

# WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT *Africa's Snow White,* ***PS. I Love you!*** (The 4<sup>th</sup> novel in this series)

"I'm pleased to see my prediction, of a sequel to Jonathan's first novel, come true. I'm delighted to see the characters from his first book mature in his new novel and go on to experience all the ups and downs and challenges of making one's way in the South Africa of that time, of trying to come to terms with living in a country as divided as it then was. I look forward to seeing how Jonathan deals with the challenges faced by so many individuals and families in South Africa in his upcoming novels. Once again, the references to St. Andrew's School evoke many memories for me from my own years as a student in Bloemfontein. Although I was not at St. Andrews, my father was head of the old boys' association, and therefore, by osmosis, I got to know something of the school and knew many of the pupils and teachers of the 1960's. St. Andrews, which was founded in 1863 in the old zuid-afrikaanse republiek, has seen many changes taking place around it over the years. I hope that Jonathan's books attract many students from abroad to this wonderful school. Jonathan, we are proud of you, keep up the good work and I look forward to the next in the series." —**Ambassador Leslie Manley**, Ambassador from South Africa to Panamá, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Perú

"An alluring tale of love and deception. Jonathan displays exceptional skills painting vivid scenes for the reader. A great escape that will have you glued to your seat."  
—**Dr. Sylvie Raymond**, English Lecturer, UAE University

"Eloff's second novel is an excellent sequel that will leave you wanting to know more about this intriguing story. You're guaranteed to lose sleep as you keep turning the pages late into the night." —**Jody Hussey**, ESL Teacher

"Fear and hope, sadness, love, and conspiracy, all centered around one family, set in the romantic scenery of South Africa. When you remember his first wonderful novel, *Summer Love - Jealous Winter*, immediately you recognize and appreciate Jonathan Eloff's unique style of writing. Every word comes out of his heart, but he leaves one question open for his readers: What's in this princess's future?"  
—**KARIN FORSTER**, German Journalist and Talk Show Moderator

"In my capacity as editor in chief of a large German news organization, I often interviewed world leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Mikhail Gorbachev. My wife and I have met this talented young author and shared some wine with him, and again I find that some of the most interesting stories are found when interviewing the people affected by the decisions of these world leaders." —**KURT FORSTER**, Editor In Chief, Rhein Zeitung (Retired)

"In his new book, *Prince Charming*, Jonathan Eloff offers vivid, masterful description and colorful insights into the continuing the saga of the two generations introduced in his first book. The innocence of young love contrasts sharply with scenes of vindictive treachery, as this amazing story unfolds. I am intrigued by the young folk as they strive to work out the usual pangs of romance, dismally thwarted by Constance, who contrives to manipulate her world and everyone in it. The plot cleverly navigates some incredible twists and turns as the characters attempt to build their own lives with only a limited awareness of Constance's determination to control every possible outcome. Ultimately, as Constance manages to conquer her own demons, her daughter, Elizabeth, comes to realize a critical truth of her own. Once again, Eloff has cleverly created a page turner with some unexpected and often surprising results." —**Margaret Wolf**, High School English Teacher, Canada.

"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**

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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 v4

*P.S. I Love You!*

**By:** JONATHAN ELOFF (Some 2<sup>nd</sup>. 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. 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.



*This is very much my mom's story (she's the blonde lady-I inherited her blonde hair) so it was rather tricky for me to write! I've been present at 2 of 3 of her weddings, and she at mine, so I think I can finally do it justice. Plus I enlisted her & her husband's help in writing all the original love-scenes since between you and me, I just can't get myself to do that! So now those will be as romantic as they originally were. My mom's still chauffeur-driven in a classic black Mercedes limo, complete with lace-upholstery, and flag. All this information should keep you rather confused as to who my mom is, who she married, who I am and even where we've lived. Good! I wouldn't want to give anything away!*

## Vol-4: ***PS. I Love You!*** (Paperback)

**By:** JONATHAN ELOFF (Some 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. scenes co-written by Nicholas Strauss)

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Nicholas (1974) is drafted into the air force, Lizzie is finishing Gr-12. Constance is determined that this love story end now, and she sets about doing exactly that. Lizzie fights back, inviting Nicholas to visit with her in Wellington, just days before he's off to war. Hindsight may be 20-20, but love is blind, so neither of them suspects foul-play.

# 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've grown-up in boarding schools—especially to those boys who have attended St. Andrew's School; all 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 all those people around the world who found true love and discovered it was out of reach but went on reaching for it anyway; and lastly, to all the many victims of life's villains, which includes the man and his family, shown here in this photo of Harvey's tombstone, the real-life "Lawrence" - with his surname obscured to safe-guard the identities of his two remaining children ... his two little girls.



*It would be many years before the pieces of the puzzle came together, as the only innocent witness left alive, Elizabeth, wasn't talking about any of what she knew - until one day when she really had no choice, but that happens much later in this series. For now we must be content with discovering what Elizabeth does know, whilst Constance must be content with believing that Elizabeth knew very little and understood even less! She was determined that it all remain as their secret, but to do so meant keeping tight control of her daughter. When Elizabeth finally started talking, the mystery unraveled. It was sobering, then, to discover one grave, not two - with Harvey's ashes and tombstone places on top of his little boy's grave - Father and son together forever.*

# rologue

**S**outh Africa, 1952: Amelia Pilkington sat on the back of Patrick's motorcycle, her legs gripping tight to the sides of the vehicle, her arms wrapped securely around Patrick's waist, and her body pressed close to his. Her wavy, medium-length, brown hair was flaring behind her in the wind, dust and grime were building in layers upon her clothes and exposed skin, and the loud, incessant whine from the motor-cycle's engine was steadily reverberating through every fiber of her being, making her rear and legs numb. It was hardly the comfort she was used to traveling in, but she was feeling so nervous about her destination that she scarcely noticed the means by which she was getting there.

It was getting dark, and she'd been sitting on the back of Patrick's motorcycle for the past four and a half hours, stopping only occasionally for gas, to relieve themselves, and to stretch their legs.

But Amelia knew that the discomfort of the journey was nothing compared to what would follow. She bit her lip, contemplating what she would do, what she would say—how she would explain herself.

She was going home with the man whom her father had forbidden her to see; with the man who had won her heart despite her best efforts to prevent it; and with the man whom she had just last night gone out with instead of Walter—Walter who was her father's choice for her; Walter, who had driven five hours from Indwe to Port Elizabeth to see her; Walter, whom she had stood up; and Walter who was supposed to have driven her home to Indwe this morning. Instead, he'd been so enraged by her behavior that he'd left without her. Her father

had probably heard all about it by now. He was good friends with Walter's father, and she was already hours later than expected.

She sighed, allowing herself to feel a shred of remorse for the way she had treated Walter. She hadn't intended to go out with Patrick last night, in fact, she had been determined never to see him again, but his dogged persistence had finally paid off. Patrick had come unexpectedly to her residence, asking the receptionist to see her, but when the receptionist had called up to her room, Amelia had explained that she didn't want to see him, and rather to let her know when a man with glasses arrived—for Walter wore glasses and Patrick did not. The receptionist had then ruefully informed Patrick that she, Amelia, did not want to see him. But, evidently, he had charmed and wheedled that receptionist until she had revealed to him the "man with glasses" criteria. Armed with this information, Patrick had returned twenty minutes later, wearing the requisite glasses. The sympathetic receptionist had then happily informed her that "a man with glasses" had arrived, and Amelia, not knowing any better, had gone down to see him.

She smiled at the memory, remembering how silly Patrick had looked wearing those stupid bottleneck glasses and how she had laughed in spite of herself as he had bumped and stumbled around the foyer to reach her. She also remembered how he had begged, flattered, and waxed poetic until her heart had melted and she had finally—on a crazy, last-second whim—decided to go out with him instead of Walter. It hadn't taken Patrick long to remind her of why she had fallen in love with him in the first place.

She continued smiling on the back of Patrick's motorcycle, even for a second forgetting her stiffness and fatigue, as she thought merrily to herself: *Patrick . . . witty, exciting, handsome, charming Patrick!* He was nothing like Walter, who in her estimation was as dull as the dietary requirements of a snail. Of course, Walter had other things going for him, such as the fact that he was heir to an enormous family fortune, held in trust for him until his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. By contrast, Patrick came from a relatively poor family . . . *with equally poor connections*. But what did that matter? She was in love with Patrick, not Walter. Her father would understand. She would



just have to tell him, that's all. She had made up her mind. She was going to marry Patrick. Her father would be angry at first, but over time he would learn to live with her decision.

After all, it was *her* decision ...

Before long Patrick turned down an old, rural road and then a few minutes later pulled into the driveway of a large, forbidding, Victorian-style, stone mansion with ramparts for walls and rounded, cone-roofed towers rising to varying heights from three of its four corners. Slowing to a rattling stop at the end of the circular driveway, Patrick turned the key in the ignition and hopped off of his motorcycle. Extending a hand to her, he helped her off the back of the motorcycle to stand on her own two shaky legs.

Amelia felt as though she could still feel the vibration of the motorcycle's engine rippling through her. And whether from exhaustion and sitting for so long on the pillion seat of Patrick's motorcycle, or from anticipation of the coming confrontation, Amelia couldn't get her legs to stop shaking as she walked with Patrick to the front door of her home.

Patrick turned to her as they walked, and noticing the apprehension in her eyes he said, "Don't worry, Amelia, I'm sure he'll understand. He is your father, after all, he just wants you to be happy. When he sees that this is what you really want . . . he'll relent."

Amelia sent him a precarious smile and nodded. Then they were there, hesitating before the twin, dark wooden doors of her home, spotlighted by the pair of gold-cased lanterns which flanked the doors like wary sentinels guarding their master's keep. Amelia raised a hand to the heavy iron door knocker on the leftmost of the two doors, but before it even got there, one of the heavy oak doors swung wide to reveal—

Her father. His face was a livid red as he stood before them, blocking the door, with veins pulsing warningly at his temples and in his neck. His eyes flashed behind his thick, black-rimmed glasses, and they met Amelia's hesitant gaze. He stared at her for a painfully long and silent minute. Amelia stared unflinchingly back, her head held high, her shoulders stiff. Eventually, Patrick couldn't take it anymore. He had to say something.

"Good evening, Mister Pilkington," he said, greeting her father.

Slowly, deliberately, Morris Pilkington turned to regard Patrick. His mouth twisted contemptuously, his eyes blazed, and then he abruptly scanned Patrick from head to foot, as if measuring to see just how far short of the mark he fell. With a final twist of his upper lip, Morris Pilkington turned his eyes back upon his wayward daughter.

"You *dare* to return home with *him*?" Morris demanded, enunciating each word with deadly precision.

Amelia met his gaze, her face betraying nothing of the fear she felt shivering down her spine. "Yes, father, I dare." Of all the ways she had imagined this going, this was by far the worst.

"How could you—"

"How could I live my life?"

"—after all I've done for you!"

"Yes, Father, how could I!"

Patrick watched as Morris's face reddened still further. "You wretched girl! Do you know what you've done? You'll be lucky if you haven't entirely squandered your chances with Walter."

"So what if I have?" Amelia demanded.

Patrick wouldn't have thought it possible, but Morris's face turned an even darker shade of crimson. "So what?" The old man gritted his teeth and the veins in his neck and temples bulged. "So *what*? He thundered.

Amelia lifted her chin still higher as if to elevate herself to eye level with him. "Yes, father: So. What." Morris's eyes flashed once more, and Patrick felt a sudden urge to run. "I don't love Walter. I never did. He was your choice, and this—" She turned to Patrick and nodded smilingly at him. "—is mine."

To Patrick's unending surprise, Morris burst into a spluttering laugh and some of the color drained from his face. "Don't be ridiculous, darling." He turned to Patrick. "It was—" He struggled to find the right word. "—*nice* of you to drive all this way to drop my daughter off after she so unwisely chose to snub her future husband for you, but as you can see, your presence is no longer required. Naturally, I'll be only too happy to compensate you for your trouble and expense. Shall we say a hundred *Rand*?" Edwin opened his mouth to object. Morris cut him off with a nod. "No, you're right, two hundred. Just to show you that there's no hard feelings." *And to ensure that I*

*never come back*, Patrick thought. "I'll go get my check book." Morris turned to go inside.

Amelia's mouth was fully gaping. "Father . . ."

He stopped in the doorway, but when he turned around it was to address Patrick, not his daughter. "What am I thinking? Of course, you'd prefer cash, wouldn't you?" he asked of Patrick, his eyes glittering dangerously, as if promising what would happen if Patrick refused the generous offer. For his part, Patrick was stunned into a stupefied silence. *He's trying to buy me off . . .*

"Father!"

"Well, what about it, boy?"

"I—" He turned to Amelia, who was staring at her father in open, seething shock, and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Perhaps it would be better if I left so that you and your father can discuss this privately. . . ."

"Patrick," she whispered back through gritted teeth, tearing her eyes away from her father for a second. "I assume you have a spine lurking about your person somewhere?"

Patrick reflexively stiffened and frowned, but his reply was interrupted before it began by Morris's next words. "Don't give the boy foolish notions," he said, proving that their whispering had done nothing to prevent him from hearing them. "It really *would* be best if he just left."

Amelia turned back to her father and was about to give him her ultimatum, when Patrick cleared his throat meaningfully. Both sets of eyes leveled upon him, and he said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Pilkington, but I'm afraid I've not come all this way just to return your daughter to you. I've come to humbly ask for your permission to marry her."

Morris flinched as if he'd been slapped and then he did a double take. "*You . . . you must be joking!*" He studied Patrick with a penetrating frown, as if hoping to determine that the boy really was making some poor attempt at humor. Patrick met his gaze with as much sincerity and determination as he could muster, and the silence ticked by for several long seconds before Morris spoke again. "You've come to *humbly* ask? Well, *dear* boy, you're right about that! Please, make no effort to lower yourself any further in my esteem, for you would soon become a slithering snake!" Patrick opened his mouth to object, but then Morris rounded on his daughter. "Do you

mean to tell me that you've accepted a proposal from this . . . this . . . *mouse*?"

Undaunted, Amelia nodded once, curtly. "I have."

Morris was left blinking rapidly as if to wake himself from a nightmare. His eyes flicked between his daughter and proposed son-in-law, then back again in utter disbelief. Finally he leveled his gaze upon his daughter again, his expression still and stolid. "Very well." His voice was quiet as he said it.

"Then we have your permission to get married?" Patrick asked, unable to hide the sudden lilt of hope and surprise in his voice.

Slowly, Morris's head turned to him. "No, you do not have my permission. I forbid it."

"It is not within your power to forbid," Amelia returned.

"We're only going through this archaic ritual of getting your approval as a matter of decorum. We'll be married with or without your consent."

Suddenly livid again, Morris stared at his daughter for a long while, his chest rising and falling rapidly with barely contained rage. When he finally spoke, it was to Patrick's unending relief that he refrained from shouting. "Take care, Amelia, for if you do this, you'll be on your own. I will tolerate no perfidy. Therefore, make your choice, and make it well."

"Mister Pilkington—" Patrick began.

"Silence! This is her choice. Let her make it."

"Morris, dear? What's going on?" A high voice asked from the darkened recesses of the Pilkingtons' mansion. A second later, Amelia's mother appeared in the doorway behind Morris.

"Nothing that concerns you, Edith. Go back inside," Morris replied without turning his head.

"Amelia? . . . Patrick?"

Patrick watched Mrs. Pilkington's gaze flick between the two of them, her face readily betraying her confusion and alarm as she took in the scene before her.

"I said go back inside!" Now Morris's head did turn, and he fixed his wife with a threatening look.

Hastily, she retreated from sight, but perhaps, not from hearing.

Grimacing, Patrick glanced at Amelia, thinking that by now there must certainly be some sign of indecision on her face.

There wasn't. She was, to all appearances, calm and

unaffected by her father's threats. And when she spoke, her voice was even and betrayed not even the slightest quaver. "I have already made my choice," she said. "And it was always *mine* to make. All that's left is for you to decide is how you're going to respond to it."

The old man pressed his lips into a thin line, then nodded, and the color drained from his face. Now, with the sudden pallor of his skin matching that of his thin, white hair, Morris looked far older than his sixty eight years—old, wizened, and very, very tired. His reply came back to them almost as a whisper. "So be it. But you, my girl, will spend the rest of your life trying to recover what you've so foolishly cast aside. . . . and I—" The old man's back began to turn and he took a step inside. "I shall forget I ever had you." With that, Amelia's father closed the door in their faces. Patrick was aghast. How could any father treat his daughter so heartlessly? Slowly, numbly, he turned to his fiancée, certain to see tears coursing down her cheeks—even he was struggling to keep his welling tears at bay. But what he saw on Amelia's face ended that struggle for him and paved the way for one solitary tear to meander down his dusty cheek.

Rather than being heartbroken by her father's rejection, Amelia was still and quiet and her eyes were dry, if a little red. To all appearances, she was fine and nothing was amiss. It was one of the things he loved most about her. *Nothing can break her spirit.*

When she turned to meet his gaze, she even smiled—briefly, wanly, but it was still a smile. She had just chosen him at the expense of her family, and yet she had still managed to summon a smile for him. No anger, no ill will, no blame directed his way. She was confident in her choice. Confident in him. It made his heart ache, and fired him with a determination and ambition he rarely felt—a feeling that he could do anything, anything at all, if only he knew he'd be doing it all for her.

"Come on, Patrick. Let's go," Amelia said, holding her hand out to him. Patrick marveled that it wasn't even shaking. His hands were. They were also clammy with sweat, but hers was dry when he took it in his and led her from the steps of her home back to his motorcycle. It dawned on him that this was probably the last time she'd ever descend those steps, and yet,

knowing this even more surely than he, she didn't even look back; she simply climbed onto the back of his motorcycle, and waited for him to drive her away from the only home she'd ever known.

Patrick climbed onto the seat in front of Amelia with Morris's final words echoing through his mind: *I shall forget I ever had you*. Grimacing against the memory, he kick-started the engine and felt his fiancée clasp her arms tightly around his waist. Silently, Patrick vowed that he'd make it all up to her. He'd be as supportive and understanding as he could in order to make up for her father's lack on those accounts. He'd make her every dream come true and prove himself worthy of the sacrifice she'd made for him. And someday, somehow, he would become the kind of man that her father might gladly have agreed to let his daughter marry. *That will show the old windbag*. . . .

Somehow . . . he thought, as he revved his motorcycle and drove off into the night. *Somehow* . . .

# Chapter 1

Constance was worrying her lower lip as she stared down at the phone. She was back in Wellington, having arrived earlier that morning. They always left Swellendam—their halfway stop between home and Siesta—before sunrise, so that Elizabeth and Hattie would spend the journey sleeping rather than fighting with each other.

For her part, Constance hadn't slept very much on the journey home—and barely at all when they had stopped in Swellendam for the night. She'd spent the whole journey home thinking about when and whether she should invite her parents to visit her in Wellington. Another nightmare last night, with her father taunting and belittling her again, had settled the question of *whether* she should invite them. That left only the question of *when*.

Constance went on staring at the phone. She knew she'd have no peace until she made the call, but that didn't stop her from hesitating. It wasn't a simple matter to invite her parents to come visit her. She had made many such invitations in the past, but they had all been spurned because of some or other excuse. Somehow she needed to convince them to accept her invitation this time. She needed to *show* her father how successful she and Edwin had become—how wrong he'd been to oppose her marriage.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then picked up the phone and began dialing. As she dialed the number, her legs began to shake, and as the phone started ringing, she felt them begin to buckle. Grabbing a stool from those arrayed behind her along the kitchen's island counter, she dragged it over to the phone. She sat down on the stool and silently counted the number of rings. *Three . . . four . . . five . . .*

"Hello?"

Constance felt an uncomfortable spike of adrenaline shoot through her, and let out a long, calming breath. "Hello Mom, it's me." She was somehow simultaneously disappointed and relieved that her father hadn't answered the phone.

"Constance?"

"Yes." Constance steeled herself. She wasn't going to get anywhere by talking to her mother. If she was going to get her parents to come visit her in Wellington, she was going to need her father's answer. "Is Dad there?"

