence on the *other* end of the line. At first Edwin thought it was just the delay—due to the distance, it took about a second from when something was said for it to be heard on the other end. But the seconds just kept on ticking by.

"Hello?"

A few more seconds passed before her reply came through the receiver: "And?" The girlish tremor was back, Edwin noted. "What did he have to say to you?"

"Well . . . he wasn't making much sense. He seemed to think that I'd betrayed him somehow, but he didn't even tell me what I'd done wrong. He kept accusing me of betraying him, and I kept denying it. Before I knew what was happening, he'd knocked me flat. I was unconscious for a couple of minutes. When I woke up again, there was a police officer shining a flashlight in my eyes, and Lawrence was gone. Apparently, he'd been arrested."

Edwin heard an audible sigh, almost as though his wife was relieved, but that couldn't be right . . . Perhaps it had been a gasp, not a sigh.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I've got a pretty shiner, but otherwise I'm fine."

An irritated growl came through the receiver then. "That man is dangerous."

Edwin shook his head, for a moment forgetting his wife couldn't see the gesture. "I can't help thinking that there's got

to be a reason. As soon as I get back, I've got to talk to him. Or maybe I should call him from Canada—"

"No! You can't," she said, the words fusing together with the speed that they were spoken. "I forbid it. You've already got one black eye. Who knows what else the man is capable of? You must have nothing more to do with him."

Edwin frowned and looked out the window of his room. "You make him sound like a psychopath."

"He's been through a lot. First his son died and his wife became an alcoholic, and then she had an affair with a mechanic and abandoned the family. Sometimes something just snaps. It's obvious from his irrational behavior at the airport that he's not in his right mind."

Edwin had no reply for that. It was true: Lawrence *had* been acting irrationally, but could it be that he'd actually lost it? *Poor Lawrence . . .*

"One way or another, Constance, I have to get to the bottom of this. He's my best friend. I can't leave him thinking that I betrayed him somehow. Even if he's deranged—"

"He is!"

"Nevertheless. All the more reason to make sure he doesn't feel like he has a score to settle with me."

Constance frowned. He was using her own logic against her.

* * *

By the time Constance put the phone down, her head was throbbing and her hands had begun to shake. She gazed out the window in the living room and saw her reflection there, gazing back at her. It was still dark out, and because of the lights on in the living room, it was next to impossible to see outside. She could imagine all kinds of hideous shapes moving beyond the glass, but that was just her mind playing tricks on her—again.

She'd awoken over an hour earlier than usual with an inexplicable feeling of terror. She'd been unable to move. Her body had been bathed in a cold sweat, and for the first few heart-stopping seconds, there had been a crushing weight on her chest. But most terrifying of all, she'd thought she'd seen something—or someone—creeping at the foot of her bed. A shadowy presence.

She'd thought she was dreaming. But after a few minutes had passed, the crushing weight had left, and she'd been able

to move again. At which point she'd flown out of bed and gone to the living room. Now, half an hour later—15 minutes of which was spent talking to Edwin in Canada—she was sure that she'd been awake.

Which was why, as she stared out into the thickly-shadowed darkness of the waning dawn, she couldn't get her hands to stop shaking. Edwin's phone call hadn't helped, either. Apparently, he already knew—and far sooner than she would have liked—that something was up with Lawrence. Fortunately, Lawrence hadn't seen fit to give him any details; perhaps he had none to give? She could only hope. But now she was left to wonder: had Lawrence lost his job after all? What exactly had the chairman done with the information she had given him?

After thinking about it for a few minutes, Constance concluded that he must have lost his job. *If he hadn't, he would have gone to Cape Town to fire Edwin, rather than to knock him senseless.* It was clear that Lawrence blamed him for losing his job—an unintended, but positive side effect. Not only had Lawrence lost his job, clearing the path for Edwin to take his place, but his friendship with Edwin was clearly also at an end. No more lonely afternoons and evenings while Edwin was out on the golf course.

But there was a problem: Edwin could still find out *why* Lawrence had confronted him at the airport. On the phone, Edwin had seemed determined to contact Lawrence and find out what he'd done to provoke his friend. She'd tried to dissuade him on the grounds that Lawrence was showing signs of mental instability. *But what if that doesn't work?*

She considered: *even if Lawrence told Edwin everything that happened, the details don't necessarily incriminate me—after all, no one knows that it was me who told the chairman.* It was possible, however, that Edwin might start digging, and then he could discover that the chairman had received an anonymous tip from a Miss *Amelia*, which would definitely raise some eyebrows in her direction. Why hadn't she used a made-up name? *Stupid.*

Constance shook her head. She had to minimize the risk. But how could she ensure that Edwin never found out? She'd been uncharacteristically rash when she'd contacted the chairman; there hadn't been time to think through all the

angles. Now, she had a secret to keep buried, but Edwin was determined to dig it up.

* * *

Since he'd slept through half the previous day, Edwin ended up spending the wee hours of the morning reviewing the contents of his file on George Colton and his company: married three times, divorced twice, rich as scrooge, and just as heartless—he had a habit of firing people just before Christmas, so he wouldn't have to pay them their bonuses.

Edwin sighed and looked up from the page he was currently reading. It was an excerpt from George's autobiography, written by him a few years ago under a pen name. There were only a few hundred copies in print, for which Edwin imagined George must have paid a small fortune. Apparently, he distributed the copies to his friends and family, as if to say, *Look at me—my life's so interesting that someone wrote a book about it!* Edwin wasn't sure how Lawrence knew that it was an autobiography, but that little detail revealed a lot about George's character. It meant that he ultimately had a weak ego, and that he would take any and every opportunity to show off.