There was a long, silent pause, then: "I'm sorry, dear—" There was a strange, but not unfamiliar catch in her mother's voice. "—he's . . . busy at the moment." Her mother couldn't fool her. Constance knew that in that long pause her mother had spoken with her father. And she knew just as surely that he wasn't busy. He'd simply refused to speak with her.

Constance sloughed it off, telling herself she didn't care. "Well, I was just calling to invite you and Dad to come visit us in Wellington—before the school holidays are over. That way you might have a chance to see your grandchildren."

"Oh—" Her mother's voice sounded tearful. "That sounds wonderful, Constance."

"I know it's short notice, but I was thinking if you and Dad could come the day after tomorrow . . ."

Another pause. "Just a minute, dear . . . I need to ask your father if we can make it."

Constance waited in silence for a handful of seconds, her mind racing. She knew what the answer would be—what it had been so many times before. She needed to think of something, anything which might compel her father to visit her—

"We've already committed to be somewhere else the day after tomorrow." The voice on the other end of the line was no longer her mother's soft and soothing alto, but rather a gruff and masculine baritone.

The voice was her father's.

"How about the day after that?" Constance asked.

"The same—already committed."

"Well, if you can't make it before school starts, come afterwards, on a weekend. When would be convenient for you?"

"There is no convenient time. We're very busy."

"With what?"



Her father was retired. Her brothers ran the company now.

"Many things. Perhaps another time. I have to go, Amelia."

Constance gritted her teeth, partly because her father *insisted* on calling her by her old name, and partly because she knew there wouldn't be another time. This was just the latest excuse. Desperate, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"Edwin got a promotion, Dad; he's the managing director of Western Tanning, now. We were hoping you might be able to come and celebrate with us." She winced. The whole point of her parents coming to visit was to *show* them how well she'd done for herself, and now she was blurting it out over the phone.

There was a pause on her father's end of the line. "Just like that? I thought he was still pushing pencils behind a desk in mid-level management. What idiot promoted him that far up the company ladder?" Despite the condescending words, his voice betrayed a hint of suspicious interest that gave Constance hope.

"That was a long time ago, Dad. Edwin has had several promotions since then." Constance had deliberately withheld news of Edwin's promotions from her parents in order to one day shock them with the news. She'd known she would need to impress her father in order to get his approval.

"Huh," he snorted.

"It's a long story. We have a new house, the nicest in Wellington, and new car, too—a Mercedes. And I have my own little red convertible. I know you'd enjoy me taking you for a drive through the vineyards in it. If you come visit us, you could see it all in person." Though most of this was old news to anyone who knew the Smythe family, it was all new to her father. They hadn't seen one another in over five years.

Her father was silent for an uncomfortably long time. Afraid that he was about to refuse in spite of his curiosity, she added, "It would mean a lot to the kids if you came. It's been many years since you last visited. They barely remember you and Mom."

The silence continued for another handful of seconds. "Very well. We'll reschedule our prior commitments. Given your appalling lack of prior notice, we'll have no choice but to fly." *Hardly an inconvenience when you have your own plane,*

Constance thought. "I trust you'll be available to pick us up from the airport?"

"Of course."

"We'll be sure to call you with the details of our arrival, then."

"Excellent. Good—"

*Click. Beep beep beep beep . . .*

Constance withdrew the receiver from her ear and put it down with a trembling hand. "—bye," she whispered.

It was done. For better or worse, they were coming.

\* \* \*

Edwin had dutifully gone to the nearby Stellenbosch municipal airport in their brand-new, bright red Mercedes sedan to meet her parents, while Constance had stayed behind to ensure that her parents' first impression of her new home was perfect. As an extra measure, Constance had insisted that Edwin have the Mercedes waxed and that he wear his smartest suit and tie, even though it was a hot summer's day. She had also told Hattie and Elizabeth to take their bikes and go for a ride through the park—it wouldn't do for her father to be overwhelmed and distracted by his grandchildren while she was trying to impress him with her new home.

Now Constance stood watching her parents arrive from Elizabeth's bedroom window, the curtains drawn slightly back, and the window open so she could hear. She saw her father starting for the trunk of the car, but heard Edwin say, "Don't worry about your bags, we'll send for them to be brought into your room later, after a nice cup of tea on the patio." Edwin was probably thinking to have their part-time maid, Thandiwe, fetch the bags. *Good thinking, dear.* For the duration of her parents' visit, they were paying Thandiwe double to act as their full-time maid.

Constance let go of the curtain and began hurrying to the front door, then she thought better of it and took a seat in one of the living room chairs.

There came a knock at the door, and Constance waited for Thandiwe to get it. When she heard the door open, followed by the sound of Edwin's nervous chatter and Thandiwe's greetings, Constance stood up, taking a moment to straighten her dress and to brush a stray lock of hair away from her forehead. She put on a smile and began striding down the

hallway to the front door.

"Hello, Father—Mother. Welcome to our new home!"

Both parents looked up. There was an awkward silence as she stopped in front of them and they stood face to face with their daughter for the first time in over five years. Constance's mother smiled, her brown eyes shining. She was a small woman with feather-fine, curly white hair, and a bird's nest of crow's feet and laugh lines etched upon her round face. Her mouth opened to say something, then quickly closed again, as though she were too choked up to speak.

Her father was not so visibly affected. His ice-blue eyes narrowed fractionally behind his thick, black-rimmed glasses. There were no crow's feet around his eyes, just smooth, age-spotted skin. He gave a curt nod of his pale, hairless head. "Amelia," he said, the very minimum required to acknowledge her existence.

For lack of words, Constance's mother rushed forward to give her daughter a hug. Audibly sniffing in Constance's ear, she said, "It's so good to see you again, sweetheart."

Her father looked on with a disapproving frown, then found someplace else to look. Constance, made equally uncomfortable by the emotional display, gave a shaky smile and tried her best not to let her discomfort show.

\* \* \*

As she led her parents on a tour of the house, Constance couldn't help but feel a girlish anxiety, like she was showing her parents a report card full of straight A's and was waiting breathlessly for their reaction. Her gaze kept flicking to her father, waiting for his expression to crack. Anything—from a subtle twitch of his lip, to a slight, half nod—could be the cue she was looking for. She could hardly expect him to come right out and say that he'd been wrong all these years, or even to utter a simple "well done," but careful scrutiny of his body language would reveal the truth of his reaction.

By contrast, her mother was being her effusively positive and complimentary self. Constance found it sickening. Her mother's unrestrained emotionalism was almost as grating as her father's stoic silence. Meanwhile, Edwin was being equally irritating with his sycophantic bowing and scraping. That attitude wasn't going to get him anywhere with her father; didn't he know that by now? Her father had had his fill of boot-

licking from his employees. They'd earned nothing but his contempt, and that went double for his son-in-law who'd already earned his irrevocable contempt by marrying his daughter.

Constance led the way into the master bedroom. Her mother pattered about oohing and ahing over every little thing, while her father stood frowning in the doorway. Edwin stopped beside his father-in-law while the women went over the finer points of draperies and bathroom fittings.

When the women disappeared inside the bathroom, Morris spoke: "This is an expensive home."

"Thank you, sir, I—"

"What did you do, steal it?"

Edwin gave a nervous laugh. "Well, actually we..." he trailed off, his brow furrowing as he remembered how they'd traded homes with Lawrence. Constance wouldn't want him to tell her father *that*.

Morris's eyes narrowed and his expression grew curiously mocking as Edwin disappeared into his thoughts. "Your silence is rather incriminating, boy."

Edwin snapped out of his reverie and offered a thin smile. "Sorry, sir, you just reminded me of something—about the home, not stealing it." He let out another nervous laugh. "I'm glad you like the new house."

Morris's expression sharpened. "Who said anything about liking it? I just said it was expensive. So is a root canal."

Edwin started laughing. "So is a root canal! What a witty remark!"

Morris eyed his son-in-law with a mixture of revulsion and disappointment. "It was at your expense."

Edwin shrugged. "I'm not averse to laughing at my own expense."

Morris looked away, shaking his head in disgust.

Once the women emerged from the bathroom, the tour continued, with everyone following Constance down the hall. She swept through the living room and opened the terrace doors. Standing by the open doors, she gestured for her parents to precede her onto the terrace. They both walked out onto the terrace and stood at the top of the steps, admiring the pool, backyard, and view. As Edwin started through the doors after her parents, Constance's hand shot out and grabbed his

arm, stopping him on the spot. She gave him a meaningful scowl and was just about to tell him to stop making such a fool of himself when her father turned from the yard and leveled his steely blue gaze on her—his thick, black-rimmed glasses appeared to magnify his eyes. Constance turned her attention from Edwin, releasing his arm.

Her father's silence was unnerving, and Constance felt compelled to break it with the question that had been preying on her mind ever since showing her parents into her new home. "Well, what do you think?"

"It looks like ill-gotten gains to me," he said.

Constance froze, her mouth hanging half open, her heart pounding in her chest.

*He knows.*

*Shut up. No, he doesn't. That's impossible.*

*Why? It's obvious that Edwin could never have made it this far on his own. He doesn't have it in him. Your father knows this better than anyone.*

Morris frowned as his daughter. "What's the matter with you, cat got your tongue? Your husband had the same reaction when I suggested that he must have stolen this home. If I didn't know that it was impossible to steal a house, I'd believe it on the strength of your two reactions alone."

Constance started laughing, a little too loudly, as if her father had just cracked the funniest joke in the world. "Really, father, sometimes you do say the most peculiar things! I'm glad you like the home," Constance replied, choosing to interpret his comment as optimistically as possible. Her father opened his mouth to say something, but his wife cut him off.

"It's absolutely lovely, sweetheart!"

Constance nodded and smiled appreciatively at her mother. "Would you like a cup of tea? One simply cannot properly enjoy the terrace without one."

"Now there's a splendid idea!" Constance's mother said. She turned to her husband with a cherubic grin. "Don't you think so, dear?"

He turned his frown upon her. "I'm not sure I share your enthusiasm, Edith." Turning back to Constance, he said, "But, I suppose it'll do."

"I'll go tell Thandy to put the kettle on," Constance said.

As she left, Constance was struck by a sudden apprehension

about leaving Edwin alone with her father. She hoped he wouldn't find a way to make an even bigger fool of himself than he already had.

\* \* \*

"Okay, Patrick, I want to know how you did it."

"It's Edwin, sir."

Morris's face froze, the color rising in his cheeks. Edwin felt an old, familiar stab of fear and resisted the urge to look away.

"Excuse me?"

"My name isn't Patrick anymore. It's Edwin."

Morris's upper lip curled into a sneer. "You'll always *just* be Patrick to me." Seeing Edwin's face flash with annoyance, Morris looked away, satisfied. He gestured to his surroundings. "As I was saying, *Patrick*—the house, the job—particularly the job . . . How long have you been the managing director of that little tannery. . . . What's it called?"

Edwin drew himself up. "Western Tanning, and I've been the managing director there for almost a year now."

Morris raised his eyebrows and fingered his chin thoughtfully. "I see. So they haven't yet had enough time to recognize their mistake."

Edwin just stared at his father-in-law, his mouth opening and closing like a guppy's.

Edith spent a handful of seconds glaring at her husband, then abruptly turned to Edwin and asked, "Where are the girls? I thought they hadn't gone back to school yet."

Edwin reluctantly swallowed the retort he'd been working on and allowed the change of topic. "They haven't, but we instructed them to get out of the house for a couple of hours so that you wouldn't be overwhelmed when you arrived."

"Oh. That's a shame. I don't think their presence would have been overwhelming. . . ."

"Nonsense," Morris said. "In this instance Patrick is uncharacteristically right. There's nothing worse than being beset by a pair of noisy, undisciplined children after a long journey."

Edwin ignored the remark about his children and nodded to emphasize their seeming agreement.

Edith appeared to ignore her husband as well, saying, "Well, I hope they return shortly. I'm simply dying to see them! It's been what, five years?"

"Five and a half," Edwin corrected.

"Such a waste," she replied softly, as if speaking to herself.

The conversation lapsed into a blameful silence, in which Morris glared at his son-in-law and Edwin made a pretense of being fascinated by the view of the Gröenberg—an extinct volcano, its sheer sides blanketed with lush greenery. Eventually, Edwin broke the silence and forced himself to meet his father-in-law's gaze: "Well, you practically live at the other end of the country. It's a long way to come."

"Oh, it's not so very far when you have your own plane," Morris said, dismissively waving his hand. "Just a short flight away. Quite a pleasant journey, too, when you love to fly as much as I do." Morris gave Edwin a thin smile.

"Ah, of course . . . that would make a difference." Edwin went back to gazing at the horizon, counting the seconds until Constance came back.

He didn't have long to wait. In the time it took for him to blink, his wife swept out onto the terrace with Thandiwe. The servant woman was carrying a large wooden tray, complete with teapot, cups, milk, sugar, and a plate of biscuits.

"Sorry I took so long returning," Constance said. "I had to ensure that Thandiwe made the tea properly."

Morris flashed his daughter a smile. "Naturally. *Competent* help comes dearly."

Edwin noticed Thandiwe's shoulders stiffen as she poured the tea. Constance sat down in the empty chair beside Edwin and returned her father's smile, pretending not to have noticed his suggestion that they couldn't afford good help.

It was only a couple of minutes after Thandiwe had poured everyone a cup of tea that Elizabeth and Hattie came bustling out onto the terrace, giggling and grinning like the pair of schoolgirls that they were. Constance cleared her throat and sent them each a stern look. They quickly bottled their enthusiasm.

But there was no bottling Edith. "My goodness, look at you two!" she said, standing abruptly from her chair and almost spilling her tea. "Come, come—" She gestured hurriedly with her free hand. "—both of you, come closer, so I can see you better!" They did as they were told, their grins slowly returning. "My, how you've grown! Elizabeth, look at you! You've grown into a beautiful woman already. And Hattie, the last time I saw

you, you were still a girl. How old are you now? Fifteen, sixteen?"

"Fourteen," Hattie replied, giggling.

Edith shook her head with wonder. Her face was almost glowing. "Well! This is simply too much!"

Morris was frowning over the rim of his teacup. "Sit down, Edith. You're making a spectacle of yourself."

She turned to her husband with eyebrows raised. "Am I?" She paused for a couple of beats, then nodded curtly. "Good! You should try it once in a while, Morris. It's enormous fun!"

Edwin laughed, almost choking on a mouthful of tea. Morris shook his head disgustedly and averted his eyes as Edith went back to fawning over her grandchildren.

\* \* \*

Constance stood in the hallway, her ear pressed firmly to the guest bedroom door, listening to her parents' conversation. In the privacy of their room, speaking to one another, there would be nothing to restrain their candor. Her parents had gone to bed early, saying that they were tired from their trip. Edwin and the children had likewise gone to bed—Edwin because he had work tomorrow, and the children because they weren't allowed to stay up past nine.

"I'm telling you, Edith, it doesn't make any sense. There's no way that that dim-wit . . . that lazy *oaf*, could have managed all this."

"That lazy *oaf* is your son-in-law and your daughter's husband. And whether you wish to believe it or not, he's managed to make a success of himself."

Constance heard her father give a derisive snort. "No, there has to be another explanation. There's something they're not telling us. Did you see the look on Amelia's face when I said it all looked like ill-gotten gains? She's hiding something. I wonder if Patrick really *is* the managing director of that tannery, or if he's merely found some creative way of skimming money out of the company—although, that would imply a lurking intelligence which he clearly doesn't possess."

Her mother's sigh was audible even on the other side of the door. "Face it, dear, you just don't want to admit that you've been wrong about Edwin all these years."

"I'm never wrong, and it's *Patrick*, not Edwin."

"Yes, yes, though I don't see why you insist on calling them



by their old names.”

“Because those *are* their names!”

“So are Constance and Edwin. They had them legally changed when they married.”

“What difference does it make?” her father erupted. “Call them by whatever names you wish; they’re still the same foolish children!”

There was a moment of silence, and Constance strained to hear as her mother’s voice came back, soft and soothing. “Exactly. After all these years, what difference does it make?”

“It’s the principle of the matter, Edith. They adopted their middle names as a way of thumbing their noses at me—as if they were saying: *look, we can do whatever we want and you can’t do a thing about it!*”

“Let them have their individuality, Morris. Just let them be. They’re not going to change their names back just because you think it was disrespectful. They have a right to live their lives the way they want to, don’t they?”

Her father gave another snort.

Edith went on, “Whether you like it or not they’ve been getting along fine without us, and your petty scorn isn’t going to change that. All you have to decide is whether you want them to continue getting along without us, or whether you’d rather be a part of their lives for a change.”

There was another long silence, in which Constance found herself listening to nothing but her own heartbeat. Eventually, her father broke the silence.

“I don’t buy it. Five and a half years ago Patrick was stuck in middle management, barely able to handle even that responsibility, and now, all of a sudden, Amelia calls us with the news that he’s the managing director and has a new house, car, caravan, and who knows what else!”

“You’re impossible!” Edith said.

“No, I’m being perfectly rational. I know what it takes to succeed in business. Some people have it, others don’t, and Edwin is one of the don’ts.”

“Don’t you mean Patrick?” Edith replied sweetly.

“Whatever! I’m going to look into it when we get home, and mark my words: I’ll find out that Edwin is not, and has never been, the managing director at Western Tanning!”

“Find out, or make it so?”

"Find out! If by some miracle I'm wrong, I'll be happy to admit it."

Constance heard her mother give a snort of her own. "Turn out your light, dear. I'd like to get some sleep if you don't mind."

Constance listened for a few more seconds just to make sure that that was the end of her parent's conversation, then she turned her ear away from the door and walked on shaky legs down the hall to the living room.

*He knows.*

*No, he doesn't—he suspects.*

*What's the difference? The result will be the same.*

Constance sat down on the couch, staring wide-eyed and unblinking at the bar counter at the far end of the room.

*And what result might that be?*

No answers were forthcoming.

What could her father possibly find out, besides the truth of how wrong he was? *Edwin is the managing director.* Constance smiled. *Maybe not wholly by his own efforts, but not even Edwin knows that. So, what will you think, dear father, when you find out? Will you finally admit how wrong you've been?*

Constance laughed out loud. He would have no choice but to admit it. And she certainly wasn't going to wait for her father to return home for him to discover that. She wanted to see the look on his face.

Getting up from the couch, Constance turned off the lamp on the end table, plunging the room into darkness. Walking with an almost bouncing stride, she headed back down the hallway, past her parents' room, and on to the master bedroom.

She was going to sleep soundly tonight.

\* \* \*

"Oh, dear! Edwin forgot his lunch. I'm going to have to find some way to get it to him." Constance closed the refrigerator door and turned to face her father. He was sitting on a bar stool at the island counter, reading the morning newspaper. "Well, since Edwin took the convertible to work today and left us with the Mercedes, we could all go out to lunch, drive by the tannery, and deliver it to him then. What do you think, Father?"

Morris raised his eyebrows and peered over the top of the newspaper at her.

Constance smiled. "There are a lot of quaint little restaurants scattered through the vineyards. We could go to one of them."

Morris's eyes narrowed fractionally, then he shrugged and returned his attention to the newspaper. "Saves your maid the trouble of making lunch—"

"Yes, that would be a welcome reprieve for her, I'm sure."

"—and us the trouble of eating it," Morris finished, turning the page.

A scowl flickered across Constance's face. She quickly hid it. "Well, I'll go tell Mom and the girls, then."

Bustling out of the kitchen, Constance allowed the scowl that she'd been suppressing. It had taken all of her self-control not to rise to her father's bait. *He can be so impossible sometimes!*

She sighed, forcing herself not to get worked up over it. It wasn't important. She could suffer his little barbs. It would all be worth it just to see the look on his face when he saw the title on the door of Edwin's office.

Her father was so sure of himself, so positive that Edwin couldn't really be the managing director. He would see.

She hadn't told Edwin to forget to take his lunch for nothing.

\* \* \*

"Hello, Martha. Is the managing director in his office?" Constance hefted a brown paper bag. "He forgot his lunch this morning."

Martha flashed Constance a pleasant smile. Her eyes traveled briefly over Elizabeth, Hattie, Morris, and Edith. "It takes all five of you to deliver his lunch?" Martha asked, her eyes widening with amusement.

Constance sent her father a sidelong glance to check for his reaction. He appeared confused. *That's right, Father, I just referred to Edwin as the managing director, and his secretary didn't find that strange! I wonder why that could be?*

Constance returned Martha's smile. "We're just on our way to lunch ourselves."

"I see, well, don't let me hold you up. Go on in."

"Thank you." Constance walked up to Edwin's door and stopped in front of it. She frowned up at the gold nameplate, which read: *Edwin Smythe, Managing Director*. Reaching up, she used her thumb to wipe an invisible smudge from it.

"There, that's better," Constance said and cast a look back

over her shoulder, again checking her father's reaction. She was just in time to see her mother giving him a smug look. Her father's brow was furrowed all the way up to the top of his round, hairless head as he stared suspiciously up at the nameplate on the door.

Constance savored the moment for a couple of seconds before opening Edwin's door and delivering his lunch. He pretended to be pleasantly surprised to see them.

On their way back out of the building, Constance couldn't help but rub it in a little. "Did you see what a nice office Edwin has now that he's the managing director?"

Morris gave a snort, but said nothing.

"Oh, yes, it was lovely, dear!" came her mother's reply.

Constance ignored her mother's praise and smiled inwardly at her father's reaction. *What's the matter, Father, cat got your tongue?*

As they passed through the foyer, they walked past a familiar-looking, silver-haired man. He cast them a lingering glance as they passed one another. Then his eyes widened in recognition and he stopped, turned, and called out: "Mrs. Smythe?"

Constance stopped and turned. "Oh, hello, Mister Gaines. What brings you to Wellington?"

William Gaines covered the space between them in two quick strides. "Company business." He nodded to her parents and children. "I didn't realize it was bring-your-family-to-work day."

Constance gave him a patient smile and made the introductions, finishing with her father.

Morris shook hands with the chairman. "Is the Board sorry for promoting my son-in-law, yet?"

William Gaines gave Morris a strange look, and then, thinking he must have been joking, he smiled. "No, actually we're quite excited to have him as one of our managing directors. He's a natural: personable, diligent, insightful, and he's had some exceptional ideas about how we might increase the profitability of this company in the future."

Morris was incredulous. "Patrick?" He all but spat the name. "Are you sure we're talking about the same person?"

Mr. Gaines frowned. "No, who's Patrick?"

Morris quickly shook his head. "Sorry, I meant Edwin."

"Ah. Yes, we are talking about the same person, then. You

can be very proud of your son-in-law, Mister Pilkington. He's a real winner."

Morris's expression grew even more bewildered, but Constance was absolutely beaming. She was really starting to like the chairman.

William Gaines nodded to them. "Well, it's been nice talking to you all, but I really must be going."

They said their goodbyes, and the chairman was just turning to leave when Edith said, "Well, Morris, don't you think you have something to say to Amelia?"

The chairman froze and slowly turned back to the group. Constance's face paled and her eyes widened with terror.

"I'm sorry," the chairman began, "I couldn't help but overhear. Who's Amelia?"

Edith tilted her head curiously to one side, as if that were a stupid question, then her eyes abruptly lit with comprehension. "Oh, silly me, I meant to say Constance! Amelia is our daughter's . . . *other* name." When the chairman arched an eyebrow at her, Edith added, "It's a long story."

"I see," William said. He began nodding absently, as if deep in thought, then a grin formed on his lips and he erupted with, "Well!" and turned to face Constance. There was a wild look in his eyes. "Life is full of strange little coincidences, wouldn't you say, *Amelia*?"

Edith glanced back and forth between Mr. Gaines and her daughter. Morris was staring at his daughter with a curious frown, but Elizabeth and Hattie appeared oblivious.

Finally recovering from her shock, Constance cleared her throat and replied: "I'm not sure I know what you're talking about, Mister Gaines."

"Really?" he asked, his eyes narrowing. He ran his fingers along his chin, as if deep in thought. "It's strange; when I first met you, I spent quite some time trying to decide where I'd heard your voice before. And now I remember! It was a year ago, almost to the day. I had an interesting telephone conversation with a Miss Amelia . . . but that couldn't have been you, could it? No, of course it couldn't! That must have been some other Amelia, because this woman was a *Miss*, and you're clearly a *Mrs.*"

Constance opened her mouth to say something, but William Gaines held up a hand and cut her off. "No, don't say anything.

The mistake is all mine; please forgive me. But I'm sure now you can see why I said that life is full of strange little coincidences."

There was an awkward silence in which Constance stared stolidly at the chairman, her impassive face belying a furiously beating heart, and cold, sweaty palms. The chairman was staring right back at her, his face beaming with an apologetic smile.

"Well, now I really *must* be going! I hope to see you again soon, Amelia—I mean Constance. *Tot siens, mense!*"\* And with that, the chairman spun on his heel and walked briskly away. Constance watched him go, her eyes glaring daggers into his back while she focused on calming her racing heart.

"What a strange man. . . ." Edith said once he was out of earshot. "Well, shall we go to lunch?"

Constance didn't move a muscle, and Morris, who was still staring curiously at his daughter, didn't either.

"Well?" Edith queried again.

Morris wasn't about to let it go at that. "What in the blazes was that all about?"

Constance slowly shook her head. "I'm not sure. . . . I think he's had too much coffee."

"Hah! He's as loony as a duck! Now I see how your husband got to where he is—the chairman is a fathead!"

"Morris!" Edith whispered sharply. "That's not nice. And besides, someone might overhear, and then you'll get Edwin into trouble."

Morris waved his hand dismissively at her, and started for the entrance of the building. "Let's go." The others followed him in leaving, but Constance stayed where she was for just a moment longer, watching as, across the foyer, the elevator doors opened to admit the chairman. He turned around to punch the number of the floor where he was going. In the process, he noticed her watching him, and tossed her an overly friendly wave before the doors closed.

*He knows.*

And for once, Constance didn't disagree.

\* \* \*

"Hello?" Martha said, pinning the phone between her shoulder

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\* *Tot siens, mense*: goodbye, people

and her ear as she struggled with some paperwork on her desk.

"Is Edwin there?"

"Mrs. Smythe?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Weren't you just here?"

"I was, but something's come up, and now I urgently need to speak with my husband."

Martha paused. "Well, I'm sorry, but he's just stepped out with Mister Gaines. I believe they had some business to discuss. Is everything okay over there?"

Now it was Constance's turn to pause. Her mind began racing with the possibilities. If she was right, if Mister Gaines had figured out from her mother's untimely slip of the tongue that it was she, Constance, who had betrayed Lawrence, then he could be relating the details of that betrayal to Edwin at this very moment.

And there was nothing she could do about it.

Constance had hurried home straight after lunch, having rushed everyone through their meals in order to get home and call Edwin, and for what? She was too late.

"Hello, Mrs. Smythe? Are you still there?"

Constance was speechless; her eyes had glazed over. The telephone receiver slipped from her hand and clattered to the floor. It bounced up on its cord and began swinging like a pendulum.

## Chapter 2

“Come on, Nicholas! She can go faster than that,” Denise said, bringing her palomino stallion around and trotting back to where Nicholas was plodding along atop an old, white mare.

“No, I’m pretty sure she can’t,” Nicholas said, smiling sympathetically down at the horse Denise had given him to ride. Truth be told, the horse probably could go faster; he just didn’t want to push his luck. While it was true that his family had a stable and a few horses of their own, he’d never spent much time riding them. When he and his brother were younger, they’d asked their dad for a pony, and had received an unequivocal “no.” But years later when their sister had asked for a horse, she’d received two, a stable, and a stable boy to look after them. Somehow that had soured him on the whole idea, and he’d rarely ever asked his sister for the permission to ride one of *her* horses.

By contrast, he suspected that Denise had some horse blood running in her veins. She’d been riding horses almost before she could walk.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of old Sally,” Denise said.

“Not scared, just respectful.”

“Uh huh.” There was a break in the conversation, and they spent a moment admiring the scenery while riding side-by-side down the road. There wasn’t much to admire: they were riding through the mountains along a dusty, gray gravel road; the mountains were studded with boulders and pebbles; and the only vegetation to be seen was a pervasive carpet of wild, brown grasses with an occasional yellow-green shrub or stunted tree. But what the ground lacked in color, the sky made up for with its bright blue brilliance.

“So,” Denise began, “How was your first day at work?”



"Oh, it was fine, though I think your mother views me as something of a packhorse. She had me offloading supplies all day, and when I was done with that, she suggested that I reorganize the warehouse to fit them all in."

Denise laughed. "She's just getting her money's worth."

"Apparently, and making sure I'm so tired at the end of the day that her daughter is perfectly safe in my company."

Denise giggled. "I'm really glad you decided to come work for us, Nick."

Nicholas looked over at Denise. She was looking right back at him. For a moment, he held her gaze, then he smiled and said, "So am I."

\* \* \*

After supper, Nicholas made his way to the living room where he plopped down in an old armchair. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, letting out a long, slow breath, luxuriating in the comfort of the chair. After spending all day on his feet unloading supplies, and then going horseback riding with Denise, he felt as though every muscle in his body had turned to jelly.

Denise's sister, Rosemary came bounding into the room and stopped in front of Nicholas. Slowly, reluctantly, he opened his eyes.

"Want to help me with my counting? I can count to one hundred now! But . . ." she trailed off, looking down at the floor.

As tired as he was, Nicholas still found the energy to smile. "But?"

Her head came up and there was a hangdog look on her five-year-old face. "I still make a few mistakes."

Nicholas's smile broadened. "I think I might be able to help you with that."

Her expression brightened. "Really?"

Nicholas began nodding—

"Goody!" she said, and leaped onto his lap.

Nicholas stifled a grunt of surprise and pain as his aching muscles were assaulted by 40 pounds of squiggling arms, legs, and hair.

Once she'd settled down, Nicholas began by getting her to count up to 100, saying he would correct her whenever she made a mistake. Denise came into the room just as Rosemary

reached 75. She took a seat on the couch beside the two of them, listening quietly. When Rosemary reached 100, Denise began clapping.

"Very good, Rosemary! But I thought you could already count to one hundred?"

Rosemary scowled at her older sister and shook her head. "No. I still make some mistakes. Nick was helping me fix them."

"Ah . . ." Denise trailed off as she heard the raised voices coming from the kitchen. She turned one ear in that direction and strained to hear. Nicholas did the same.

It was Cathy, arguing with her parents about her boyfriend, Leon—*again*. Denise sighed and shook her head. She was of the opinion that her parents had no business dictating to her sister who she could and could not date. Nicholas couldn't agree more.

"You want to get some fresh air?"

Nicholas hesitated, listening for just a second longer before giving his reply. "Sure."

It was considerably quieter outside, where the only shouting was that of the crickets. They each found a lawn chair on the deck and took it out onto the grass where they unfolded them and sat, looking up at a vast, starry sky. With no streetlights and no clouds to diminish the brilliance of the stars, it felt almost as though they were floating high above the earth, gazing at the stars from space. "There's so many of them!" Denise exclaimed.

"Yeah . . ." Nicholas said, sounding distant. And he was: he'd just been wondering if Elizabeth, way on the other side of the country, might possibly be staring up at the same starlit sky.

It had only been a week since he'd said goodbye to her in Siesta, and he'd had trouble keeping his thoughts off her ever since. His mind kept going around in circles: should he visit her in Wellington? Would it make a difference, or would he just end up losing her anyway? In the end he always came back to one hopeless fact: Elizabeth had Charles, so what did she need him for?

"Hello? Anybody home?"

Nicholas tore his eyes away from the stars to see Denise staring at him, her eyes glittering in the starlight.

"I just asked you a question," she said.

Nicholas blinked. He hadn't heard a thing. "I'm sorry. I got distracted for a minute. What was the question?"

"You seem to be distracted a lot these days. Something on your mind?"

Someone, Nicholas mentally corrected her, but he shook his head. "No, just tired I guess."

Denise snorted. "Come on, Nicholas. You can't fool me. I remember you moping like this the last time you said goodbye to Elizabeth, too."

Nicholas frowned, surprised that he was so transparent. "I wasn't moping last year."

"Not last year, you *domkop*. The year before. The year you met her. You came back from Siesta certain that you were never going to see her again, and you were acting just like this."

Nicholas quieted at that. She wasn't wrong.

"You want to talk about it?"

Nicholas considered that for a second, and then discarded the idea. He didn't want to make Denise jealous. "No, not really."

"Please?" she urged.

Nicholas sighed. "Are you sure *you* want to talk about it?"

"Of course. I wouldn't be asking otherwise."

Nicholas hesitated, looking back up at the stars. "Well, it's just that I'm not going to have a chance to see Elizabeth again for the next two years, and after that . . ." Nicholas stared at Denise again, trying desperately to read her expression through the darkness.

"What?" she asked.

"Are you *sure* you want to talk about this?"

Now it was Denise's turn to sigh. "Nicholas, when did we stop talking to each other about this stuff?"

*As soon as it started making you jealous*, he thought, but didn't say. It sounded callous enough in his head.

"Well . . ."

"It's okay, *really*. I'm not going to get jealous," she said, all but reading his mind.

"You're not?" Despite the darkness, he managed to see her shake her head. Nicholas hesitated before continuing, then took a deep breath and let it out again. "Well, I guess the reason I'm moping is I found out from Elizabeth that she and

her new boyfriend are going to be at university together while I'm in the air force."

"And you think she's going to forget about you?"

"She might not forget, but if I can't be there for her and he or someone else can, then I'm going to lose her." Nicholas paused, collecting his thoughts. Denise waited for him to continue. "She invited me to visit her in Wellington before I go to the air force."

"So, what did you say?"

"I said yes."

Silence.

"But?"

He shook his head. "I just don't see the point of traveling all the way across the country to see her when it's so obvious that we've got no future together."

"Since when did you become such a pessimist?"

Her answer surprised Nicholas. "I don't get it. I would've thought you'd be happy to hear that Elizabeth is a lost cause."

"Not if it's going to make you miserable. If you're really in love with her, then you need to fight for her."

Nicholas frowned at that. *In love with her? Am I?* He'd been about to tell Elizabeth as much just before they'd said goodbye, and at the time he would have meant it, but now the answer seemed a lot less certain. . . .

Suddenly Nicholas realized how unusual it was for his girlfriend to be encouraging him to pursue another girl. Denise was being so objective that he was beginning to wonder if all of her feelings for him had suddenly disappeared.

He decided to play it safe. "Listen, Denise, I'm really not comfortable talking to you about this. I'm starting to feel like a real louse. When we first agreed that we could date other people while we were on holiday, I don't think we were thinking very far ahead."

"So what's changed?"

Nicholas shrugged. "We're not kids anymore."

"Nicholas, we've always been good friends, right?"

Nicholas met her gaze across the darkness, and once more tried to discern more of her expression than just the whites of her eyes.

"Yeah."

"So whatever else happens, let's not lose that, okay?"

Nicholas nodded. "Okay."

"I'm not going to waste my time getting jealous over you and Elizabeth." Nicholas started to say something, but stopped himself, realizing he wasn't really sure how to respond. "You need to decide if I'm the one you really want, and if not . . . then I'm not going to fight it."

Nicholas let out a long, whistling breath. "You're really something special, you know that?"

"Of course, but I still like to hear it," she said with an audible smile. She leaned across the open space between their chairs, and her lips found his halfway there.

\* \* \*

"Where have you been?" Constance demanded. She was leaning against the wall at the end of the darkened hallway. A golden slice of light was spilling through the front door from the streetlights outside, but it quickly narrowed and disappeared as Edwin closed the door behind him.

He sent his wife a curious look that he wasn't sure she could see through the darkness between them. She was just a silhouette to him, hazily outlined by the yellow light of a lamp left on in the living room.

"Didn't my secretary give you the message? Mister Gaines came up from Cape Town because he had some business he needed to discuss with me. He's kept me busy all day."

"Yes, yes. I got the message, though I'd rather have heard it from you," Constance replied. Edwin started to say something, but she cut him off. "What did he talk to you about?"

Edwin blinked, noting his wife's impatient, almost accusing tone. "Business. I already told you that. What's with the tenth degree?"

Constance was silent for a moment, then her voice came back slightly calmer than before. "And that was all?"

"We might have mentioned the weather at one point, but yes the general topic of conversation was *business*."

"And what were you doing the rest of the time, then?"

Edwin set his briefcase down on the floor, loosened his tie, and took off his suit jacket. "Would you mind terribly flicking the light switch over there? I can't see a bloody thing."

Silence greeted his request but he saw his wife's silhouette move, then the overhead lights came on, illuminating the foyer. Edwin blinked against the sudden brightness. "Thank you."

Now that he could see, Edwin looked up to study his wife's face. She looked terrible: her hair uncombed, the skin beneath her eyes hanging in loose folds, her makeup conspicuously missing, as though it had all been cried off. But his wife never cried. "What happened to you?"

"Never mind that!" she snapped. "I don't have time to spend in front of a mirror all day, trying to look nice for you. Particularly when you disappear for a whole day and don't even have the decency to tell me where you went!"

Edwin sighed. "I didn't plan to be gone so long, but Mister Gaines apparently didn't have anything better to do, and after work he invited me to play a round of golf with him. What was I supposed to do—refuse?"

Constance was frowning—outwardly implacable, but inwardly relieved. If the chairman had told Edwin something, Edwin would have said something about it by now. Begging the question, did Mr. Gaines not know, or was he simply keeping what he knew to himself?

"You still should have found some way to reach me," Constance replied, turning her back to him and starting down the hallway toward the living room.

"I *did* find a way to reach you! I had Martha call you to say that I would be home late."

But Constance just kept walking, either not hearing him, or not caring to give a response. He shook his head, frustrated and confused. His wife was being even more unreasonable than usual.

\* \* \*

Monday morning came, but not quickly enough for Constance. Her parents left early, her father claiming that something important had come up and he needed to fly back and deal with it immediately. That was probably just an excuse, but she was glad to see them go. It had been three days and three nights since Mr. Gaines had found out that she was Amelia, his mysterious informant. Those days had been more stressful, and those nights more sleepless, than ever. Her parents' visit had ultimately been a disaster. She hadn't really won her father's approval, though it was too much to expect him to admit that he'd been wrong after all these years.

And now Constance was left with the mess that their visit had caused. Her nightmares hadn't gone away. If anything,

they were getting worse. And now, in addition to everything else, she was even losing sleep from lying awake at night fretting that Edwin would somehow find out from Mr. Gaines what she'd done. That was why she'd been waiting so anxiously for Monday to come. Monday—when the girls went back to school, when Edwin went back to work, when her parents went home, and when she would have the opportunity to drive to Cape Town and see Mr. Gaines in person.

Which was where she was now: in Cape Town, just after lunch time, waiting for the elevator to take her up to the eighth floor of the building where Western Leathers International had its offices. She could have simply called him, she supposed, but she needed to be able to read his body language in order to be *sure* of just how much he knew, and to know beyond a shadow of a doubt what he intended to do with his knowledge. She wasn't sure what she was going to say to the man when she saw him, or even how she was going to get past his secretary to see him without an appointment. All she knew was that she had to find some way to keep him from telling Edwin anything.

Surprisingly, the lack of an appointment posed no problem, and she had no trouble getting in to see Mr. Gaines. Giving his secretary a courteous nod, Constance glided past her desk and opened the door to the Chairman's office. Beyond the door was a yawning space with a large desk, a few leather chairs, and little else. The desk sat in front of a full wall of floor-to-ceiling windows which gave a view of the surrounding city and, in one corner, an unobstructed view of Table Mountain—the long, flat-topped mountain which loomed over the city. Constance took all of this in with a glance, focusing instead on the man seated behind the desk, silhouetted against the brightness of the windows. He was sitting with his back to the view, facing her. She stopped in front of his desk and frowned down at him. He was leaning luxuriously back in his chair, smiling smugly up at her.

"What a surprise to see you here, Mrs. Smythe! Please, take a seat." He freed one hand from behind his head and gestured to a chair on her side of the desk.