The snob appeal would probably work very well on him, Edwin reflected, but he wasn't sure how to work that into the sale of a depreciating investment . . .

Nevertheless, he could always appeal to the man's ego in other ways. Flattery, so long as it was sufficiently discreet, might go a long way.

Edwin noted absently that it was growing light out. He checked his watch. It was now a quarter after seven in the morning. He was due to meet George at noon for lunch, but he still had breakfast to attend to. He briefly considered his options: he could go outside and catch a cab somewhere, or he could just walk around until he found a place . . .

Just the thought of those options gave him an involuntary shiver. No, he didn't want to spend any more time outside than absolutely necessary. It would be bad enough when he had to go out for lunch.

Instead, Edwin called down to the front desk and asked if there was any kind of restaurant inside the hotel. The lady on the other end informed him that there was a café just off the lobby, which served breakfast and lunch. Perfect. He hung up the phone, put on his wrinkled tweed jacket from the day

before, added his hat to the disheveled ensemble, and left the room.

Breakfast consisted of two cups of coffee, a bagel, and a delicious, hot bacon and black forest ham sandwich with melted cheddar. After that, he went to the front desk to see about having his suit pressed. They said they'd send someone up to get the suit in just a few minutes, so he went back up to his room.

Before long, one of the chambermaids knocked at his door. He answered and handed her the navy blue three-piece suit he'd brought. She said she'd have it pressed for him within the hour. He smiled and told her that would be fine. Closing the door behind her, he checked his watch.

It was now 8:15. That left him about three hours before he had to leave for his lunch appointment. What was he going to do with all that time? His eyes drifted to the table in one corner of the room where he'd left scattered papers from his file on George Colton. He eyed them for a moment, wondering if he should continue reading and making notes.

He grimaced at the thought, and then his gaze idly swept around the room in search of something more interesting. His eyes panned over the rumpled sheets on his bed, and from there to the chest of drawers directly opposite. On top of the chest of drawers, there was a boxy cupboard at about waist height. It wasn't quite high enough to hang anything inside. Perhaps it concealed a safe? Curious, Edwin went over to it and opened the cupboard. His eyes widened. A television set! Of course! He'd forgotten all about television. It hadn't even occurred to him. Television didn't exist in South Africa yet.

Edwin smiled to himself, thinking that he'd better take advantage of the luxury while he had it. *Now, how to turn it on . . .* He studied the television set for a moment before finding the on/off switch. He pushed it in until it clicked and was gratified to see a picture spring to life. He gasped. It was in color. So amazed by the novelty, Edwin didn't even bother to try to change the channel. He went back to his bed, sat down, and leaned back against the headboard. It was a news program—the weather.

Fascinating.

It was almost an hour before Edwin noticed the strange box sitting on the bedside table beside the telephone. Somehow

he'd missed it before. Studying it more carefully now, he noticed a wire trailing from it. He traced the wire with his eyes, all the way around the perimeter of the room until it disappeared behind the cabinet with the TV in it. That hinted to its purpose. Edwin picked up the box and experimentally pressed one of the numbered buttons.

The picture on the television flickered and resolved into an entirely different one. This time it was a game of ice hockey. Edwin grinned like a little kid with a new toy. He continued pressing buttons, capriciously flicking from one program to the next until he'd pressed them all. Having run out of buttons, Edwin picked one of them at random and found a program called *Days of our Lives*. He figured that was as good a place as any to start.

* * *

"Hey Beaver, who you writing to?" Shorty asked, looking over Nicholas's shoulder in an attempt to answer his own question.

Nicholas sighed. There was no use trying to cover up any longer. Shorty was bound to find out sooner or later. "To Elizabeth," he replied. "She hasn't written to me all year and soon I'll be going to the Wilderness for summer holidays again with my parents. So I thought I'd check whether she's going to meet up with me there. . . . or not."

Shorty raised his eyebrows. "Let me guess, just like Bog Rat predicted in Biology class last year, you kept dating both girls, and you lost her?"

"No, that bothered Denise a lot more than it did Elizabeth. But I think I'm to blame anyway."

"I'm not surprised, what did you do this time, Beaver?" Shorty said with a stern, but suitably wise-beyond-his-years look on his face. He considered himself an expert in these matters.

"At the end of last summer vacation I realized that she was having difficulty dealing with two relationships at once, so I suggested that when she got back home to Wellington, she be honest and tell her boyfriend, Pieter, about her summer romance with me. . . ."

"Oh, Beaver, you really blew it!" Shorty slapped Nicholas on the back, making the sore-point sting a little more. "And you thought you stood a chance after she got home and took your advice?" Not waiting for Nicholas to answer, Shorty continued,

"Well, I'll grant you this much, Beaver—it's a long shot, but you never know. Stranger things have happened. I mean, who could have ever thought you'd get so lucky in meeting her in the first place?"

Nicholas just sighed—Shorty was probably right about his chances, but he had to at least try.

* * *

Elizabeth knocked on the door. It was barely five seconds before it opened to reveal Thandiwe's smiling face. It was a Friday, so their maid was there to do the laundry and the ironing.

"Miss Elizabeth! I was just thinking about you."

"Oh?" Elizabeth walked through the door, followed by Hattie. "And why is that?" Elizabeth asked.

Hattie interrupted by saying hello and Thandiwe returned the greeting before giving Elizabeth a reply. Elizabeth waited, impatiently curious.