Constance reluctantly took a seat in the indicated chair.

"So, what brings you to Cape Town?" He gave her half a second to reply, then held up a hand to forestall her. "No, don't

tell me,” he said, his smile broadening into a grin. “Let me guess: you’re here because you are afraid that I’m going to tell Edwin about that phone call you made last year, regarding his best friend.”

Constance blinked. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She kept her expression blank and her voice a flat monotone. That was exactly why she was there.

Mr. Gaines’s grin faded. He leaned forward, placing his elbows on the desk, and clasped his hands in front of him. “Please don’t insult my intelligence, *Amelia*.” Constance narrowed her eyes, but said nothing. “As it happens, everything you told me last year in that fateful call about the late Mister Stevens was perfectly true—but, also perfectly heartless.”

Constance almost said something, but stopped herself. There was no point trying to convince this insufferable man that what she’d done had been ultimately selfless, and for the good of the company.

“Knowing your husband,” the chairman went on, “I’m quite certain that he wouldn’t understand the inevitability and necessity of the circumstances that you hastened to bring about. All Edwin would understand is that you betrayed his best friend.”

Constance’s face remained carefully blank, but her heart was pounding, and she could feel a cold sweat beading on her forehead. So he *had* figured it out. She spent a moment considering that; then she realized something: he couldn’t possibly know that Edwin hadn’t been involved in Lawrence’s betrayal.

“Edwin got me to call you,” she said. “He felt that you wouldn’t believe it coming from him, and would suspect that he had an ulterior motive for—”

“You’re insulting me again, *Amelia*. I believe you’re aware that I spent all day with your husband on Thursday, obliging him to join me for a game of golf after work?” The question was clearly rhetorical, so she said nothing. “In that time I was able to confirm my suspicion that he has no idea what you did. Or for that matter, exactly how or why Lawrence Stevens lost his job and subsequently took his own life.”

Constance’s jaw dropped. *You fool!* She had to bite her tongue to keep from saying it. “I trust that you didn’t



accidentally reveal anything to him. . . .”

The chairman shook his head. “He’s blissfully ignorant.”

Constance breathed a quiet sigh.

“But frankly, I didn’t need to confirm his ignorance. It’s plain for anyone who knows your husband to see that he would never have done that to his friend—or allowed you to do it for him. The proof of that is in the fact that he covered for Lawrence so well and for so long. In fact, that was in large part the reason your husband was promoted. Edwin had already been doing the managing director’s job in order to cover for his friend. When the board realized that, it was a matter of course to promote him.”

Constance allowed herself a moment to process what the chairman was saying, then tilted her head to one side and narrowed her eyes suspiciously at him. “So why haven’t you told Edwin what really happened?”

“Knowledge is power, Amelia—a fact which you seem to have an unusual grasp of. I have nothing to gain by telling your husband what you did. If I told him, his personal life might very well become as troubled as the late Mister Stevens’s did, and then I and the rest of the board would be forced to select a new managing director for Western Tanning.” The chairman sighed. “A tiresome job.”

Constance began nodding. “I’m glad that you have such a rational outlook. Shall I take it that this means you will keep what you know about the matter to yourself?”

Mr. Gaines leaned back in his chair and said, “Of course.”

Constance visibly relaxed. Her gaze dropped to her hands where they lay shaking in her lap, and she let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding.

“But . . .”

Constance’s head snapped up, and her expression hardened.

The chairman’s grin returned. “Nothing in life is free.”

Constance hesitated, then smiled. “You just told me that you couldn’t afford to tell Edwin, and now you want to blackmail me in exchange for your silence?”

The chairman held up the forefinger of one hand to correct her. “I didn’t say I couldn’t *afford* to tell him, I just said that I had nothing to gain by doing so. While it would be unfortunate to lose yet another managing director, he’s by no means irreplaceable.”

Constance scowled across the desk at Mr. Gaines. "Well, what do you want, then?"

"Nothing." Constance's face had just enough time to register surprise and confusion before Mr. Gaines delivered the caveat: "Yet." The chairman met her smoldering gaze with a grin. "If ever I think of something, however, you'll be the first to know."

"Indeed." The nerve of the man! Trying to blackmail *her*! Constance rose from the chair, sending him an imperious look. She wasn't going to let him intimidate her. She'd deal with him when the time came, just as she'd dealt with Lawrence.

"One more thing before you go, Mrs. Smythe," the chairman said, looking smug behind his big, important desk. "If you were to ask your husband to jump, would he then ask how high?"

Constance's eyes flashed and the chairman laughed. "Never mind, I think I already know the answer. Good." He nodded. "You're going to be worth your weight in gold to me, Amelia. I'll be in touch."

"Thank you for your time," Constance said.

He returned her smile and waved his hand dismissively. "Not at all. I'm glad you came to see me. You saved me the trouble of finding a way to see you myself."

With that, Constance spun on her heel and marched out of his office, her smile returning as she left. William Gaines didn't know who he was dealing with—a mistake he might never have the chance to regret. After all, why settle for making Edwin the managing director when the office of the chairman was ripe for the picking? And she'd be killing two birds with one stone: silencing the chairman and elevating Edwin at the same time. She'd just have to be patient as she waited for the right opportunity to present itself.

*God is just, she thought, and he sees everything. He won't allow me to be trodden upon by fools.*



# *Rivalry*

# Chapter 3

## —TWO MONTHS LATER—

Nicholas was walking up the hill that lay at the farthest edge of the Hepburn family's property. As he strode up through the knee-length grass, watching the ground for hidden rocks that could cause him to trip, it occurred to him that he was just delaying his decision. He'd already put it off for too long. He hadn't received any letters from Elizabeth, but that was because she didn't have his address. She'd only ever written to him in boarding school.

The ball was in Nicholas's court, and there it had lain for the past two months. It wasn't like him to be so indecisive. He had said that he would visit her, but no matter how much he thought about it, it just seemed like a waste of time and money. Elizabeth had Charles, and he had Denise. Why complicate things further?

Reaching the top of the hill, Nicholas spied a nearby rock and kicked it over the cliff. He watched as it tumbled to the river below with an invisible splash, then heaved a sigh and sat down in the long grass. Looking out to the horizon, he watched the sun sinking, slowly spreading a golden blanket of light across a thin veil of white, cirrus clouds swirled against a dark blue sky.

There was a soft breeze blowing, buffeting his windbreaker and pants and bowing the long grass away from the cliff. The rapidly cooling air provoked a shiver from him, and he drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them for warmth. May wasn't the coldest month, but it certainly wasn't the warmest, especially at this altitude and time of day.

A soft, feminine voice sounded out close behind him. "You and your sunsets."

Nicholas turned to look over his shoulder, and smiled up at Denise. Her hair was looking even more golden than usual in

the gilded light. "You caught me. I'm a sucker for a good sunset."

She returned his smile and sat down beside him.

"I would have invited you to come, but I couldn't find you, and I didn't want to miss this. . . ." Nicholas gestured to the horizon.

After a moment's silence, Denise adopted a pouting look. "How many sunsets have you been watching without me?"

Nicholas met her emerald green eyes and flashed a wry grin at her. He began ticking off on his fingers. "Well, there was Monday's, and Tuesday's, and Wednesday's, and . . . oh yeah, Thursday's."

Denise gave him a playful shove. "Hey, that's not fair! I'm at Saint Mary's during the week," she said, referring to the convent in Aliwal North where she went to school.

Nicholas looked back to the horizon. "Don't worry, you're not missing much. Mostly I just come up here to think. I'd probably be rotten company."

"Oh? And what do you think about?"

"Everything."

"Wow, you must be up here a *lot*, then."

Nicholas chuckled. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah. I do."

The conversation lapsed for a couple of minutes, and Denise found herself watching Nicholas as he watched the sunset. He was oblivious to her scrutiny, far away in thought.

Strangely, she thought she knew what he was thinking about. And even more strangely, it didn't bother her as much as it once had. The past four months had been bittersweet for her. She had been able to see more of Nicholas now that he was working for her family, but whenever she saw him, he wasn't his usual optimistic, cheerful self. Instead, he'd been distracted and pensive—like he was now—as if there were a perpetual cloud hanging over his head.

Watching him had been painful. Almost as painful as knowing the reason for his melancholy. He didn't talk about it, except when pressed for details, and even then he tried to spare her those. But she knew. She almost wished she could trade places with Elizabeth just so that he could be happy. That was impossible, of course, but there *was* something she could do.

For both their sakes.

Denise chewed her bottom lip, considering the consequences of what she was about to suggest. Finally, she spoke: "Nicholas, you need to do it."

As if coming out of a trance, Nicholas slowly turned from the view and gave her his attention. "Do what?"

"Visit Elizabeth."

Nicholas gave her a strange look, but said nothing. Growing uncomfortable beneath his unrelenting gaze, she asked, "What?"

"How is it that you always know what I'm thinking?"

She laughed. "It's a girl thing."

Nicholas smiled wanly. "Must be. But what makes you say that I should visit Elizabeth?"

Denise shrugged and looked down at the ground. She began twiddling a long, dry blade of grass around her finger. "You need closure—for yourself and for us."

Nicholas began nodding absently, his eyes glazing over as he disappeared into his thoughts again. Eventually he replied: "I think you're right."

Denise looked up at him and smiled. The wind grabbed a few golden locks of her hair and fluttered them in front of her face. She reached up with one hand and tucked them behind her ear.

For a fleeting moment, all he wanted was to reach out and pull her closer to him, to kiss her and tell her that *that* was all the closure he needed. He frowned, confused by his feelings. How could his heart be pulled in two directions at once? Instead, he reached over with one arm and put it around her shoulders in a friendly embrace. Then he leaned his head on top of hers, and simply said, "Thank you."

She didn't reply to that. The words wouldn't come.

They watched in silence as the golden rays of the sun slipped behind the distant, craggy line of the horizon.

\* \* \*

"Hi, Dad," Elizabeth said as she entered the living room. She'd just returned from a bike ride, and apparently her dad had arrived home from work while she was away. "How was work?"

He looked up from where he was reading a newspaper on the couch. "Oh, hello, Elizabeth. Just fine, thanks."

Elizabeth nodded and continued on toward her room.

"Just a minute," Edwin said. She turned to face him again. "The mail arrived this morning. As I was looking through it, I noticed that there was something for you in there."

"There was?"

Edwin nodded. "Go take a look. I left the mail on the kitchen counter."

On her way to the kitchen, Elizabeth wondered who might have sent her a letter. It wouldn't have been Charles; he'd just call her, which left only one other possibility—

Nicholas. But he hadn't sent her a letter since they'd said goodbye in Siesta, and that was almost two months ago now. Based on that fact, she'd assumed that he'd started having doubts about visiting her, or maybe that he had no practical way to live up to his promise to visit her before he went to the air force. Maybe he was just too proud to say it? It was probably for the best; after all, how would she tell Charles? Elizabeth grimaced.

When she reached the kitchen, Elizabeth found her mother there, preparing supper. She spent a moment looking around for the mail, but all the kitchen counters were littered with food, and there wasn't an envelope in sight.

"Looking for something?" Constance asked.

"The mail."

"I had to clear it to make supper." Constance began chopping a carrot. "It was lying all over the counter. Honestly, sometimes your father is such a slob! He leaves everything lying around and expects me to pick up after him. In future I should just let him live in his mess for a few days and see how he likes it."

Elizabeth endured her mother's rant in silence. When it was over, she asked, "Where did you put the mail?"

"It's in the hallway cupboard," Constance said, tossing the slices of carrot in a salad. Just as Elizabeth started from the kitchen to retrieve the mail, Constance grew curious and called after her daughter: "Why do you ask?"

Elizabeth cast a look over her shoulder as she left. "Dad said there was a letter for me."

Constance watched with a frown as her daughter went. She'd been screening the mail ever since they'd returned from Siesta, looking for a letter from Nicholas. After Elizabeth had so unwisely invited him to come see her in Wellington, Constance had felt it her duty to do for her daughter what she couldn't do

for herself. But no letters had come, and after four months of needlessly screening the mail, she had been forced to reevaluate her opinion of Nicholas. Apparently, he was aware of the hopelessness of his situation and had no intention of fighting it.

*Apparently.*

But now Elizabeth had received a letter from someone. Could it be him? Could he have the gall to send Elizabeth a letter after four months of silence? Why would he do such a thing? It didn't make any sense, but then, not everyone was as rational as she.

For a moment, Constance debated following Elizabeth to the hallway closet. But what could she do even if Nicholas *had* sent Elizabeth a letter? She couldn't very well tear it from her daughter's hands. . . .

\* \* \*

Elizabeth opened the hallway closet, got down on her haunches, and began rifling through the bottom drawer in a chest of drawers inside the closet.

She found the envelope she was looking for near the bottom of the drawer. Reading the return address, she discovered that it was from Sterkspruit in the Transkei, and there was only one person who could have sent that. Her heart gave a little flutter, and all her doubts about Nicholas's visit—Will he? Won't he? Should he?—were suddenly suspended and pushed to the back of her mind.

She quickly withdrew the letter, but in her rush she accidentally tipped a few letters off the top of the pile and they fell behind the drawer. Elizabeth sighed and placed Nicholas's letter on the ground beside her. Reaching in behind the drawer, she strained to get the fallen envelopes. She was just barely able to brush one of them with her fingertips before accidentally pushing it even deeper behind the drawer. Sighing again, she withdrew her arm and sat back, staring at the drawer. She could just leave the envelopes there. *Probably junk mail*, she thought.

*Or they could be important.*

Sparing a glance at Nicholas's letter, she fought her impatience to read it, and reached out with both hands to lift the heavy drawer up and out of the closet. Her cheeks bulged with the effort.



Setting it to one side of her, she peered into the darkened space where the drawer used to be and spied three white envelopes, one leaning up against the back of the chest of drawers, and two lying flat on the tiled floor of the closet. Reaching in again, she withdrew the one at the back and then the other two. She tossed them in the drawer, on top of the other mail, then reached for the drawer again, about to put it back. As she did so, her eye caught sight of the last envelope she had tossed into the drawer, and she paused. That last envelope was covered with dust—a far cry from the pristine white of the other two. Realizing that it must have slid behind the drawer a long time ago and lain forgotten at the bottom of the closet, Elizabeth grew curious.

Taking the dusty envelope out of the drawer, she looked at it more closely. Strangely, there was no return address. In fact, there was no address at all. And no stamp. Elizabeth flipped the envelope over a couple of times. How had it even been delivered? The envelope was completely blank, except for some handwriting on one side. It read:

*A Reminder*

*Strange*, she thought. Maybe it was from her mother—a note or a card she had packed into her father’s suitcase for one of his business trips? Or maybe it was an old memo her father had received at work. Or . . . the possibilities were endless. It could even be for her.

Examining the back of the envelope more carefully, Elizabeth realized that it had never been opened.

*Even stranger.*

Elizabeth bit her bottom lip, thinking: *should I open it?* She didn’t think it was for her, but she couldn’t discount the possibility. *It can’t be too important*, she reasoned, *since it hasn’t been opened after all this time. . . . What could be the harm in reading it?* Elizabeth scanned up and down the hallway to make sure that no one was watching. Once she was sure that no one was, she slipped the envelope beneath Nicholas’s.

Quickly hoisting the drawer back into place, she closed the closet doors, picked up the pair of envelopes beside her, and hurried to her room. Once there, she closed the door behind her.

Leaning up against the door, she let out a long breath and stifled the urge to giggle. It was silly, but her heart was pounding and she felt lightheaded with exhilaration. Walking over to her bed, Elizabeth sat down with her back to the door. As curious as she was about the unaddressed letter, she opened Nicholas's letter first. It didn't have the same forbidden appeal, but she was just as curious about what it would say.

Her eyes scanned from side to side, reading Nicholas's letter. He made some excuse about being very busy now that he was working. She didn't really believe it, but whatever the reason he'd taken so long to write to her, he had written to her now. That was all that mattered.

As she got to the end of his letter, her eyes lit up, and she began reading faster:

*I've been thinking about your invitation to visit you in Wellington before I go to the air force, and it occurred to me that I could visit you sometime during winter school holidays, at the end of June. How would this work for you? I'd like to visit for a week if possible, but I'd have to leave on the train for Pretoria on the first of July, at the latest, since I need to report to the Academy on July 3rd. Well, talk to your parents about it and let me know!*

*Love,  
Nicholas*

Elizabeth's heart was doing double time as she considered the implications of Nicholas's letter. He really was coming to visit her!

*Which means, I'm going to have to explain to Charles. . . .* She frowned, that thought tempering her excitement. He didn't even know about Nicholas—she hadn't found a way to tell him yet. She bit her lower lip, thinking hard. Now she had no choice; she would have to tell him. And even if he was okay with it, Nicholas's visit would still be awkward. She didn't want the two of them to meet, and she certainly didn't want Charles hanging around while she was with Nicholas. So the only way to make it work, would be to tell Charles to stay away while Nicholas was visiting. That wasn't going to be easy to do without hurting his feelings.

And, of course, she'd have to talk to her parents. Her mother wasn't going to be happy. . . . Ultimately though, it was good news. Elizabeth let out a sigh and lovingly folded Nicholas's letter back into its envelope.

As she did so, she noticed the other envelope, a dull white against her pink bedspread. In her excitement over Nicholas's letter, she'd almost forgotten about the mysterious *Reminder*.

Smiling, she set Nicholas's letter aside, then took up the unaddressed envelope, opened it, and started reading. . . .

*Hello Edwin,*

*By the time you read this I'll already be dead. Thanks to you. No, don't stop reading, you little worm. After all you've done, you can at least have the decency to admit it to yourself: it's because of you that I'm sitting here, about to fetch my pistol. Maybe you don't care that it's come to this, but maybe, just maybe, you have some shred of a conscience left. If that's the case, then may this letter haunt you.*

Elizabeth gasped and stopped reading. Her smile had faded, replaced by a heavy frown. The letter didn't make any sense. Who had her father known that had wanted to commit . . .

*Suicide.*

With a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, Elizabeth's eyes skipped down to the bottom of the letter and read the signature. She gasped again. The letter was from Lawrence Stevens.

Elizabeth was feeling lightheaded again, but the accompanying nausea made it quite a different feeling from before. She continued reading:

*You, of all people, knew what I was going through and still you betrayed me! Tell me, did you have even a pang of guilt as you told the chairman all the gory details? I suppose you said that I was guilty of dereliction of my duties, that you'd been forced to prepare my presentations for me, covering for me while you let me take all the credit. You probably explained that you'd been happy to do all of that until now. Until you found out that I'd risked all of the company's savings on a rapidly depreciating investment. Then, of course, you couldn't keep silent any longer. For the good of the*

*company, you had to say something. And when it came time to select a new managing director, who else would they choose but you?*

*I suppose you came out looking like a hero. . . . The man who saved Western Tanning from bankruptcy at the hands of a grief-stricken madman. Well, you might have fooled the board, hell, you might even have fooled yourself, but you haven't fooled me.*

*You were just after my job. All this time, pretending to be my friend, and you were just looking for the right place to stick your knife. Well, congratulations, you found it. You have my job now. My only consolation is that my bad investment may prove to be your undoing as well. Good luck with that.*

*Hoping you rot in hell,  
Lawrence Stevens*

The words on the page blurred as Elizabeth's eyes filled with tears. She reached up with a trembling hand to wipe them away, and began shaking her head. It couldn't be true, could it?

Elizabeth sniffled, then heard, "Bad news, sweetheart?" Elizabeth's head snapped around. She saw her mother standing in the doorway. For a long moment Elizabeth just sat there, frozen in shock. She hadn't even heard her mother open the door. How long had she been standing there?

Her mother abandoned her place in the doorway and began striding over to the bed. Abruptly, Elizabeth realized that she was still holding Lawrence's letter. For a heart-stopping second she was frozen in panic, wondering what to do, and in that instant a thousand ramifications splintered through her mind's eye: her mother reading the letter, using it to blackmail her father, or worse, finding it cause for divorce. . . .

Regardless of whether and to what extent the letter was true, Elizabeth knew that she could never show it to her mother. The information would be too dangerous in her hands. But even as Elizabeth realized that, her mother stopped beside the bed, and as if in slow motion, she followed her mother's gaze to the letter in her lap.