Thandiwe pointed to Elizabeth's bag of books. "Can I take that for you?" Elizabeth shook her head. "How about your jacket, then?"

Elizabeth was frowning now. It was almost as if Thandiwe was intentionally frustrating her curiosity. "Thandi . . ."

"Mmmm? Yes, miss?"

"You said you were thinking about me?"

Thandiwe's chubby face broke into a delighted smile, but she quickly covered it with a furrowed brow and a thoughtful frown. "No . . . I don't think so."

Elizabeth sighed. "Well, you said you were, and now that you have provoked my curiosity, would you please tell me why?"

Thandiwe's grin returned, and she reached into her apron and withdrew a letter.

"Aha!" Elizabeth exclaimed, having discovered the object of Thandiwe's game.

"You want to know who it's from?"

"Of course, but I'm sure I'll find out when I read the address on the envelope." Elizabeth held out her hand to receive it.

Thandiwe shook her head and made a clicking sound with her tongue. "No, no, no. What if it's not for you? Tell me if you know the person. That way I'll know who it's for."

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes at that. "Thandi . . . the envelope says who it's for at the top of the address. You should

already know whether or not it's for me."

"I'm sorry, miss, but you know I'm not very good with reading English . . ."

Elizabeth placed her hands on her hips. "So, how is it, then, that you know the name of the sender?"

Another delighted smile. This time Thandiwe didn't bother to hide it. "You caught me, miss."

Elizabeth smiled, and Thandiwe handed the letter to her. In a near whisper, she said: "It's from that boy Nicholas."

"*What?*" Elizabeth's eyes flicked to the envelope to read the name for herself, and sure enough, it *was* from Nicholas. How he had the gall to write her—not once, but twice—after she'd seen him kissing Claire in Siesta, was beyond her.

Thandiwe watched Elizabeth's expression turn from smiling to scowling angrily, and her brow furrowed. "Is something wrong, miss?"

"Yes." Elizabeth looked up from the envelope, her eyes blazing. She thrust the letter out to Thandiwe. "Burn it!"

Her face abruptly stricken, Thandiwe hesitantly accepted the letter and then watched wordlessly as Elizabeth stalked off toward her room. Just last year Elizabeth had been eager to receive any letters from Nicholas. Now, she wouldn't even open them.

Thandiwe's eyes dropped to the letter in her hands, and she began shaking her head. *What did you do to make her so angry, Master Nicholas?*

* * *

Lunch went spectacularly. Thanks to Edwin's gift of wine from South Africa, and some strategically placed flattery, keyed to deeply held insecurities that George had unwittingly revealed in his autobiography, Edwin was practically bosom buddies with the man. The details of the sale were hardly broached, however, and Edwin was getting the impression that his business trip was turning into a long distance social call. But, he didn't want to be the first one to start discussing business, so he waited. To his relief, after the bill for lunch came and Edwin paid for it—he'd insisted despite George's protestations; it was an old sales technique: make the client feel like he owes you something—George suggested that they go to his office to talk about Lawrence's investment.

George's office was large, but cluttered. The walls were lined

with sports trophies, academic certificates, diplomas, and pictures of George with various celebrities. None of the celebrities Edwin had ever heard of, but George spent a few minutes pointing them out and exaggerating the fame of the individuals pictured with him. Edwin made the appropriate oohs and aahs.

Eventually, George directed him to a black leather couch with matching leather armchairs that overlooked the dull gray urban sprawl below. They sat down across from each other in the armchairs, and Edwin placed his hat and briefcase on the coffee table between them.

George began, "I'll be frank with you, Edwin. The only reason I'm even considering this deal is because I'd like to repay Lawrence for a favor I owe him. We can use the hides, certainly, but apart from settling the personal debt I owe, there's absolutely no reason for my company to buy them at greater than their market value. In fact, this decision could get me into a fair amount of trouble with my board of directors."

Edwin nodded. "I understand, and believe me, Lawrence, myself, and the whole of Western Tanning greatly appreciate the sacrifice you're making."

"Good. Then you won't mind if I contact Lawrence to be sure that he hasn't changed his mind."

Edwin hesitated. "Of course, but I don't see why he would have . . ."

George shrugged. "If you knew the extent of the debt I owe, you'd understand. I need to be sure that as far as Lawrence is concerned, this will make us even. It's been a weight on my mind for some time."

Edwin nodded, frowning. He was tempted to ask what that debt was, but if George wasn't going to volunteer the information, then it would be prying to ask.

George rose from his chair. "If you'll excuse me, I'll just make the call. Would you like my secretary to get you something to drink while you wait?"

Edwin shook his head.

"See you in a minute, then," he said, and headed for the door to his office.

Edwin watched George Colton leave. He was a short man, around five foot seven inches. Somehow that hadn't stopped him from accumulating sports trophies, but that was probably

because he was built like an ox—thick across the chest, and everywhere else, too. It was like seeing a rugby player who'd had something heavy land on his head and knock six inches off his spine. Edwin caught himself smiling at the thought.

It occurred to him to wonder why George hadn't used the phone in his office. That was rather strange. Perhaps there was something he had to say to Lawrence that he didn't want just anyone to hear? Edwin wondered if it had to do with the debt he owed. Just what sort of favor had Lawrence done for the man?

It was a curious matter. More curious still, what would George find out from his phone call? Edwin hadn't made contact with anyone at the tannery, least of all Lawrence himself, since their unfortunate encounter at Cape Town International.

Edwin drummed his fingers nervously on the armrest of his chair. His head turned to the window to watch the scene below while he waited. It had begun to snow. Giant, fluffy, white flakes were fluttering down through a pale blue-gray sky. *Beautiful.*

Fifteen minutes later, when Edwin heard the door to the office open again, he turned from the window and saw George come striding in. George didn't even bother to close the door behind him. Sensing something amiss from that, and the briskness of the man's pace, Edwin stood up. George was a little pink in the face, as if he'd been running. His nostrils were flared and his jaw was set so that his lips formed a thin line. The expression seemed to Edwin to have a contemptuous twist.

George came to a stop when he reached the armchair where he'd been seated earlier, but made no move to sit. He just stood there, silently staring at Edwin.

Feeling uncomfortable, Edwin spoke. "So, what did Lawrence have to say?"

That elicited a short smirk from George, but he quickly wiped the expression from his face and allowed a patient smile. "Apparently, Lawrence Stevens no longer works for Western Tanning." Edwin's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You didn't know?" George asked, inclining his head to one side, his smirk returning. Edwin shook his head dumbly, and George made a noise in his throat that sounded something like a growl.

"There must be some mistake. When I—"

"There is. Your being here." George smiled again. He stepped to one side, clearing a path for Edwin to walk between the leather couch and chairs, and gestured to the open door of his office. "I'm afraid we have nothing else to discuss."

"But—"

"Goodbye, Mister Smythe."

* * *

As Edwin walked through the revolving doors of the office building, out into the freezing cold, he was barely conscious of the snowflakes falling and melting in his hair. He made his way slowly down the sidewalk, searching halfheartedly for a taxi. It didn't take long for his hands to start freezing through his leather driving gloves, and his three-piece suit wasn't much help for the rest of him. Five minutes later he was shivering, and he couldn't feel his fingertips, but at least he'd found a taxi. As he was climbing in, ducking to avoid knocking his hat off on the roof of the cab, he realized he didn't have a hat. He must have left it on the coffee table in George Colton's office.

Edwin couldn't have cared less. He had far more important things to dwell on—like how and why Lawrence had been fired. There was the matter of the bad investment for which Edwin had come to Canada in the first place . . . if the board had somehow found out about it . . . *But only Lawrence and I knew about that.* Short of an audit, Edwin doubted the board of directors could have found out so quickly.

The cab driver requested a destination, and Edwin specified the Holiday Inn on Bloor Street West. It was about halfway there that it finally dawned on Edwin what had happened to cost Lawrence his job, and the whole rest of the way back to his hotel, as the cab wove through traffic and sloshed through the slush and muck to get there, Edwin could think of just one thing: *Lawrence lost his job because of me.*

Chapter 26

George Colton sat at his desk, staring across his office to the door where Edwin had departed not five minutes before.

The nerve of him! Coming here, after what he did, to capitalize on a favor I owed to the very man he knifed in the back. George's jaw clenched at the thought.

When he had called Western Tanning to get hold of Lawrence Stevens, his secretary, Martha, had told him that Lawrence had been fired three days ago. He'd then called Lawrence's home—as much to offer his condolences as to find out how he'd been fired. Lawrence had answered on the sixth ring, just as George had been about to put the phone down. He remembered . . .

"Hello?" The voice was Lawrence's. He sounded awful.

"Hello, Larry, it's George, from Canada. I just heard from your secretary . . . she tells me you've been let go?"

Pause.

"Yes."

George hesitated. "I'm sorry to hear that." Long seconds of silence followed. "Are you still there?"

George heard coughing on the other end, followed by the sound of Lawrence clearing his throat. "I'm here."

"Listen, Lawrence, I've got your assistant, Edwin Smythe, here right now. We were just about to work out the details whereby my company would purchase those bovine hides that Western Tanning is holding. Under the circumstances, do you still want me to—"

"Edwin is there?"

"Ah . . . yes."

"And you haven't signed anything yet?"

"No."

George thought he heard laughter on the other end of the

phone. Under the circumstances, it seemed like a strange reaction.

“Good. Don’t sign anything. If you still want to repay me, all I ask is that you find some way, somehow, of paying Edwin back for what he did to me.”

George’s frown deepened, his brow drooping until it hooded and shadowed his eyes. “What did he do?”

Lawrence had proceeded to explain everything. George had been aghast. He still was. And now he, George Colton, had been tasked with making things right. He steeped his fingers on the desk in front of him, and glanced to Edwin’s hat where it lay on the coffee table between the chairs where they’d been sitting earlier. Perhaps Edwin would come back for it, and then he’d have the pleasure of denying that he had it.

George smirked at the thought. It wouldn’t be much, but it was a start. With half a world between him and Edwin Smythe, it wasn’t going to be easy to effect any sort of justice, but he had time on his side and a wealth of resources to draw upon. Besides, any sort of justice he could devise would probably end up costing him far less than buying the hides would have. There were some ethical and legal considerations, but George had no qualms about those. As Edwin himself had proven, there were plenty of *legal* ways to hurt a man, and as for the ethical considerations—Edwin had wormed his way into Lawrence’s confidence, pretending to be his best friend, all in order to steal his job. Who could mind repaying such treachery in kind?

* * *

Half an hour after getting off the phone with George Colton, Lawrence found himself in his study, sitting at his desk. He knew what he was going to do; he’d spent the whole day contemplating it, but before he did anything, there were some loose ends to tie.

One day, when they were old enough to understand, his daughters would deserve an explanation. He didn’t want them to think ill of him. Of what he was about to do.