"Who's it from, dear?"

## Chapter 4

**“No** one,” Elizabeth said, quickly folding Lawrence’s letter in her lap. Her heart was beating like a drum, so loud that she was afraid her mother might hear it. Elizabeth tucked the letter back into its envelope with a shaking hand. She was grateful that the envelope was lying facedown on the bed, so her mother wouldn’t notice that it was unaddressed.

“It didn’t look like no one to me.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth to reply, then noticed with an electric jolt of adrenaline that there were *two* envelopes on the bed, one on top of the other. Trying to maintain an appearance of calm, Elizabeth straightened the envelopes so their edges overlapped, one hidden beneath the other.

This time, Elizabeth wasn’t so lucky. “You received *two* letters? Who are they from?”

Elizabeth looked up at her mother and forced a smile. “Nicholas.”

Constance was frowning back at her. “Both of them?”

“Yes.”

Putting the pieces together in her head, Constance had trouble keeping the smile from her face. Obviously, from the tears shimmering in her daughter’s eyes, and the brave face she was putting on, the letters had had some upsetting things to say. The only thing she could imagine was that Nicholas had written to tell Elizabeth that she should move on and forget about him. *Smart boy. But why did he have to write two letters?*

*Maybe one of them got lost in the mail, and only just now arrived. . . . Suddenly it all made sense. Of course! Nicholas did write to her, probably shortly after getting back from Siesta, but the letter got lost in the mail and he, assuming that Elizabeth was ignoring him, wrote a second letter to tell her that they were*

*through.*

Things were working out splendidly. Now all she had to do was to make sure that Elizabeth didn't write back to undo all of that.

"You want to talk about it?" Constance asked, taking a seat on the bed beside her daughter.

"Not really."

"You know . . . Elizabeth, we're not so different, you and I." Elizabeth raised her eyebrows, but kept silent, waiting for her mother to explain, or better yet, to sense her disinterest in the conversation and leave.

"Believe it or not, at your age—older even—I was just like you. Naïve, a loner, a romantic . . . imagining that the world was just as I wanted it to be." Elizabeth opened her mouth to object, to say that she wasn't any of those things, but she wasn't given time to reply.

Constance went on: "Unfortunately, no matter how much you want things to be a certain way, no matter how much you imagine them that way, reality eventually has its way with all of us. And when awareness finally dawns, and one discovers how things *really* are, it can be a painful experience."

Elizabeth's brow furrowed, and she shook her head. "I don't understand."

"Do you remember when your grandparents came to visit at the end of summer holidays?"

"Yes."

"And did you notice how your grandfather was behaving?"

Elizabeth hesitated, wondering where the conversation was going. She was grateful at least that her mother was no longer interested in the contents of the envelopes beside her. "He was being difficult . . . always complaining, putting people down—especially you and Dad."

Constance nodded. "Did you ever wonder why?"

"Well, I didn't really think about it, but I guess grandpa has always been like that—an old grouch." Elizabeth sent her mother an apologetic look. "Sorry."

"Don't be. He *is* an old grouch." They both laughed at that. "But there's more to it than that. My father and I had a disagreement, long before you were born."

"He wanted me to marry Walter—Walter who came from a wealthy, upper-class family, and was his best friend's son. And

for a while, I thought that was what I wanted, too.”

“So what happened?” Elizabeth asked, searching her mother’s face.

Constance sent her daughter a rueful smile. “I met your father. He was charming, funny, and—” Her smile broadened. “—oh so handsome. Everything that Walter was not.” Constance’s smile faded, and she looked away. “But your father hadn’t a penny to his name. He came from a relatively poor, middle-class family. Naïve as I was, I didn’t think any of that would matter to my parents, and I invited your father home to meet them.” Constance grew silent as she remembered, and Elizabeth waited for her to continue.

“When your father arrived—coming to a formal dinner on his old motorcycle, his clothes all dusty, his hair tousled by the wind—and I saw my father’s face . . . my heart sank. As the evening wore on and my father pressed with probing questions about what he planned to do for a living, where and what he was studying, what his parents did . . . things only got worse. After he left, my father forbade me to ever see him again.”

Elizabeth gasped. “So what did you do?”

“I fought with him over it. I told him it was my life, and I would jolly well do as I pleased. He told me that if that was how I felt, then I would be on my own, and I’d get no more help from him.

“I was still in nursing school at the time, and I couldn’t imagine doing that on my own, so I agreed not to see your father again.

“But . . .” Constance tapped her chest and sighed. “In my heart, I was anything but agreeable. I think it showed—perhaps in my subsequent disinterest in Walter, because my father, Walter, and his father did everything they could to win me over: meals at fancy restaurants, lavish gifts, holidays at exclusive resorts, and subtle, disparaging mentions of your father.

“I knew what they were doing, but . . . eventually it got to me, and I began to see the sense in what they were saying.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “You broke up with Dad?”

Constance shook her head. “I didn’t have to. We were on vacation, and he was far away. We wouldn’t get a chance to see each other again until we got back to school, and I had made up my mind that when that happened I’d simply ignore him

and he'd get the message."

"And?"

Constance smiled. "Your father proved to be more persistent than I'd imagined. It didn't take him long to remind me why I'd fallen in love with him in the first place. Eventually I relented, and I stood Walter up for your father."

"I'll bet grandpa wasn't very happy about that."

Constance sent her daughter a sad little smile and shook her head. "No, he wasn't. And he wasn't the only one. Walter, his father, even my friends . . . they were all furious with me. They thought I was a fool. Only my mother stayed out of it. But that didn't matter, because what my father decided was the law, and he decided that I was going to have to choose between your father and my old family. I was so angry with him—with all of them—that I vowed to marry your father. Your grandfather disowned me for it."

"That's terrible!" Elizabeth said.

Constance nodded. "He cursed me, saying that I would spend the rest of my life trying to recover what I gave up for your father." Constance gave a short, bitter laugh. "I sometimes wonder if . . ." A faraway look crept into her mother's eyes.

"What?"

After a long moment, Constance seemed to come back to the present. Sending her daughter a sideways glance, she smiled, but made no attempt to finish her sentence.

Elizabeth blinked, not sure what to say. She'd known that her grandfather had disapproved of her parents getting married, but she hadn't known all the details, or realized the full extent of his disapproval. She shook her head, feeling bewildered and overwhelmed. "That's all so horrible, but I don't understand, why are you telling me all of this now?"

Silently, Constance reached over to the envelopes beside Elizabeth. Frozen in terror, Elizabeth watched wide-eyed as her mother picked up the envelopes. It was all she could do to keep from snatching them back.

But instead of trying to read them, Constance merely waved them in front of her daughter. "I'm telling you because of these. Because Nicholas has obviously written to tell you that it's over, and no matter how tempted you are, I don't want you to write back and tell him any different."



Constance set the letters down, and Elizabeth opened her mouth to correct her mother. "But—"

"I want to spare you the pain that I went through, Elizabeth. Right now you stand on the precipice—at the crossroads between two very different lives. You're not a child anymore, and the decisions you make now could mean all the difference. Learn from my experience. I followed my heart, against my better judgment and that of those around me, and lived to regret it. Don't make the same mistake."

Elizabeth gaped at her mother. "You regret marrying Dad?"

Constance hesitated a moment, then looked away. "In some ways, sometimes, I do. Don't get me wrong, I *do* love your father, but I paid the price for my rebelliousness . . . for my *romanticism*. I often wonder how differently my life might have turned out, how much easier it might have been, if I had consented to my father's wishes and married Walter instead."

Elizabeth allowed her jaw to drop. "I had no idea . . ."

"No one does. But try to understand Elizabeth, when your father and I got married, we were all alone, poor, and not even finished school yet. Your father's parents couldn't help us—they had enough trouble getting by themselves—and mine would barely speak to me. It was difficult.

"We assured ourselves that once we finished school, things would get better, but they didn't. We struggled to make ends meet—I, by working as a full-time nurse, and your father by working as a car salesman. We had student debts, rent, car payments . . . bills, bills, and more bills.

"I still talked to my parents, but only ever by phone, and even then, only on special occasions. My father always asked how we were doing, his voice *dripping* with smug condescension." Constance sent Elizabeth a rueful look. "He knew we were struggling, but he wanted *me* to know that he knew. He wanted to remind me of how wrong I'd been to defy him."

Elizabeth's brow was pinched in sympathy. "What about your mother? Didn't she try to help?"

Constance shook her head. "My mother tried one time to send us a check for Christmas, but my father found out and canceled it before we could cash it. She got into so much trouble for that, that she never dared to help us again."

"But . . . Dad is the managing director of Western Tanning

now. He did very well for himself! Doesn't grandpa see how wrong he was?"

Constance snorted. "Yes, *he* did do very well for *himself*, didn't he?" Elizabeth frowned, wondering at the ironic tone in her mother's voice. After a while, Constance shook her head. "It doesn't matter, anyway. My father is a proud, stubborn old man. Hell never admit that he was wrong to oppose our marriage, and truthfully, he wasn't wholly wrong. His primary objection was that your father wouldn't be able to provide for me the way that Walter could, and he was right. We struggled for most of our lives—all the best years of our lives—to make ends meet."

"But at least you were in love. . . ."

Constance turned a slow, understanding smile upon her daughter. "That's what we thought when we got married." Constance's smile faded. "But love didn't pay the bills. It didn't give us the strength to get through long, ten hour days and still come home with enough energy left for each other. Love is like a fire, Elizabeth. If you don't feed it, it dies."

"That's so sad." Elizabeth felt like crying again; she didn't want to hear all of this now, especially not with so many other doubts swirling through her head. With all of what her mother was saying, she was beginning to wonder if there wasn't some truth to Lawrence's letter after all. What if her father really had betrayed Lawrence in order to get his job? It was beginning to sound like he might have had the motive.

"Yes, it is sad. It's too late for me to go back and fix my mistakes. But it's not too late for you. It looks like you're going to have to make the same choice: whether to follow cold, reliable reason, or the seductive and capricious warmth of your heart."

Elizabeth's face was ashen, her eyes far away as she considered the possibility that her father really was guilty.

Seeing the look on her daughter's face, Constance gave a sympathetic smile and said, "Don't worry, I'll be there to help you. I won't let you make the same mistakes that I did."

Elizabeth took a moment to process that. Her eyes flicked to the envelopes which lay between her and her mother, then back up to meet her mother's gaze. She shook her head. "Mom . . . Nicholas didn't write to tell me that it's over. He wrote to ask me when would be a good time for him to visit."

Constance's eyes widened. "He suggested during winter school holidays—at the end of June."

Constance stood abruptly from the bed and turned her back to her daughter. "Absolutely not!" She whirled on Elizabeth. "Haven't you been listening to what I've been saying? Elizabeth! Don't you see?! This is *exactly* what I've been talking about."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "I don't understand."

Constance stared down at her daughter, thinking furiously. How could her daughter not see it? Charles Atherton was her Walter Owen, and Nicholas Strauss her Patrick Smythe. *And if Nicholas didn't tell you that it was over, why were you crying when I came in?* Constance shook her head as if to clear it. It didn't make any sense! Regardless, she had promised not to let her daughter jeopardize her future as she had, so she couldn't let Nicholas visit!

*And yet . . . that was my father's mistake. If I tell her "no," then she'll automatically resist, but if I give her time to see the truth and make the right choices for herself, then perhaps, things will turn out the way they should.*

After a long moment, Constance sighed. "Tell Nicholas he can come." Elizabeth blinked, shocked by her mother's sudden change of heart. Constance held up a cautioning finger. "But just for a long weekend—three days, no more."

Elizabeth nodded eagerly. "Okay."

With that, Constance turned and strode from the room, leaving Elizabeth alone and feeling like she'd been on an emotional roller coaster. She let out a long, shuddering breath, thankful at least that her mother hadn't discovered Lawrence's letter. Her eyes returned to it now, and she was struck by a sudden, impulsive urge to tear it, envelope and all, into a million pieces and forget she'd ever read it. It couldn't be true, could it?

She shook her head, pushing the doubts away. Climbing unsteadily to her feet, she carried the envelope over to her desk, opened the bottom drawer, and hid it beneath a stack of other letters she'd saved through the years. She would decide what to do with it later; for now, she had to write a reply to Nicholas.

# Chapter 5

## —THREE AND A HALF MONTHS LATER—

**F**riday, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1974: Nicholas was staring out the window of the steam train, watching the scenery flash by in a profusion of blurry greens and browns. He was far away, lulled by the steady chugging of the locomotive.

The goodbyes at the train station in Aliwal North had been difficult. He'd had to say goodbye to both his family and to Denise and her family at the same time, and due to the timing of winter school holidays, and Elizabeth's mother's stipulation that he could only stay for three days, he'd had to time his visit with Elizabeth to coincide with his induction into the air force. At the end of his short visit he would be taking another train, this time from Wellington, but there'd be no time or opportunity to stop in Sterkspruit—which meant that his goodbyes at the train station in Aliwal North were to last for the next six months. He wouldn't see his family, Denise, or anyone else from Sterkspruit again until he was done basic training.

Having gone to boarding school, he should have been used to goodbyes by now. Ironically, having had so much practice only made it harder.

He remembered:

*"... and don't forget to call as soon as you get there. Both in Wellington and Pretoria."*

*"I won't, Mom," he said as he shifted the weight of his black, hard leather suitcase to his other hand. He'd had to fit all of his personal effects in there—everything he might need or want for the next six months—but he was used to that; it had been no different in boarding school.*

*His mother gave him a long, squeezing hug that lingered until the train's whistle blew a warning blast and his father had to*

*tap her on the shoulder to remind her to let go.*

*Reluctantly, she pulled back to an arm's length. Tears were brimming in her eyes. "I love you, Nicholas," his mother said, smiling as the tears began spilling down her cheeks. Pulling a tissue out of her handbag she wiped her nose and dabbed her cheeks. "Don't get into any trouble. And stay safe."*

*"I won't—ah—and I will." He smiled at the seeming contradiction, and then he laughed, because laughter was easier than tears.*

*Seeming satisfied, his mother withdrew, and his father stepped forward, holding out his hand. Nicholas took his father's hand, whereupon his hand was nearly crushed in his father's grip. "You'll be fine, son," he said, nodding once, decisively. His father was smiling, but there was a glimmer of moisture in his eyes which betrayed his apparent nonchalance.*

*"Of course I will," Nicholas said as they shook hands.*

Nicholas smiled wanly at the memory. His brother and sister had been there as well, but their goodbyes had been somehow less poignant. His sister was at an awkward age—almost, but not quite a teenager—and as a result she had stood quietly off to one side, unsure how to handle the situation. Remembering well that time of his life, he'd simply sent her a lopsided grin and a wink. She'd returned that with a smile and a wave. And as for his brother, well, Philip had never been good at displaying his emotions—a handshake and a gruff remark was all that it had taken for them to part ways.

Denise, on the other hand, had been another matter. Both his best friend and his girlfriend, and here they were saying goodbye as he went off to see his *other* girlfriend, all the while with her family and his looking on. It had felt incredibly awkward. *Probably because it was.*

He remembered wincing at her parting words: *"I hope you find what you're looking for, Nicholas."* Her tone had been earnest, without even a hint of jealousy or bitterness. But why should there be? After all, it had been she who'd convinced him to visit Elizabeth.

*She really is one of a kind,* he thought, shaking his head. *What other girl would do that?*

Their relationship was something special. Less in a romantic sense than in the sense of two friends who, more than

anything, just wanted to see each other happy.

*Even when that happiness comes at the expense of her own,* Nicholas thought with a sigh. If he'd only had to listen to his head, he'd have looked no further than Denise. *But in love, the heart says one thing and the head another. When, if ever, the two agree that is the time to persist.*

And so it was for him with Elizabeth.

But did she feel the same way?

And what did it matter if she did, if circumstances kept them apart?

Shifting uncomfortably in his seat, Nicholas eased the pocketbook Bible from his trousers' pocket. It was a gift from his mother, given to him when he'd left for boarding school at age eight. Undoing the clasp, he carefully opened it to page 316, and found the small, white flower he'd pressed there between the pages. He'd kept it from the time he'd last seen Elizabeth. And for some reason, feeling it was somehow significant, he'd thought that he should have it with him when they saw each other again.

After a moment of gazing at the fragile flower, he closed the Bible, redid the clasp, and put it back in his pocket.

Nicholas took a deep breath, then sat back and closed his eyes. It was a long way to Wellington from Aliwal North—Aliwal being about an hour by a pebbly dirt road from Sterkspruit, and Sterkspruit being almost the full breadth of the country from Wellington. He was doing the journey in two parts: the first would take him all the way to Cape Town and from there he would catch a second train and begin the second part of his journey—barely an hour long—to reach Wellington. Between both legs of the journey he would have to travel the rest of the day and all through the night to reach his destination.

Given that, Nicholas decided that he may as well get some rest. It would probably be infrequent enough with the incessant chugging, bumping, and jostling of the train.

\* \* \*

Elizabeth and Charles were sitting side by side, half-facing each other on the couch in her living room. On the coffee table in front of the couch was a half-finished puzzle depicting a red sun rising over the African savannah. The puzzle lay forgotten amidst their conversation.

The expression on Charles's face was a mixture of

indignation and disbelief. Elizabeth had just told him about Nicholas, and the fact that Nicholas would be arriving tomorrow.

"Why didn't you tell me about Nicholas sooner? Instead of springing the news on me at the last second."

Elizabeth frowned uncertainly. "I didn't tell you sooner, because I was afraid you'd say that Nicholas couldn't come."

Charles shook his head. "I can see that I need to be more specific. Why didn't you tell me about him a long time ago? This is the first I've ever heard of him."

"I didn't think there was anything to tell. It was over between us, and I was determined never to see him again. But that changed when I saw him again at Siesta, when I finally gave him a chance to explain."

Charles frowned. "Assuming you can trust him, and it really all was just a misunderstanding. . . . So you were seeing him behind my back while you were in Siesta?"

Elizabeth hesitated, looking sheepish. "Yes . . . and no. It wasn't as though I could ask you for permission. And technically, Nicholas was in my life long before you were."

"So that gives him more right to be with you than me?"

"No . . . equal right perhaps." Charles's eyes flashed with annoyance, and Elizabeth hastily explained: "I didn't think you would mind. Do you remember what you said to me at your birthday party, before you went back to England? You said that if I couldn't wait for you, I could go ahead and date other guys, that you would steal me back from them when you returned. Where's that confidence now?"

"Confidence I have. Indifference I do not." Charles appeared to be grinding his teeth, and Elizabeth looked anxious. Eventually, he let out a long breath and said, "Fine, let Nicholas come. I'd like to meet him."

"Charles . . ." Elizabeth gave him an admonishing look. "When Nicholas comes you have to stay away."

"Why should I? So that he can have my girlfriend all to himself?"

"No. As a favor to me. Please?" Elizabeth looked up at him, her eyes pleading. "It will only be for three days, and after that he's going to the air force for two years. We need this opportunity to say goodbye. I may never see him again."

"Good!"

Elizabeth sighed, and looked to the half-finished puzzle on the coffee table.

Charles considered himself above petty jealousies; after all, what did he have to be jealous of? But all the same it was hard to think of Elizabeth spending three days alone with Nicholas without feeling something.

"He's *only* staying for three days?"

Elizabeth nodded, her face turning back to him. "Not even. He arrives tomorrow morning and leaves Monday afternoon."

"Well, okay—"

"Thank you!" Elizabeth sprang up from the couch and wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him on the cheek. Withdrawing to an arm's length, she added, "For being so understanding."

Charles smiled up at her and withdrew her arms from behind his neck, trapping her wrists in his hands. He stood up from the couch. "On one condition. If I'm going to be forced to stay away for the next three days, let's make the best of today."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "What do you suggest we do?"

"You can put puzzles together with Nicholas. I have something more exciting in mind."

"Oh?"

Charles grinned wryly down at her. "Reservations for six o'clock at the Château de France, followed by a movie and a moonlit walk along the beach. . . . What do you say?"