Opening the bottom right drawer of his desk, Lawrence took out three blank sheets of paper and three envelopes. The first two letters would be to his daughters, to be given to them . . . *much later*, he decided. Lawrence paused for a moment,

thinking what he should write. Surprisingly, it didn't take him long to find what he wanted to say.

Not wanting to give cause for jealousy, he merely duplicated the letter for Julia, using her name instead of Lydia's. He placed each of the letters in an envelope, writing instructions on the envelopes for when their contents should be read. They wouldn't need to be addressed; he'd just leave them in a place where they would be discovered later.

The third and final letter would also need no address, but that was because he was going to deliver it himself. Edwin wasn't going to get away with what he'd done that easily, and he certainly wouldn't be able to forget. Taking up the third envelope, Lawrence wrote on the front of it: *A reminder*.

When he was finished with the third and final letter, Lawrence sat back in his chair and heaved a shaky sigh. He felt numb, and his eyes felt scratchy and swollen from crying, but it was done. Lawrence felt a strange warmth spreading through his veins. For a moment the feeling confused him. It felt like—

Peace?

Then he noticed the glass at his elbow. There were still a few millimeters of brandy in the bottom. He had to laugh at that. *Peace, indeed. No. There's no peace for the wicked—or so the Good Book says. Well, Edwin, if that's true, then I'll be in good company, won't I?*

Lawrence smiled grimly to himself, and with that, rose shakily from his chair. Now standing, he snatched the envelopes from his desk and turned to leave the room.

As he left, his foot caught on the leg of his chair and he almost tripped. He scowled viciously down at the chair, then gave it a kick. He was gratified to see the chair tip over, but was immediately sorry when it thumped noisily to the floor.

With a grimace, Lawrence checked his watch. It was almost nine o'clock. Mary had put the kids to bed over half an hour ago, and he didn't want to wake them. Especially not tonight. He shuffled to the door of his study, envelopes in hand, and turned out the light. Now there was only one thing left to do—no, two.

He had to find his pistol.

And use it.

* * *

When the cab pulled up to his hotel, Edwin climbed out and almost forgot to pay. It was only when the cabbie yelled out behind him: "Hey, come back here! That's three seventy-five!" that he turned around and favored the cab driver with a dull look. Abruptly, Edwin's eyes lit with comprehension, and he paced back to the cab and passed a five through the window. He didn't bother to wait for his change before turning around again. He simply didn't care.

Lawrence had lost his job, but he had lost it because of *him*. As he thought back on it, Edwin could only come to one conclusion: the story of their fight in the airport must have made it into the newspaper. One or more members of the board of directors must have read the story . . . and that was that. No company could afford to have its managing director knocking people unconscious in airports. That was the very worst kind of publicity. Instability in a company's leadership implied and often meant instability in the company itself.

Edwin sighed and pulled open the door to his hotel. He needed a drink. Badly. If he recalled correctly, there was a bar right inside the hotel. Standing just inside the door, he looked around the lobby until he found a sign with an arrow that read: *Fox & Fiddle Pub*.

Perfect.

Edwin started forward, angling for the sign. He checked his watch. Only 2:15. He fervently hoped the pub would be open.

* * *

Lawrence strolled down the sidewalk, doing his best to appear nonchalant as he walked past his neighbors' homes. He didn't want any of them to see him and wonder what he was doing. They were all so nosy . . .

It was now quarter after nine. After going to fetch his pistol, he'd spent 15 minutes in his bedroom with the lights off, just sitting on the bed, gazing at the glistening silver barrel and turning the gun over and over in his hands. But all that contemplation had done nothing to dissuade him.

The streetlights shone down weakly from above, casting everything in a warm, coppery glow. Lawrence felt anything but warm. It was a night like any other at the end of summer—temperatures hovering comfortably around 60 degrees, but that made no difference. The blood in his veins had turned to ice.

Step after fateful step, he drew inexorably closer. He recognized every tree, hedge, and shrub along the way. He crossed the street, turned the corner, and kept on walking. His current neighbors gave way to his old ones, and now he was in even more familiar territory. Finally, he came to the house he was looking for. There, across the street from him, all on one level, and sprawling in its size, was his old home. A bigger yard, nicer finishings—in every respect superior to the home he had now. No wonder Becky had been so angry with him when he'd agreed to trade.

Now that he looked back on it, he was angry, too. When they'd been working out the details for the trade, Edwin had said nothing in his defense, and offered no remuneration for the difference in value between the two homes. Lawrence had thought at the time that it was because his friend was too spineless to stand up to his wife. Now, in retrospect, he realized that even then Edwin had been taking advantage of him. He'd simply used his wife to take the blame—but how else to ensure that it didn't reflect poorly on their friendship? No, he needed to be squeaky clean, right up until the end.

Well, Edwin, you're not going to have a chance to enjoy your ill-gotten gains. Lawrence smiled grimly, his eyes traveling over the length and breadth of the house. There were no lights on as far as he could tell. He'd timed it perfectly. It was after nine, so the kids would be in bed, and Edwin wouldn't be back for a few days yet, which meant that the only one likely to still be up was Constance.

It hadn't taken Lawrence much thought to realize that the perfect form of revenge had to involve Edwin's wife. It was unfortunate that she had to suffer for his misdeeds, but real justice was rarely neat and tidy. Besides, she wasn't exactly blameless. Lawrence remembered well her part in trading homes. She'd been Edwin's willing accomplice all along.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Lawrence started across the street. It was time to finish what he'd come to do. As he reached the other side of the street, Lawrence reached into the inside pocket of his wrinkled, gray suit to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. His fingers found the letter there, then travelled down until they encountered the cold, steel barrel of his pistol.