"You mean go to Cape Town for the evening?"

"Of course."

"That sounds wonderful! But I'll have to ask my mother first."

Already knowing what her answer would be, Charles let go of her wrists and replied: "Do that. I'll call my chauffeur and make the reservations in the meantime."

Elizabeth had already started for the kitchen—having heard her mother in there earlier—but upon hearing Charles's reply, she flipped a glance over her shoulder and said, "Someone's sure of himself. What if my mother says no?"

"She won't."

"Well, make the reservation for five so that we'll be back before midnight."

"Will do," Charles said, already busying himself with the phone on the end table.



Ten minutes later it was all arranged, and Elizabeth's mother had given her consent. Charles was again sitting on the couch in the living room, absently putting the puzzle on the coffee table together to pass the time as he waited for Elizabeth to get ready. He was already ready. His usual attire would be enough for the Château de France. He always took care to dress well. And if it wasn't good enough for them, it wouldn't matter; they wouldn't dare to anger his father, one of their most regular patrons, by insulting his son.

Charles was sorting through the pile of puzzle pieces on the coffee table, looking for a particular patch of golden grass with the barest slice of the flaming red sun along its rightmost edges, when Constance came up behind him. She stood to one side of the couch, ostensibly admiring the puzzle. Catching a glimpse of her in his peripheral vision, Charles looked up at her.

"Oh, hello, Mrs. Smythe."

She met his look with a pleasant smile. "Hello, Charles. May I speak with you in confidence about something?"

A line of worry etched Charles's forehead. "Certainly."

Constance took a seat beside him on the couch. "I couldn't help overhearing you and Elizabeth talking. And I have to say, whatever Elizabeth may have made you to agree to, you'd be a fool to leave her and Nicholas alone for three days."

The worry lines on Charles's brow grew deeper, and he shook his head. "A gentleman stands by his word, Mrs. Smythe. I agreed to leave them alone, and I will."

"I understand. A gentleman's honor is important, but that's why I'm speaking with you now. Surely it is also a gentleman's responsibility to defend the honor of the one he loves?"

Charles's head canted to one side. "What do you mean?"

Constance sat beside him on the couch, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "Only that Elizabeth could use a chaperone. She's an impetuous girl, often ruled by her emotions rather than her head. Combine that with Nicholas's . . . *suspect* intentions and I'm afraid of what might happen."

"Suspect intentions?"

"Surely I don't have to explain what I mean by that."

Charles's upper lip twitched, and he looked away, back to the puzzle on the table. "No, I think I can work that out for myself. . . ."

"I didn't know who else to ask."

Charles's gaze turned back to Constance. "It seems to me, that as her mother, you shouldn't need to ask anyone. If you're worried about Nicholas's intentions, you should have simply forbidden him to come."

Constance shook her head. "It's not so easy. Elizabeth isn't a child anymore. At her age, a blunt refusal from me would be the surest thing to bring them together, not push them apart."

Charles's brow lifted, and then he nodded. "I suppose you're right."

"It's not a problem while they're under this roof, but when they go out . . ." She let Charles's imagination finish that sentence for her. "I need you to keep an eye on them for me."

"You realize this puts me in a very awkward position. Elizabeth won't be happy to find me constantly intruding on their time together after I promised to stay away. I'll be tarnishing my reputation."

"But saving hers."

"Perhaps."

"Don't worry, she has a short memory and a forgiving nature; she'll hold no grudges."

Elizabeth came rushing back into the living room. "Okay, I'm ready—" She stopped abruptly as she noticed her mother and Charles sitting on the couch together. They looked up at her—Constance smiling, Charles frowning.

"Am I interrupting something?" Elizabeth asked.

Constance stood up from the couch and shook her head. "No, I was just helping Charles put the pieces of the puzzle together while he waited for you."

Elizabeth was about to reply when the sound of an approaching car drew their attention to the front door. The sound diminished to an idling hum and then died completely.

"It sounds like my chauffeur has arrived. Come on, Princess," Charles said, affecting a cheerful tone as he stood up from the couch. He took a few steps in the direction of the front door and held his hand out to her. "The Château de France awaits."

## Chapter 6

**S**aturday morning: Nicholas stepped off the train with suitcase in hand and spent a moment looking around the platform amidst billowing white clouds of steam.

No one. At least, no one he recognized.

He checked his watch. It was 9:55. The train was a little early, scheduled to arrive at 10:00.

Nicholas spied an empty bench on the platform and started toward it. The bench was under the eaves of a small, brown sandstone building—a fact for which he was not very thankful. Despite being winter, the sun was shining out of a brilliant, blue sky, and the air was unusually pleasant. It was a welcome change from the near-freezing temperatures of the Drakensberg mountains where he lived.

Nicholas took a seat on the edge of the bench and set his suitcase on the platform beside him. He spent a moment examining his surroundings. The train station in Wellington wasn't very large—nothing like the one in Cape Town—and he could see clear from one end of the platform to the other. There weren't even many people around, even though the train had just stopped to let off passengers. Most of them were probably traveling further up the line.

"Nice day, isn't it?" A gravelly voice rang out from somewhere behind him.

Nicholas jumped with fright and quickly turned toward the sound. He'd thought that there was nothing but a building behind him. Staring at the gray and brown wall of the terminal building, he frowned. Where had the voice come from?

Then he heard it again: "Over here."

Nicholas turned to look over his other shoulder and was gratified to see that the voice wasn't coming out of thin air.

There, not far from the bench he was sitting on, were the familiar black iron bars of a ticket office. Beyond those bars, a wizened old man was peering out from the shadows. Nicholas noted the man's grizzly beard, suit, and . . . his eyes stopped at the top of the man's head. He was wearing a stationmaster's hat. Nicholas cocked his head and looked suspiciously up at the old man.

"You're the stationmaster?"

"That's right." The old man nodded and drew himself up behind the bars of the ticket office. "Gerhardus Petrus Viljoen, stationmaster, old eccentric, and *baie gooie kok*\*—but you can just call me Mister Gee."

Nicholas grinned. "Okay."

"You waiting for someone here?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

The old man smiled and then began looking about conspiratorially. He crooked a finger at Nicholas in a "come here" gesture. Nicholas got up from the bench and walked the two paces up to the ticket office until he was face to face with the old stationmaster.

"A girl?" Mr. Gee asked, almost whispering as he leaned closer to the bars.

"Yeah."

"Good." Mr. Gee nodded decisively. "A young, good-looking man like you ought to be courting heartbreak every chance he gets. Prevention's the best cure for loneliness there ever was. Do me a favor . . . what's your name?"

"Nicholas."

The stationmaster acknowledged that with a nod. "All right, Nicholas, first chance you get, tell her how you feel about her."

Nicholas's eyes widened, then narrowed thoughtfully. "What makes you say that?"

Mr. Gee shrugged. "Only thing that's kept me single all these years. Never had the guts to tell the lady I loved how I felt about her. Many years later I found out she felt the same way, but by then it was too late, and now she's many miles and many train stations away from here. Long since married with a few misbegotten rascals like yourself."

*Misbegotten rascals?* Nicholas almost laughed, but the

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\* *baie gooie kok*: very good cook

stationmaster was obviously speaking about a painful topic, so Nicholas nodded respectfully instead. "I'll try to keep that in mind, Mister Gee."

"Good, but speaking of happier things, I believe I've spotted your girl." Mr. Gee pointed through the bars, and Nicholas turned around to look. Even as he did so, he heard a jubilant shout of his name and then saw a girl come running across the platform to meet him—accompanied by a familiar blur of flowing, chestnut brown hair.

It could only be Elizabeth. He began walking toward her and stopped beside the bench where he'd left his suitcase. He began to say hello, but soon cut himself off with a startled *oomff* as Elizabeth ran straight into him, wrapped her arms around his neck, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Nicholas stumbled backward a few steps, her momentum driving him. Instinctively, he grabbed her by the waist to keep himself from falling. It was exactly the wrong thing to do, and a second later, they both tumbled backward. He landed on the bench where he'd been sitting a moment ago, and she landed in his lap.

"You made it!" she said, breathless, looking up into his wide, blinking green eyes.

Recovering enough to affect a wry grin, he said, "Of course I did! Did you miss me?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she asked.

Nicholas shook his head. "No, go back and try again." He waved his hand back the way she'd come.

Her jaw dropped and she gaped at him for a second before giving him a playful shove.

Nicholas heard someone harrumph and looked up to see Elizabeth's parents both standing a dozen paces away—Edwin with a silly grin on his face, but Constance with a disapproving frown on hers.

"Shall we?" Constance asked, her eyes finding Nicholas's.

Nicholas nodded, and Elizabeth quickly disentangled herself from him. "Hello, Mister and Mrs. Smythe," he said, rising from the bench and picking up his suitcase.

Elizabeth was standing blushing beside him, trying not to meet her mother's gaze. Edwin returned Nicholas's greeting but Constance merely about-faced and began walking back the way she'd come.

As they followed her to the car, Edwin turned to Nicholas

and whispered: "You'll have to forgive my wife; she's against public displays of affection."

Nicholas grinned. "That's okay. Different strokes—"

"—for different folks," Edwin finished for him.

\* \* \*

Scarcely an hour later, Nicholas was sitting on the couch in Elizabeth's living room, absently staring at the half-completed puzzle on the coffee table as he drank a glass of lemonade. Elizabeth was sitting beside him, likewise drinking lemonade.

"So, what do you want to do?" she asked, setting her glass down on a coaster beside the puzzle.

Nicholas shrugged. "You live here, so I was hoping you might have an idea."

"Well . . ." she trailed off, thinking. After a moment, her voice came back excitedly: "We could go for a bike ride, and I could show you around town. We could cycle through the vineyards and maybe stop at the diner afterward for some refreshments?"

Nicholas smiled at Elizabeth's bubbling enthusiasm. Setting his empty glass down beside hers, he turned to her and took a moment to admire the way her hair fell to her shoulders in a wavy, golden-brown cascade; the way the morning light, shining in through the lattice windows of the back porch, caught the blue in her eyes and made them sparkle. . . .

Taking his pause for disinterest, Elizabeth said, "Or—"

"You had me at 'we,' " he said, his smile broadening into a grin.

"Great!" She bolted up from the couch and held her hand out to him. "Come on, let's go!"

Laughing lightly, he took her hand, and followed her out onto the back porch.

\* \* \*

Watching from the kitchen as Nicholas and Elizabeth walked out onto the porch, Constance frowned and shook her head. Seeing Elizabeth and Nicholas together brought back memories of her own—memories from the happy, carefree days before she got married. Those days had been disappointingly short-lived and followed closely by *years* of hardship. Elizabeth was repeating her mistakes, even with the full benefit of hindsight. Oh, it could work out differently for *her*, of course it could, and maybe she was worrying for nothing, but Constance had learned the hard way that some things were better not left to

chance.

If she were going to save Elizabeth from her own foolishness, she couldn't allow this time with Nicholas to be filled with fond memories which would only grow fonder in time. That was why she'd had to engage Charles's cooperation. She needed him to play the part of a third wheel, constantly getting in the way, never giving them a moment's peace. *But he will need my help to do that*, Constance thought as she headed for the kitchen phone.

\* \* \*

Rounding the corner of the house, Nicholas and Elizabeth came upon two girls' bikes—one pink and larger than the other, the other a light shade of purple. The purple one had a white basket in front and some colorful tassels trailing from the ends of the handle bars. Nicholas stopped and stood frowning down at the bikes.

Noticing his hesitation, Elizabeth laughed. "I forgot to mention—you'll have to ride a girl's bike. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all. I was just thinking that there's no way I'm going to fit on top of that little purple bike."

"It's my sister's. Don't worry, I'll ride it. You can take mine."

"That should work better," Nicholas said, smiling ruefully at the pink bicycle.

A few minutes later, they were riding side by side down the street, with Nicholas attracting a number of amused glances from the neighbors. Nicholas removed one hand from the handlebars, waving to an old lady smiling and waving to them as she watered a patch of red geraniums on her front lawn.

A quarter of an hour later, they were cycling down the main street in Wellington. They reached a T-junction and crossed it together. Elizabeth stopped on the other side, taking a break in front of a large church with a statue of a man standing out front.

Nicholas stopped beside her and gestured through the wrought iron fence. "Your church?" he asked.

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, that's the Dutch Reformed Church."

"Which one do you go to?"

"As of recently, the Presbyterian Church, but I used to go to the Anglican Church."

"Oh, I used to go to the Anglican Church as well—when I was in boarding school." One corner of Nicholas's mouth turned upward in a rueful smile. "Every day, and twice on Sundays."

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "That's a lot of church."

"Too much. Eventually I could say mass by rote while I thought about other, more interesting things." He snorted, shaking his head. "So, why don't you go to the Anglican Church anymore?"

"Well, they started letting Blacks into the church, and one day, during communion, while my mother was kneeling in front of the altar, one of them got to drink out of the chalice before she did."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. "And?"

"And, she refused to drink out of the chalice. She complained to the reverend after the service, but he told her that before God there's no Black and White, just people."

"Wise words."

"My mother didn't think so. She stormed out of there and never went back."

Nicholas laughed.

"Don't laugh," Elizabeth said. "I liked the Anglican Church. Now we go to the Presbyterian Church. It's much smaller, and the pastor there preaches every sermon on sins of the flesh. But whenever he sees me, he says, 'my - you're blooming!'"

Nicholas feigned confusion. "That doesn't sound so bad."

"It is when he's saying it to my chest," Elizabeth replied.

Nicholas burst into a gale of laughter that almost carried him off his bicycle and to the pavement.

Elizabeth looked on in disgust. "Careful. Don't you know how unlucky it is to fall off a pink bicycle?"

Once Nicholas had recovered enough to speak, he said, "Falling off a bicycle is always unlucky—pink or not."

"True," Elizabeth replied through a smile. "Come on, I want to show you the vineyards, and then we can come back this way and stop at Sandy's." With that, Elizabeth started pedaling down the sidewalk.

Nicholas followed, cycling up beside her on the shoulder of the road. "Sandy's?" he asked.

Elizabeth cast him a glance. "It's a diner, the one and only in Wellington. The food is great, and very reasonably priced. I keep asking Charles to take me there, but he always has



somewhere fancier in mind.”

“Ah,” Nicholas commented, his voice diminished by the mention of Elizabeth’s boyfriend.

“Sorry. I wasn’t trying to make you jealous.”

“I know.”

Before long they came to the end of town, and turned down a dusty gravel road. Row upon row of dark green grapevines rushed endlessly past to either side of the road, only broken by the occasional hedge of even darker green trees. Farther in the distance, Nicholas could see the sheer, bald and rocky gray cliffs of the Hawequa Mountains, rising majestically against a clear blue sky.

It was a magnificent sight, especially to eyes accustomed by months of winter in the Transkei to the endless browns and grays of dried out grasses and overcast skies. Feeling his spirits buoyed, Nicholas smiled. Every hint of trepidation and regret over visiting Elizabeth had now disappeared. This was going to be a short but incredible vacation!

It was a bright sunny day—though there was the hint of a decided nip in the air that would doubtless take hold later in the day, after the sun set. Stopping on a hill to catch their breath, they leaned their bicycles against a tree, and stood there, next to each other, holding hands and admiring the view of the endless vineyards, the town and the surrounding mountains.

Elizabeth was the first to speak. “I was beginning to worry that you’d forgotten about me—that you’d forgotten your promise that you’d never ever forget to—”

Nicholas didn’t let her finish. Instead he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. It had been almost six months since they’d last been alone and able to kiss freely. The intensity of their pent-up emotions burst forth, and it was a while before Lizzie came up for air.

“I’m just guessing—” Elizabeth said, pausing to catch her breath. “—but that didn’t feel like you’d forgotten about me.”

Nicholas smiled, using his free hand to gently brush the hair away from where it lay covering her left eye. “Lizzie, I’ll say it again—you’d have to become a very different person before I could ever even contemplate forgetting you—and even then, it would not be easy. But you’re not planning any major personality changes, are you?”

Elizabeth just laughed and replied, “No Nicholas, I’m the same silly, jealous girl that I’ve always been.”

Nicholas, noticing the flirtatious gleam in her eye, replied, “Jealous—yes—Silly—no, but I’m OK with you just the way you are, so don’t go changing on account of me. In the three summers we spent together, I’ve gotten pretty used to you—”

Before he could finish, Lizzie gave his hand a tug. “Come on, Nicholas. I’ve got a special place picked out for us where we can just be ourselves—like in our three summers past”

Nicholas and Lizzie mounted their bicycles, and rode next to each other, chatting away happily, as they always had, down a maze of paths between the vineyards, until they came to the grassy, tree-lined banks of a clear mountain stream. Lizzie came to a stop underneath a large old Willow tree, and leaned her bike up against it. Nicholas followed her lead, then standing there next to her, he said, “Wow, Lizzie, this is a surprise—what river’s this?”

“The Berg River. It comes down from the mountains, flows through Paarl, then Wellington and eventually into the Atlantic ocean on the west coast,” Lizzie replied.

“It looks like you can canoe on it,” Nicholas remarked.

“People do,” Lizzie replied. “Actually, there’s a four-day canoe marathon\* that they hold in July each year. That began back when I was just starting school. Care to stay a few more weeks and enter?” Lizzie teased him with a smile.

Nicholas sighed. “If only, Lizzie. If only I could stay here with you for another three weeks—I’d gladly endure the marathon!”

Lizzie laughed. “You’d do that for me? Awww . . . I’m flattered!” she said, taking his hand and leading him to a smooth grassy spot under a willow tree. She sat down and motioned for him to sit beside her. Nicholas did; then removing his shoes and socks, he rolled his pant legs up and dangled his feet in the cool clear water of the stream. Lizzie followed his lead, and the two of them sat there in the shade, shoulder to shoulder, dangling their feet in the water, and chatting away excitedly in the privacy of their beautiful hideaway.

“I take it Denise knows about this visit?” Lizzie inquired, curious to know all the details of what had happened between

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\* The Berg River Canoe Marathon is a famous event in S. Africa: [www.berg.org.za](http://www.berg.org.za)

her and Nicholas in the last six months.

"Yes she does . . ." Nicholas replied. "In fact, she kind of insisted I come and visit you," Nicholas added.

"Why would she do that?" Lizzie inquired rather incredulously.

"Apparently she thinks that you and I have to somehow finalize our relationship, one way or the other, or else it will haunt any relationship she and I could ever have."

"Hmmm . . . that's pretty mature of her," Lizzie remarked. "I'm not sure I'd ever allow that, but I'm grateful that she did!" Elizabeth added, turning to Nicholas with an inviting smile.

Nicholas accepted the unspoken invitation, moving his arms around her, and then whispering in her ear, "I am too, Lizzie. There's so much to say—and so little time!"

Then, taking her face gently in his palms, his lips moved to hers and they kissed—with a gentle, loving affection."

Their kiss over, Elizabeth tucked her head into his shoulder, pressing up against him, and Nicholas spoke first, "I'll be 18 in a few days, Lizzie, and you're not far behind, we're both fast leaving our high school days behind us now—just five months still left for you. Any final plans I should know about?"

"Still the same plan, Nicholas. I'm heading to UCT in January to start their pre-med program, and you?"

"Well, I have no choice but to wait till you've finished your freshman year before I can join you there, but that's where I'll be heading, too."

"Good! Then there's a lot of hope for us yet"

"Yes," Nicholas said. "If somehow we make it through the next two crucial summers—your final year of high school, and your first year at university." Nicholas sighed, then asked, "And Charles? How did he take the news of my visit?"

Lizzie winced as she remembered. "Not too well I'm afraid. He's so confident in his prowess, that he gave me to believe he would welcome any competition, but when it came right down to it—he didn't. He had quite a tantrum," she said. "But to his credit, he has agreed to stay away for these few days."

"Well, I'm really glad for that at least. These last few days alone with you are really precious! I've been anxiously dreaming about them for months!" Nicholas replied, smiling.

"So have I, Nicholas, but also of last summer, and one night in particular—can you guess which one?" she asked.

"That's not a tough question—Christmas Eve, of course!" Nicholas replied, relieved to hear she'd shared his dream.

"Yes, that's one night I shall never forget, for as long as I live," Elizabeth replied, snuggling up closer. "I'm glad you still feel the same way about Lady Jennifer, Sir Ian."

"Oh yes, Lizzie—we shared such a lovely dream that night, and as for our wishes, remember we must never mention them to anyone else until they do come true!"

"Don't worry, Nicholas. It's our secret—who else would value those dreams anyway?"

"So when do we get our next two wishes?" Nicholas inquired.

"Only when you and I return to our secret place, Nicholas, and only at night! We've got five left, remember; that's two each and one that we have to agree on together!" She replied.

"That sounds hopeful, Lizzie. I'll look forward to that! I'm not sure how it will happen but let's just believe that it will."

Then, turning to each other, they sealed their pact with a kiss—a long, wistful kiss, overshadowed by their mounting trepidation that it may be many years before they ever got to return to their secret place and use their wishes.

"Brrrr . . ." Lizzie said, shivering. "I can hardly feel my feet!" "Yep!" Nicholas agreed, as they both removed their feet from the river to dry, before putting their socks and shoes back on.

Standing up and stretching, Lizzie took him by the hand, and pulled him up to her, landing comfortably in his eager arms. They stayed there, under the willow tree, and kissed again, but this time more passionately.

"Oh Nicholas, do I have to say it, or will you?" Lizzie joked as she pulled away from him.

"You mean 'forest'?" Nicholas replied with a wink, pulling her back into his arms to resume their passionate embrace, pressing home the point that she'd begun to make.

Lizzie eagerly responded. Neither of them wanted this to end, but finally she broke free and moved to whisper in his ear. "No, not 'forest,' silly—waterfall!"

Nicholas sighed. *All good things come to an end, they always do. Nothing seems to last forever—just a few stolen moments.*

"Come on, Nicholas," Elizabeth said, fetching her bike from the tree. "I have a fun place we can go and have refreshments. Time to go back to civilization again."

And off they rode together . . . innocent and carefree.

## Chapter 7

Charles parked his red Porsche 911 Carrera in front of Sandy's Diner. As he got out of his car, he spared a deprecating glance at the line of motorcycles arrayed in the opposite corner of the parking lot, and then started for the entrance of the diner.

The door bells chimed as Charles opened the door. A few waitresses and customers looked up to see who it was. Upon seeing him, they gave him a funny look. Upon seeing *them*, he realized why. They were all dressed very casually, whereas he was wearing a slick, brown herringbone sports jacket with matching brown pants and a lightly-checked, white shirt. Amidst the slew of leather jackets and miniskirts, he stood out like a diamond necklace on a pig.

Frowning, he looked around the diner. He'd never actually been to it, but had often heard Elizabeth suggest they go. He couldn't, for the life of him, imagine why. The garish décor—with its bright reds and whites and neon purple trim—assaulted his eyes, and there was a tacky, checkered pattern of tiles on the floor and walls. Grimacing in distaste, Charles walked over to a booth and slid into a red vinyl seat and waited to be served. His eyes roamed around the diner as he waited. A jukebox stood in one corner, a glittering disco ball hung overhead, and near the back of the diner was a line of barstools with a scattering of people atop them. Even the barstools were capped with shiny red vinyl. *Vinyl*. Worse, the tables were all covered by a layer of smooth, white plastic. He shook his head. The tackiness of it all made him sick. No, Elizabeth would never get him to take her here. It was bad enough that he'd had to come at all.

But Mrs. Smythe had been insistent. Elizabeth had gone for

a bike ride with Nicholas, and he needed to start playing his part of chaperone. On his way over from Paarl, he'd wondered how he was even going to find them. If Constance hadn't mentioned that they were planning to go to a diner after their bike ride, he would have had no hope. But there was only one diner in Wellington.

"*Kan ek jou help, bru?*"

Charles's head swept up and around, and his eyes fixed upon the speaker—a short, blond-haired waitress, wearing a red miniskirt and white blouse. She was quite attractive, save for the impatient look on her face, and the fact that she must have been chewing 10 sticks of gum.

He frowned. "I'm sorry?" He didn't understand *Afrikaans*.

The girl rolled her eyes. "Can I help you?"

"Ah. Yes," he said, choosing to ignore her rude behavior. "I'm waiting for some friends, so I'll just have something to drink, please."

"Right. A glass of wine, then?"

Charles blinked in shock. He looked around again, wondering if he'd been too quick to judge the establishment. Turning back to the waitress, he asked incredulously, "They serve wine here?"

The waitress gave a short yip of laughter, shifted her enormous wad of gum from one cheek to the other, then leaned down until she was breathing bubblegum-scented breath into his face. For a moment, he irrationally feared that she was going to blow a gum bubble and pop it on his nose.

"For you, honey, we just might."

"A Coca-Cola would be fine, thanks."

Straightening, the waitress turned on her heel and went to fill his order. As she went, he heard her mutter under her breath, "*Ryk domkop*."\*

He was tempted to call after her: *I understood that!* But he managed to hold his tongue. She was calling him an idiot. The word was similar enough in German. What had he done to deserve her ire? He shook his head in annoyance; whatever the reason, she wasn't going to get a tip from him.

Charles began impatiently tapping his fingers on the table top and absently fiddling with the salt and pepper shaker in

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\* *Ryk domkop*: rich idiot

front of him. He looked up and noticed a group of leather-crusted toughs sitting across the aisle and a few booths down from him. They were periodically glancing his way. He stared at them, to make them realize he was aware of their scrutiny; they scowled and looked away. But as he waited for his drink, he noticed that every now and then they'd point and gesture animatedly at him. One of them glanced his way again, giving him an ugly look.

Abruptly, the group of young men—Charles counted four of them—got up and began swaggering his way. He kept his head down and tried not to look at them. *They're probably just on their way out*, he reasoned.

spite trying desperately to ignore and be ignored, Charles couldn't help but notice when the four leather-jacketed toughs that had been swaggering down the aisle toward him came alongside his table and *slowed* down. One of them—the biggest of the four—actually stopped and said something to him in *Afrikaans*. To which Charles smiled and replied, "Same to you."

The young man's eyes flashed briefly, but then he returned the smile and said something else. At this, the other three—not yet out of earshot—burst out laughing, and a few of them cast backward glances to see Charles's reaction.

Charles realized they were making fun of him, but he wasn't about to get a broken nose for his pride, so he just went on smiling and returned to his drink.

The young man who'd stopped began shaking his head and started past Charles. He pretended to stumble over his own feet—

And before Charles had a chance to get out of the way, the young man fell with an elbow to Charles's gut and one hand stretched out to the table, where he deftly knocked over Charles's Coke. The contents spilled out in a fizzy, golden-brown river of ice and coke. Charles let out a grunt and quickly shifted his leg out of the way of the soda river.

The bully picked himself up, dusted himself off, and grinned viciously down at Charles. "Oops," he said.

Charles felt a giddy rush of adrenaline as he listened to the steady *splat-splat splattering* of Coke on the floor. He almost didn't care that it was splashing his expensive, Italian leather shoes. For a long moment, Charles met the young man's grin

with an icy scowl and imagined a hundred different ways that he could incapacitate the bully. But all of those scenarios ended with the young man's friends coming to his aid and Charles getting thoroughly beaten.

Letting his anger out in a sigh, Charles shrugged and said, "No harm done."

The young man smirked. "*Bang-broek*."\*

Charles turned his head, pretending not to hear what he guessed was just another insult. He began mopping Coca-Cola from the table with a handful of serviettes. The bully shook his head disgustedly and started after his friends.

"Ruffian," Charles muttered.

When he was done mopping Coke from the table, Charles spent five minutes trying to get the attention of his rude waitress to order another Coke. Eventually, he succeeded, and 10 minutes later, it arrived.

As he was sipping his Coke through a straw, he heard the door chimes signaling new arrivals to the diner. There had been half a dozen such sounds since he'd come to the diner, and since he'd chosen to sit with his back to the door, he'd been forced to crane his head around each time to check if it was Nicholas and Elizabeth.

Letting out a tired sigh, Charles began turning his head once more, desperately hoping that *this time* it was them. If not, he wasn't sure he could wait much longer. After the incident with the bully, he was a heartbeat from paying his bill and shaking the dust of diners everywhere from his Coca-Cola-stained designer shoes.

But there, standing half a dozen paces from the open door of the diner was Elizabeth, her back turned to him, recognizable by her clothes, figure, and hair. Since she wasn't looking back at him, he allowed his gaze to linger, searching for Nicholas. It took him only a second to find the young man—the same height as him; longer, more unruly hair, the same color as Elizabeth's; casual clothes.

Elizabeth was staring after Nicholas, apparently waiting for him to join her inside the diner, but he was standing frozen in the doorway, holding the door open, his head facing the other way, his attention fixed on something outside. Charles followed

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\* *Bang-broek*: Coward



the young man's gaze through the nearest window of the diner—

To his Porsche 911 Carrera. Charles grinned; Nicholas was unwittingly admiring his competition's car.

Then Elizabeth said something to Nicholas and he turned to her, abandoning his place in the doorway. Not wanting Elizabeth to see him, Charles snapped his head back to the fore and waited for the moment to reveal himself. He'd wait for them to order something. Then they wouldn't be able to leave as soon as they saw him. When they did see him Elizabeth would be suspicious, and Nicholas would squirm. Charles smiled. It would almost be worth her ill feelings just to watch the latter display. Almost. But he couldn't allow a cad like Nicholas to be alone with Elizabeth. She would thank him later.

Charles heard Elizabeth's voice, accompanied by a deep, male voice, which he assumed to be Nicholas's. They were coming closer. He felt his pulse accelerate until it was hammering insistently in his ears. The voices grew louder and louder, until they were almost upon him.

They were coming too close! They were going to walk right past him, and then they'd see him. He began mustering his features for a look of appropriate surprise. Their voices grew so loud that they seemed to be speaking directly into his ear. He held his breath.

"Huh, that's peculiar," came Elizabeth's voice, from directly behind him. *She's spotted me!* Charles thought. Then, to his confusion, he felt a slight bump come through the back of his seat from the booth behind him. He almost turned to look, but then his eyes widened in astonishment, and he realized that at least one of them was now sitting directly behind him.

"Quite peculiar . . ." this from Nicholas.

After a moment, Elizabeth's voice returned—"Maybe it's got engine trouble?"—sounding so close that it left no doubt in his mind that she was the one sitting directly behind him.

Charles grinned and concentrated on staying quiet to avoid drawing attention to himself—and so that he could better eavesdrop on their conversation. . . .

\* \* \*

Minutes earlier: Nicholas and Elizabeth crossed the street, riding their bikes up onto the sidewalk and then into the

parking lot of Sandy's diner. Nicholas noticed as they did so, the usual slew of motorbikes that he'd come to expect from diners everywhere, but opposite them, standing out amidst a host of generic cars, was a gleaming red spectacle—a sports car with smooth, rounded edges and a high top that sloped down to a distinctive duck tail spoiler in the back.

Nicholas recognized it instantly and gave a long whistle. As he and Elizabeth rode across the diner's parking lot, Nicholas nodded to it and said, "You must have some wealthy people around here."

Elizabeth followed his gesture with her eyes and began shaking her head. "Wow! That's a nice car. Is it expensive?"

"Is it expensive?" Nicholas echoed. "That's a Porsche!"

"Oh." She slowed to a stop in front of the diner and hopped off her bicycle. Nicholas did the same.

"Come on, let's go," Elizabeth prompted Nicholas, who was still staring at the car. Without waiting for a reply, she started toward the door of the diner, but Nicholas snapped out of his reverie and beat her there.

"They make the best Coke floats here," she said as Nicholas opened the door for her.

"Really? That's my favorite drink."

Nicholas was just about to follow her through the door when a sudden hissing noise caught his attention. He found himself looking directly at the red Porsche. Outwardly, there was no sign of what could be causing the noise. The only thing he hadn't noticed before was a group of three young men, clad in leather jackets and standing some fifty paces from the car, admiring it. Nicholas frowned curiously as the sound went on, uninterrupted but gradually growing softer.

"Well, aren't you coming?" Elizabeth asked.

Nicholas blinked, then turned from the car and abandoned his place in the doorway to join her inside.

As they started toward one of the booths, Elizabeth said, "You were beginning to make me jealous the way you were staring at that car."

Nicholas laughed and explained: "There was a strange hissing noise coming from it—or maybe from something near to it."

"Huh, that's peculiar," Elizabeth said as they slid into an empty booth.

"Quite peculiar."

"Maybe it's got engine trouble?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Maybe, but the engine wasn't running."

"Strange." Elizabeth watched Nicholas casting his eyes around the diner and said, "Pretty neat place, huh?"

Nicholas began nodding. "Reminds me of a diner back in Bloemfontein that I used to go to."

A short, blonde-haired waitress chose that moment to come to their table. Nicholas noted from the way that her cheek was bulging and from the constant smacking noises issuing from her mouth that she was chewing an enormous wad of gum. After a couple distracted chews of her gum, she asked them in *Afrikaans* if they'd like anything to drink. He discussed it for a moment with Elizabeth—in English—and peripherally noted the waitress rolling her eyes at him. Elizabeth developed a conspiratorial smile, and Nicholas wondered at the waitress's strange behavior.

He studied her out of the corner of his eye while listening with half an ear to Elizabeth's musings about what she'd like to drink. He noticed the waitress start tapping her foot and looking the other way, as if she had better things to do. Then he heard her mutter, "*Rooineks*,"\* and suddenly he understood.

Nicholas smiled, and once he and Elizabeth had agreed to get two Coke floats, he turned to the waitress and asked for the drinks in flawless *Afrikaans*.

"Well!" the waitress replied, still speaking in *Afrikaans*. "It's nice to hear that not all of you English people are as ignorant as you seem."

The waitress began turning to leave, but Nicholas stopped her: "Hey—" The waitress stopped and regarded him with eyebrows raised. "—I'm not English."

"Aha!" she said, as though a great mystery had just been solved. "Makes sense. I thought you spoke *Afrikaans* too well to be a *Rooinek*. Unlike the dandy in the fancy suit over here," The waitress said, jerking a thumb over her shoulder. "He's a real *domkop*."

Nicholas followed the gesture to the booth directly behind theirs. Sitting with his back to Elizabeth was a man with dark hair, wearing a brown sports jacket. Nicholas nodded absently

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\* *Rooinek*: red neck (derogatory name for the English)

and returned his attention to the waitress. Lowering his voice, he replied, also speaking in *Afrikaans*: “Aren’t you afraid he’ll hear you?”

The waitress grinned and shook her head. “No, he’s as thick as a brick. Doesn’t understand a word we’re saying. Watch—” and to Nicholas’s horror she turned to the man and said, “—*hallo, domkop*.”\*

The man’s head swiveled to look her in the eye, and Nicholas heard him say, “The same to you with brass knobs on! And if you call me stupid one more time, I’m going to have to have a talk with your supervisor.”

The waitress did a double take, then turned to Nicholas with a shrug and said, “I guess he understands something after all.” Flashing Nicholas a quick grin and shifting the wad of gum in her mouth from one cheek to the other, she said, “I’ll be right back with your floats,” and then she hurried off to fill their order.

Nicholas began shaking his head, wondering how such a racist person could have got a job as a waitress. Then he noticed that Elizabeth had turned around in her seat and was gaping at the man behind them. For his part, the man—whom Nicholas could now see wasn’t any older than himself—was gaping right back at her.

Nicholas had only a second to wonder at their expressions before Elizabeth answered his curiosity:

“Charles?”

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\* *hallo, domkop*: hello, idiot

## Chapter 8

“Elizabeth?” Charles asked. “What are you doing here?”

“I was about to ask you the same question,” Elizabeth replied. “You *never* come here.”

He shrugged. “I decided to give the place a try. And I must say—” Nicholas watched Charles cast an irritated glance back toward their waitress. “—I haven’t been very impressed.”

“Just a minute,” Nicholas butted in, holding up a hand for attention, once he got it, he pointed an accusing finger at the young man. “You’re *Charles*?”

The brown-haired man flashed him an irritating grin, showing off a perfect set of teeth and an enviable pair of dimples. “That’s right.”

“Elizabeth’s *boyfriend*, Charles?”

“The same,” Charles replied, and Nicholas frowned. “You must be Nicholas. Elizabeth has told me a lot about you.”

Now it was Nicholas’s turn to smile. “Well that’s not really fair. . . .” Charles raised his eyebrows. “Because she hasn’t told me very much about *you*.”

Charles’s eyebrows abruptly arched back down, his eyes narrowing. For just a second, he appeared to be scowling, but then he adopted a more pleasant expression and said, “Well, there’s an easy way to fix that.”

And before either Nicholas or Elizabeth could object, Charles stood up from his booth, snatched his drink from the table, and sat down next Elizabeth.

“Charles!” Elizabeth whispered fiercely. “You promised.”

“Yes, I suppose I did. But it seems fate has different plans for us. Besides—” Charles nodded to Nicholas. “—Nick expressed an interest in getting to know me better. It would be rude to decline him the opportunity.”

Elizabeth turned to Nicholas, looking hesitant. "Do you mind if Charles sits with us?"

Nicholas took a moment to consider that. Actually, he *did* mind, but he couldn't very well say so without seeming rude or jealous. Besides, he *was* curious to know more about Charles. *It never hurts to know your competition.*

He shrugged. "It's okay with me."

Charles flashed another irritating grin. Then, under the guise of stretching, he arched one arm up over his head and let it land on the back of the booth behind Elizabeth's shoulders, giving the impression of putting his arm around her without actually doing so. Elizabeth didn't notice, and Charles just went on grinning.

Nicholas frowned.

"So, Nicholas, did you notice my car outside?"

Nicholas's brow momentarily furrowed, then he began nodding, suddenly putting two and two together. "I did."

"What do you think of it?"

"That's your car?" Elizabeth interrupted, pointing through one of the diner's windows to the red Porsche outside. "We were wondering whose it was."

"It's a nice car," Nicholas conceded. "When did your father buy it for you?"

Charles had already opened his mouth to give a smug reply, but once the meaning behind Nicholas's words sank in, he visibly hesitated. Nicholas was clearly emphasizing that his wealth wasn't really *his*, but his father's. *Fair enough*, Charles thought. *That doesn't make it any less available to me.*

He waved a dismissive hand in the car's direction. "Oh, my father asked me what kind of car I'd like to drive, and I chose that one." Charles gave a short laugh. "He has so much money that it scarcely matters to him how it's spent—or by whom," Charles added, with an accompanying smirk at Nicholas.

But Elizabeth quickly wiped the triumphant look off his face. She had just noticed Charles's arm draped along the top of the booth behind her. She stared pointedly at it. When Charles made no move to remove his arm, she cleared her throat and said, "What's your arm doing there, Charles?"

Charles's smirk vanished. Unable to come up with a suitable excuse, he silently removed his arm. Nicholas grinned.

At that point the waitress returned, carrying two coke floats.

Upon finding Charles seated with them, she raised her eyebrows at Nicholas. Speaking in Afrikaans, she asked, "Is he a friend of yours?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Not mine." He nodded to Elizabeth. "Hers."

The waitress smiled as she placed Nicholas's coke float in front of him. Leaning over Charles, she placed Elizabeth's float in front of her. As she straightened, she paused with her face a few inches from Charles's and blew a gum bubble in his face. She grinned, and speaking in English she said, "By the way, I am the supervisor, *domkop*."

Shock registered on Charles's face, then he adopted a tone which was simultaneously contrite and serious: "I guess that makes sense. You are too asinine to be just a waitress."

At this, the young girl's brow furrowed and she seemed taken aback. "Enjoy your floats," she said and then left.

"That was very big of you," Elizabeth said. "Giving her a compliment after she was so mean to you."

Charles smirked. "I didn't. I just told her she was stupid."

"But it sounded like you were—"

"Complimenting her?" Charles shook his head. "That's how I wanted it to sound."

Nicholas stirred the ice cream around in his float using his straw, a hint of a smile on his face. "I take it that 'asinine' means stupid."

"Quite."

"Shame on you, Charles!" Elizabeth said. "You shouldn't lower yourself to her level."