Satisfied with that, Lawrence went up to the mailbox, which

stood out front of his old home. He withdrew the letter from his pocket, opened the mailbox, and popped the letter inside. That done, Lawrence proceeded down the familiar walkway which led to the front door of his old home. He soon departed from the walkway, however, making his way instead across the lawn and around the side of the house to the backyard.

There was a curious fact about his home, which he doubted Edwin had known to fix. The sliding glass doors which led from the master bedroom to the patio outside didn't lock properly, and if one so much as jiggled the lock, it came undone.

When Lawrence reached the backyard, he saw that the lights were on in the living room. It was easy for him to see in, but from his angle he couldn't yet tell if anyone was in there. He knew from experience that it would be almost impossible to see out with the lights on, but just in case, he walked down to the pool to put some distance between him and those broad, gleaming windows.

Once there, he turned to look back up at the house. Now he could see Constance, sitting in a chair in the living room, drinking a cup of tea. She was oblivious to his presence. He stood there for a while, watching her, unconsciously buying time. He was aware of his pulse racing, of the cold sweat that had broken out all over his body, but he felt oddly detached about it—as if this were not real, and he wasn't really here.

Somehow believing that made it easier, and Lawrence found the will to continue, but before he actually started on his way again, he saw Constance's head turn. She was looking straight at him! Lawrence's heart froze. She'd seen him. He was sure of it.

But no, she wasn't looking *directly* at him—rather, it seemed, at something in the yard. And she was smiling. Would she be smiling if she'd seen someone lurking in her backyard? Lawrence let out a breath—

And quickly caught it again as Constance's gaze found his—for real this time. Her expression changed instantly, but it was hard to tell *how* at this distance. A primal burst of adrenaline spurred him into motion, and he hurried toward the master bedroom. It was now or never. He had to act before Constance had a chance to wonder what she'd seen.

* * *

Fifteen minutes earlier: as Thandiwe was going home she'd

decided to give Nicholas's letter to Constance, complete with an explanation of Elizabeth's reaction to it. Because of Constance's prior warnings about "coddling," she hadn't dared to talk to Elizabeth about the letter, but there was nothing stopping her mother from looking into things.

And that's exactly what Constance did. She accepted the letter with a smile, and as soon as Thandiwe was gone, she looked into the envelope to read its contents. Elizabeth had asked that it be burned, anyway, so she'd never know that it had been opened. Yet, the letter had shed no light on her daughter's reaction.

Puzzled, Constance had gone to the kitchen, made herself some herbal tea, and then taken both the letter and her tea to the living room for further contemplation.

At the moment, however, she sat sipping her tea and enjoying a few moments of peace and quiet before she went to bed. The girls had left hours ago to go on a school camping trip, so she had the entire house to herself. A rare treat.

Constance raised her teacup to her lips, savoring the warmth against her hands, and the therapeutic scent and flavor of the tea. For just a moment, Constance allowed herself to revel in her success. Here she was, in Lawrence's home, with Edwin coming home in a matter of days to take over for Lawrence as the managing director of Western Tanning. And now that Edwin and Lawrence were no longer friends, Edwin would be spending much more time at home with his family. Her dreams were finally coming true.

Unfortunately, Constance's appreciation of all of that was dimmed by her still-lucid memory of the frightening episode she'd had early that morning—and endless thoughts of what could possibly have caused it. Upon reflection, she'd decided that she must have been dreaming. It was ridiculous to give credence to it: a shadowy creature, a crushing weight on her chest, paralysis . . .

No, those were the trappings of children's nightmares, not reality. She must have simply missed the part where she'd woken up afterward. Nevertheless, Constance felt a chill creeping down her spine. Some called her superstitious, but some things, inexplicable things like luck, fate, premonitions, and dreams were merely expressions of the supernatural. *And we ignore those at our peril.*

Frowning at herself, Constance pushed the nebulous fears from her mind, and allowed her thoughts to drift back to what had brought her to the living room in the first place—Elizabeth’s strange reaction to Nicholas’s letter: “*Burn it!*” There was nothing revealing about the contents, and certainly nothing objectionable, but according to Thandiwe, Elizabeth hadn’t even read the letter before she’d said that. So, something had to have happened before she’d received the letter to make her angry with Nicholas. *But what?*

Perhaps she would simply ask Elizabeth when she got back from her camping trip. Then again, perhaps she wouldn’t. In a way, it was truly fortuitous that Elizabeth had somehow been turned off of Nicholas. It saved her the trouble of finding some way to effect that outcome herself. Elizabeth couldn’t afford any distractions from Charles. He’d be coming back to South Africa in a few months, perhaps to stay—definitely to stay, by the time Constance was done—and Elizabeth couldn’t allow her heart to be torn in two directions when that happened.

While Constance had been of the opinion that Nicholas was a better match for her daughter than Pieter, Charles was almost certainly a better match for her than either of them. Constance smiled to herself and cast a glance over to Nicholas’s letter on the end table beside her. *Why look a gift horse in the mouth?*

As Constance’s gaze drifted away from the letter, she caught sight of her reflection in the living room windows—her still-smiling face was distorted by the reflection and mirrored in washed-out colors, making her look far older than she remembered herself. Vanity taking hold, Constance began to look away.

And that was when she saw him—just the barest glimpse of a face, and the outline of a man standing down by the pool. He was staring up at her. Constance’s heart began thudding in her chest, and her face went slack with shock.

And then the man was gone, and Constance was left staring at her own reflection again.

Constance shook her head and blinked a few times; then she peered more closely through the windows. With the light on beside her, it was next to impossible to see through the reflections.

Had she imagined it? After thinking she’d woken up that morning and finding herself confronted by a shadowy phantom

at the foot of her bed that had seemed no less real, Constance couldn't be sure. Was this another nightmare? Perhaps she'd fallen asleep in her chair.

Constance pinched herself to ensure she was awake. The pain registered, so she wasn't asleep. What had she seen?

Setting her teacup down, she turned off the lamp on the end table and got up from her chair. Pacing over to the windows, she searched the backyard for any sign of the man she'd seen.

There was nothing; just the starlit patio, and the steps leading down from it to the night-black lawn and the quietly rippling waters of the pool beyond. Constance sighed and rubbed her eyes. She was tired. She must have imagined it. It was time to get some sleep.

* * *

Lawrence managed to jimmy the lock on the sliding door to the master bedroom, just as he saw the light spilling from the living room go out. *What?* Lawrence felt his blood pressure ratchet up a notch. Constance shouldn't have been going to bed so early, but why else would she turn out the light?

If she was going to bed, he had just seconds to get inside, otherwise he'd be discovered too soon and Constance might find a way to stop him.

Lawrence quickly slid the door open, stepped inside, and brushed past the curtains. He turned around, reached through the curtains, and slid the door shut behind him. The door connected with its counterpart with a soft *clang* that sounded far louder to Lawrence's ears.

It had been loud enough.

"Who are you! Identify yourself!"

Lawrence started. The voice belonged to Constance. He turned slowly around, a fresh sheen of sweat forming on his brow. "Watch it! I have a gun!" he heard her say.

In the darkness of the room, it was impossible to see if Constance was bluffing or telling the truth, but, ultimately, what did that matter?

"So do I," he replied, and drew it from his pocket.

* * *

As Edwin drove back through Paarl on the way to Wellington, he anxiously considered his options. His flight from London to Cape Town had been canceled, but the airline had managed to squeeze him aboard an earlier one. Unfortunately, that meant

he had arrived in Cape Town two hours earlier than expected. Constance wasn't going to meet him at the airport, so there were no complications there, but now he was arriving home early, and he had no desire to do so.

The sooner he got home, the sooner he'd have to tell Constance all the bad news—how Lawrence had lost his job, and how the business trip had all been for nothing because George Colton could no longer repay the favor he owed Lawrence by buying Western Tanning's bad investment. It didn't matter that it wasn't his fault. Edwin knew his wife would blame him anyway.

She'd be disappointed, and her disappointment was nothing to trifle with. Delaying *that* as long as possible, was high on his list of priorities. So, as Edwin drove home, he found himself stopping off at the tannery to collect his wits first. It was Monday, so the tannery was open. He wasn't expected there until tomorrow, but that just meant that he wouldn't have to do any work. It struck him as strange to be taking refuge from home at work, but then again . . . what was normal, anyway?

Edwin pulled into his parking space, right beside Lawrence's, and tried not to notice that Lawrence's space was empty. Putting his white Mercedes in park, Edwin turned the key, killing the idling roar of the engine, and then left the vehicle.

It was then that he noticed the squad car in the parking lot. Edwin frowned, wondering, *What are the police doing here?* It didn't make any sense. His brow pinched in thought, Edwin walked up to the entrance of the tannery, passed straight through, and headed for the elevator at the back of the entrance hall. Offices were on the third floor. He punched the button in the elevator, watched the doors close, and waited patiently for it to open again.

The doors opened, revealing a short, brown-walled stretch of hallway that turned left around a corner. Feeling faintly apprehensive, Edwin walked from the elevator, down the hall, and turned the corner.

The sight that greeted him was both shocking and expected. He'd already known from the squad car parked outside that there were police at the tannery, but to see them questioning Martha, and to see that one of them was wearing a suit rather than a uniform, meaning he was probably a detective—that was unexpected.

Edwin tried to steady his suddenly shaking hands and legs as he continued down the hallway toward the desk where Martha sat. There were two uniformed policemen standing in front of her desk, their backs turned to him; the third man, the detective, was standing beside them, with a pen and a pad of paper, taking notes. Martha was looking up at them, her expression blank with shock. As Edwin drew nearer, she noticed him, and her head turned his way. There wasn't even a glimmer of recognition. It was as though she hadn't seen him at all.

The detective caught Martha's gesture first and turned to see Edwin coming down the hall. The two policemen turned their heads now as well and fixed him with grim looks. Edwin stopped in front of the trio and tried to ignore the sniffing he heard coming from Martha's direction.

"May I ask what's going on here?" Edwin asked, his frown heavier than ever. Something was definitely wrong.

The detective offered a weak smile that might have been intended to look sympathetic. "Certainly," he said. "But first, perhaps you'd like to help us."

Edwin nodded. "If I can."

The detective subtly shifted his grip on his pen and pad of paper, and then asked, "Who are you? And what's your connection to Lawrence Stevens?"

Edwin shook his head, unsure where this line of questioning was going. "I'm Edwin Smythe, Lawrence's assistant—or I was, until he was fired."

The detective's face flashed with shock, and he exchanged a slow glance with the policeman nearest him. After a long moment, his eyes found Edwin's once more. "Edwin *Smythe*?"

"Yes, that's what I said."

The man hesitated. "I'm afraid I have some very bad news for you, Mister Smythe."

Edwin gave the detective a hard look. "What do you mean?"

The detective was frowning again. "I think we'd better discuss this in your office."

"If you insist," Edwin said, and led the way to his office. As he left, he heard Martha's composure suddenly slip as she broke into loud sobbing. Edwin felt a cold slice of fear slither into his gut. He opened the door to his office, walked in, and held it open for the police.

THE STORY CONTINUES

With a murder mystery, love and rivalry, death and despair, a jilted boyfriend, and a well-buried secret that's just waiting to be uncovered. Now with her two romantic interests out of the picture, and not realizing what her mother's role was in that, Elizabeth starts falling in love with Constance's choice for her, but there's still a small corner of her heart that has fond memories of summers past, and events conspire to set up a meeting between her and Nicholas in the Wilderness again. But will Lizzie overcome her unfounded Jealousy, allowing herself to once again fall into his arms, or will her new romance with the rich Englishman, Charles, preclude that? Lizzie and Nicholas now have the fond memories of two summer romances to draw on, a third could very well tip the balance in Nicholas' favor – and he is most determined to take her in his arms and overwhelm her with his love and passion. Of course, he has another ACE up his sleeve – their "Secret place", their waterfall!

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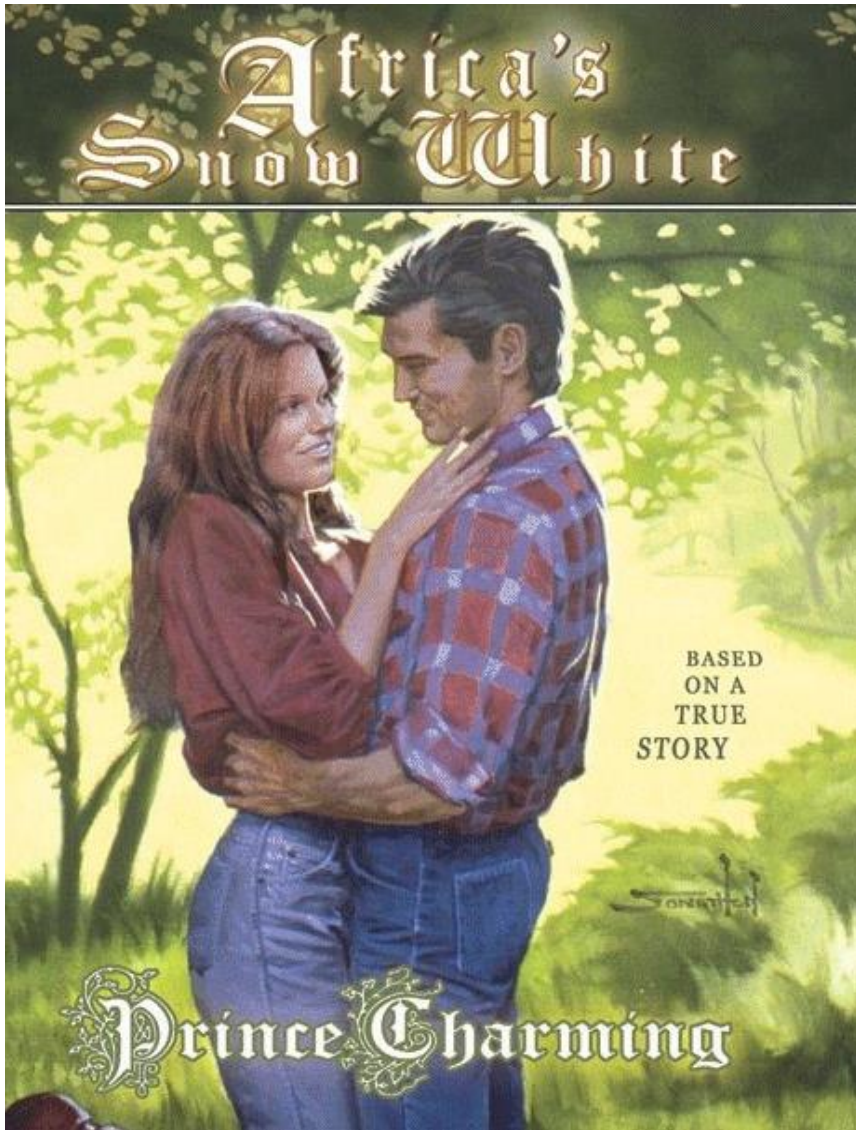
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"Jonathan won some major concessions for these 2nd editions—the right to include some of the more private details of the real-life love story. In the first two novels we encounter healthy suitors aged 16/17, so understanding his relationship to characters within his novels, made this a rather tricky decision! But truth is important for this story and, as happened in real life, it's much stranger (and more entertaining) than fiction! So some characters reluctantly agreed to shed the safe veneer of "youthful innocence" they've enjoyed so far in his novels, and co-wrote those scenes for Jonathan. The mysteries have barely begun to unfold. We've seen the home swap (which happened—it's a matter of public record) and we've just witnessed a tragedy with far-reaching consequences (The grave-stone's real) But worse yet, we are about to see Constance's covert control of Elizabeth's personal life intensify—with sad consequences for Nicholas and Lizzie - but just maybe she's not the one really in control? Maybe some Force far stronger than her was manipulating her, even getting her to inadvertently introduce them in the first place? Time and these novels will reveal how that all ends." -**Safely Anonymous**

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