"She started it," Charles replied.

"She deserved it," Nicholas added.

The two belatedly glared at one another, angry to find that they were in agreement.

"Well, I think you're both wrong," Elizabeth said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Nicholas swallowed a mouthful of his float and frowned. "How so?"

Elizabeth gave him a patient look. "Revenge is wrong."

"It's not revenge. It's justice," Nicholas retorted.

Elizabeth had given her attention to her drink, and in lieu of a verbal reply she merely shook her head. A moment later, she fixed Nicholas with a curious look, and then her gaze flicked

sideways to Charles. "Do either of you believe in God?"

"Of course," Nicholas replied.

"Well—" Charles cleared his throat. "—no. I respect those who do, but I confess that I've never been able to imagine some invisible man in the sky secretly directing my fate. Frankly, I've never needed to. My family's always done just fine on its own."

"I see," Elizabeth said, failing to keep the disappointment from her voice. "Well, I believe in God. I graduated at the top of my confirmation class."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows, and despite his best efforts to prevent it, his expression twisted contemptuously. It wasn't contempt for her, but rather for the ritual she'd gone through, which, apparently, she seemed to think meant something.

Elizabeth didn't miss the look on his face. "Something on your mind, Nicholas?"

He shrugged, and avoided her gaze by staring down into his float and stirring it. "I just don't think that God cares how well we do on a test. After all, it's not like *He* wrote it."

Elizabeth frowned. "Well - it is based on Godly principles."

Nicholas shook his head and looked up from his drink. Elizabeth's brow was furrowed in confusion.

"I saw all of my friends go through confirmation, and none of them changed as a result of it. It was just a ritual, something that everyone did because everyone was doing it. I wasn't going to go through all that trouble just for the sake of conformity, so I refused."

"You *refused*?" Elizabeth asked. "No wonder you believe in revenge." With that Elizabeth turned her attention to her drink.

Nicholas wasn't about to leave it at that, but he was distracted by the suddenly sly look that crossed Charles's face. He grinned across the table at Nicholas and said, "Well, speaking for myself, Elizabeth, you've pricked my conscience."

Nicholas's eyes narrowed.

"I'm going to go apologize to that waitress."

Nicholas's eyes narrowed still further, and then Charles winked at him and stood up from the booth.

Nicholas's jaw dropped in sudden comprehension. Charles wasn't going to apologize; he was just trying to appear to be the better man. Nicholas glanced at Elizabeth to see if she was falling for it.

She was; she smiled at Charles as she said, "Good for you!"



To which he replied, "I'll be right back," and left.

"You could learn a thing or two from him," Elizabeth said. "He's an atheist, and yet *he's* still able to see when he's wrong."

Nicholas's brow furrowed. Was she talking about his views on confirmation? Or revenge? *I'm not wrong*, he thought, but he decided to drop it. Instead, he jerked his head toward Charles and said, "He's not going to apologize."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "He just left to do exactly that."

Nicholas began shaking his head. "He winked at me when he said that he was going to apologize."

"I didn't see that."

"Well, I did."

Elizabeth looked dubious. "I don't believe you. And besides, if you're always looking for the worst in people, you'll find it."

Nicholas snorted at that. "Watch, I'll bet Charles doesn't go anywhere near that waitress."

Elizabeth obediently turned to look, following Charles with her eyes. Nicholas likewise watched to see where Charles went. To his unending surprise, Charles went right up to their waitress, and though they couldn't hear what he said, they did observe a brief conversation between the two. After which, Charles turned and started back toward them.

Elizabeth looked away, and regarded Nicholas with a subtle smile and a too-pleased sparkle in her eyes. "You were saying?"

"I—" Charles sat down next to Elizabeth, and Nicholas narrowed his eyes at him.

"Nothing like an apology to soothe a person's ruffled feathers," Charles said, grinning smugly.

"Except that hers weren't ruffled," Nicholas pointed out. "She didn't even know that you had insulted her. So what did she say when you told her that you had?"

Charles's grin momentarily faltered. "Well . . . she was indignant, of course." Charles chuckled nervously. "But after I'd apologized she was considerably more cordial."

"Right . . ." Nicholas said.

The trio quieted as Nicholas and Elizabeth gave attention to their drinks. Only the occasional comment passed between them to fill the silence. Meanwhile, Nicholas was busily contemplating his rival.

Charles, and his suave, smug over-confidence; Charles, and

all his father's limitless wealth; Charles, and . . . Nicholas grimaced around another mouthful of Coke and ice cream.

"I'm going to go to the *loo*," Elizabeth said, interrupting Nicholas's thoughts. Charles stood up from the table so that Elizabeth could slide out of the booth.

Before departing, she cast a look between Charles and Nicholas. "You two be nice," she said.

"Of course," Charles replied smoothly. Nicholas's mouth was filled with a spoonful of ice cream that he'd recently taken from his float, so he gave no reply.

Once Elizabeth had left, Charles sat down in the booth again. His expression abruptly changed from smug and smiling to cold and measuring as he glared at Nicholas. "Okay, listen, I'm on to you. You make one wrong move with Elizabeth and you'll regret it." Nicholas raised his eyebrows but said nothing. "I'm watching you," Charles finished.

Nicholas tried to keep a serious expression as he digested Charles's words and fished around in his float for some more ice cream. Finding some, he spooned it into his mouth and began nodding thoughtfully, with a hint of a smile curling the corners of his lips. Withdrawing the spoon from his mouth, he began shaking it in Charles's direction. "And by wrong move you mean . . . kissing, cuddling, and holding hands? Because if that's the case . . ." Nicholas began shaking his head sadly. "I might just have to live with some regrets."

Charles's eyes flashed dangerously. "Watch it. You're on thin ice."

"Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you. I was under the impression that you'd promised to stay away while I was visiting, and yet here you are." Nicholas spread his hands to indicate their surroundings. "In a place where you supposedly never go, at a time when we were going to be here . . . It's almost like . . ." Nicholas stared off into a distant corner of the room, as if searching for answers, and then he met Charles's icy glare with equal frostiness. "You were waiting for us."

Charles began shaking his finger in Nicholas's face. "And I wouldn't have had to do that and break my promise to Elizabeth if you had a scrap of honor to your rotten name. I

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\* *loo*: restroom

know all about you, *Nick*. So you just be careful how you treat Elizabeth, and *maybe* I'll let you leave Wellington in one piece."

"Excuse me?"

Whatever explanation Charles might have given for his accusations was cut off when Elizabeth returned. She stopped alongside the table, waiting for Charles to get up so she could sit down. But neither Nicholas nor Charles appeared to notice her, locked as they were in a staring match. Elizabeth cast a nervous glance between the two of them.

"Did I miss something?" she asked.

Still shocked by Charles's threats and insinuations, Nicholas just went on staring, but Charles finally tore his eyes away and acknowledged her presence with a smile. "We were just discussing politics," he said.

"Ah . . . aren't you going to let me in?"

"Of course, Princess, where are my manners?" Charles stood up from the booth.

"*Princess?*" Nicholas echoed.

Elizabeth gave Nicholas an embarrassed look as she slid into the booth. "Charles's nickname for me."

"I see," Nicholas replied, smiling and raising his eyebrows as though that were the cheesiest thing he had ever heard.

The rest of their time in the diner was filled with yawning, uncomfortable silences and a crackling tension that made it seem as if the air were charged with static. Charles's smug looks had been replaced by a slew of rock-eyed glares and malevolent smiles. Nicholas was feeling equally ill-disposed to Charles, but put up a front of geniality for Elizabeth's sake. After all, she was facing him and would see any discourteous looks he gave Charles.

Once Nicholas and Elizabeth finished their floats and they got the bill from the waitress, Nicholas began reaching into his pocket to pay for his and Elizabeth's drinks, but Charles stopped him with a hand and a mockingly charitable look. "No, please, it's my treat."

Nicholas narrowed his eyes at Charles. "That's okay, you pay for your drinks and I'll pay for mine and Elizabeth's." Nicholas started to count out some change from his wallet.

"No, I insist. It's the least I can do for you after intruding on your time together. Besides, Nicholas, you'll need what little money you have for your upcoming time in the air force. I'm

sure they don't pay one very well for services rendered. I, on the other hand, have nearly limitless resources, so it's no trouble."

Nicholas frowned. "In other words—*here, let me drop a few pennies in your hat, you poor beggar, you?*"

Elizabeth reached out and grabbed the hand Nicholas had been using to count out change from his wallet. "I'm sure he didn't mean it like that." She turned to Charles. "Did you, Charles?"

Charles managed to look hurt. "Of course not! Nicholas, it might sound like charity, but look at it this way: I'm just doing you a favor. Next time, if indeed there is a next time, you can get the bill."

Nicholas hesitated, but when he looked up from the change he'd counted out on the table and saw the pleading look in Elizabeth's eyes, he relented. Obviously, she thought Charles was making some kind of peace offering out of the goodness of his heart. Nicholas knew he'd look horribly ungrateful if he refused.

Swallowing his pride, and reminding himself that it was for Elizabeth's sake, Nicholas nodded. "Okay, but next time I'm paying. I'm not as poor as you obviously seem to think."

Nicholas noticed Elizabeth send Charles a gracious smile as he picked a 20 *rand* note out of his wallet and placed it on the table.

When their gum-chewing waitress came by to collect the bill, Charles said, "Keep the change," and was rewarded with a blank and blinking stare from the young girl. She'd even stopped chewing her gum.

He'd just given her almost 15 Rand for a tip.

Charles pretended not to notice her shock as he slid out of the booth. Once standing, he offered his hand to Elizabeth to help her out of the booth.

As they turned to leave, Charles spared their waitress a glance and said, "Don't mention it." She gave no sign of having heard him. Her gaze was fixed upon the 20 *rand* note on the table.

Nicholas wasn't impressed. Elizabeth seemed to be taking the overgenerous tip in her stride, as if there were nothing strange about it. But Nicholas couldn't help sarcastically thinking: *how difficult it must be to be so free and easy with his*

*father's money.*

The three of them stopped outside the diner, alongside Nicholas's and Elizabeth's bikes. When Charles saw Nicholas climbing on top of Elizabeth's pink bicycle, he burst out laughing.

"An interesting fashion statement you are." Charles laughed again, then stepped back and adopted a more serious expression. "Well, I think the color suits you *very* well."

"There weren't exactly a lot of options." Nicholas spared a meaningful glance for Hattie's purple bike as Elizabeth climbed on top of it. "Good thing I'm not lacking in self-esteem, but I can understand how *you* might find it embarrassing to ride a pink bicycle."

Charles smirked at that and started toward his Porsche. "How fortunate, then, that I don't have to."

Nicholas watched as Charles rounded his car to the driver's side, withdrew a set of keys from his pocket, and opened the door. But Charles froze halfway through climbing into his car and then suddenly erupted into a string of curses that Nicholas hadn't thought him capable of uttering. Charles closed the door with a violent slam and went down on his haunches near the front of the car.

"What is it?" Elizabeth asked, sounding worried. Anything that could make Charles crack his genteel outer shell had to be bad. When no reply came, Elizabeth cycled down into the parking lot to see for herself. More curious than ever, Nicholas followed.

It didn't take long to see what had Charles so upset. The front tire on the driver's side of his car was completely flat.

Charles pointed to a particular spot on the side of the flaccid tire. Nicholas strained to see what he was pointing at. Then he noticed the short, ragged gash.

"Someone deliberately slashed my tire!"

Elizabeth gasped. "Who would want to do that?"

Charles shook his head.

"Looks like they got the back one, too," Nicholas said, pointing to the rear wheel of the car.

Charles whirled around. Another stream of curses. He went down on his haunches next to the rear wheel. "Also slashed," he said, sounding dismayed. "I don't understand it! I barely know anyone here; I haven't made any enemies. . . ."

Nicholas chuckled, and Charles rounded on him, his eyes suspiciously narrowed.

"What are you looking at me for?"

"You tell me." Charles's voice was deadly serious.

Nicholas shook his head. "It wasn't me, if that's what you're thinking." Shrugging, he went on, "Probably someone saw your car and was jealous. . . ." Nicholas trailed off, his eyes widening. "So that's what that noise was!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Before I went into the diner, I stopped in the doorway because I heard a hissing noise coming from your car—like the hissing of air escaping from slashed tires."

"Why didn't you say something about it?"

Nicholas shrugged. "I did, to Elizabeth. Anyway, I do remember seeing a group of three guys admiring your car before we went into the diner—"

"They weren't wearing leather jackets by any chance?"

Nicholas nodded. "They were. Why, you know them?"

Charles's eyes flashed, and he looked ready to let out another string of curses. "Yeah, *acquaintances* of mine. One of them tried to pick a fight with me in the diner."

Elizabeth gasped. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, thanks for asking. I refused to rise to his bait. Anyway, he had three friends with him. I suspect those were the three you saw admiring my car. The other one was probably hidden behind the car with his knife buried to the hilt in one of my tires." Charles glared at the diner. "This is the last time I'm ever coming here."

Nicholas chuckled.

"What are you laughing at now?" Charles asked, glaring at him.

"Oh, nothing. It's just ironic, that's all. I'll bet you wish you had my pretty pink bike, now, huh?"

Charles just went on glaring.

"Actually, Nicholas, that's a good point," Elizabeth said. "We should let Charles borrow my bike so that he can get to a gas station or a mechanic and get his car fixed."

Nicholas's delight vanished beneath a scowl, which he promptly sent Elizabeth's way. "And what am I going to do, walk back to your house?"

"It's not that far."

Nicholas grimaced, imagining the hot walk back. He'd have to jog to keep up with Elizabeth on her bike. . . .

"You two could always ride on the same bike together," Elizabeth added.

Charles pretended to consider that. "What do you say, Nicholas? You can ride on the bar."

Nicholas's cheeks bulged and he sputtered: "Why should *I* ride on the bar?"

Charles got off his haunches and strode over to Nicholas. Stopping in front of Nicholas, he measured with a level hand from the top of his head and swept it through the empty space above Nicholas's head. "Because I'm taller, that's why."

Nicholas snorted. "I think I'd rather let you ride by yourself."

Charles smiled broadly, as if that had been his plan all along. He shrugged. "If you insist . . ." He reached for the handlebars of the pink bicycle.

"Wait a minute," Elizabeth said. "Something just occurred to me." She looked over at Charles. "How are you going to get the bicycle back to me?"

"I'll ride it over to your house when I'm finished."

"But then how are you going to get back to your car?"

Charles's expression clouded over. "Well, I . . ."

"She's got you there," Nicholas said. "Looks like you'll have to walk either way."

Elizabeth came to a different conclusion: "You're going to have to ride together. That way Nicholas can ride the bike back to my house after we get you to someone who can fix your car."

Charles and Nicholas glared at one another, looking equally reluctant.

"There's no way I can ride the bike with him sitting on the bar in front of me," Nicholas said.

"That's a pity, because I'm quite certain I could ride it with *you* sitting in front of *me*," Charles replied.

"That would still be awkward," Elizabeth said. "But I'm just small enough that one of you might be able to ride with me on the bar." Elizabeth started climbing off Hattie's bike.

"Sure, hop on, Lizzie," Nicholas said, patting the bar in front of him.

"Hold on a minute." Charles held up a hand. "How come I get to ride the little purple bike? I won't fit. You ride that one, Nicholas, and I'll ride Elizabeth's bike with her in front of me."

In fact, she can even sit on my lap. How about it, Princess?" Elizabeth shrugged and Charles turned to Nicholas with another irritating grin. "I think she likes my plan."

Nicholas was struggling to speak, for lack of either oxygen or words. "Not on your bloody life!" Nicholas finally managed. "Elizabeth can sit on my lap. If you're so confident you can ride with two people on the same bike, then you'll have no trouble at all riding one that's a few sizes too small." Elizabeth was flicking nervous glances between the two of them, looking uncomfortable.

"I think Charles is right, Nicholas. He is taller than you, so it'll be easier for you to ride Hattie's bike."

Nicholas frowned. He'd run out of logical arguments to oppose the arrangement, but the thought of Elizabeth riding on Charles's lap was intolerable. He realized that at this point there was only one way he could prevent it.

"Forget it. I'll jog beside you two," Nicholas said as he began clambering off Elizabeth's bicycle.

Elizabeth's eyes widened in pleasant surprise. "That's very unselfish of you, Nicholas! Thank you." And with Charles watching, she threw her arms around Nicholas's neck and kissed him on the cheek. Charles glared daggers at him, and Nicholas smiled smugly back. *Checkmate, pal.*

When Elizabeth let go of him, Nicholas gestured from Charles to the pink bicycle. "It's your fashion statement, now. I hope you don't feel too self-conscious riding it."

Looking sullen, Charles clambered onto Elizabeth's bicycle.

"Let's go," Charles said, then set off at a brisk pace which forced Nicholas to run to keep up. But he didn't mind. The whole way to the nearest gas station, he was smiling blithely, remembering the look on Charles's face when Elizabeth had kissed him.

*Priceless.*

And to improve his mood still further, at one point along the way, a group of *four* leather-jacketed young men drew alongside them on motorcycles, laughing and pointing at Charles riding Elizabeth's pink bike.

A coincidence?

Nicholas didn't think so.



## Chapter 9

**T**hat night Nicholas lay wide awake in bed, staring up at the dark, featureless ceiling in the Smythe family's guest bedroom. Nine o'clock was an exceptionally early hour to go to bed, especially for him. He was used to midnight, at least. Though, having managed to get very little sleep the previous night—due to the constant motion and noise aboard the train—he *was* tired. Unfortunately, he still couldn't sleep. His mind simply wouldn't rest, endlessly swirling as it was with possibilities, doubts, fears, hopes, and—dare he allow them to form—dreams. And at the center of them all was a girl, but not just any girl.

Elizabeth.

The trouble was, as much time as they'd spent together, neither one of them had ever said how they felt about each other, leaving Nicholas to wonder whether he was just an entertaining distraction for Elizabeth, or if he might actually have a chance with her. Nicholas frowned up at the ceiling.

He had to find out the answer to that before he left. And the only way he could think to do that would be to tell her how *he* felt. But how to do it?

*And when?*

He waited for an answer, but none was forthcoming from his thoughts. If he told her tomorrow as soon as he could find an opportunity, and she wasn't very receptive to his feelings, appeared conflicted, or obviously didn't feel the same way about him . . . then that would surely spoil the rest of their time together. On the other hand, if she did reciprocate, their time together would be that much more special.

But how could she feel the same way? She had Charles. He wouldn't be easy to compete with. Nicholas had no illusions

about that. Charles was rich, suave, a real English gentleman if ever there was one (at least as far as appearances went). But most important of all, he was *here*. Putting himself in her shoes, Nicholas couldn't imagine why Elizabeth would choose him. What did he have going for him?

Nicholas grimaced. On that depressing note, he suddenly felt the full measure of his fatigue. Yet, no matter how small his chances, Nicholas knew that Denise had been right when she'd convinced him to go to Wellington. For better or worse, he needed closure.

And that meant telling Elizabeth how he felt, regardless of the consequences. But it couldn't hurt to wait until the end of his time with her. It would soften the inevitable blow. Now the only question was *how* to tell Elizabeth.

How, after three summers together and countless letters written back and forth, could he tell her that it had meant more to him than just the fun they'd had?

His first idea had been to just come out and say it. He'd been in the process of doing exactly that, while saying goodbye to Elizabeth in Siesta, when her mother had rudely interrupted them. *What else is new?* he thought disgustedly. But at least she'd given him an opportunity to tell Elizabeth with the right atmosphere. . . . Dinner at a nice restaurant perhaps.

Nicholas smiled. He had a plan, and it just might work. Unfortunately, that did nothing to quiet his mind. Now, he'd switched to wondering what her reaction would be, and when he should take her to dinner. He decided that an evening meal would be the most romantic, and since he was leaving Monday afternoon, that left only tomorrow night.

*So Sunday night it is*, he thought. Rolling over onto his side and closing his eyes, Nicholas tried to quiet his mind.

It didn't work. In no time at all his mind had conjured up another stream of questions and his eyes shot open. Where was he going to take her? And how, with no car and a reasonably low budget, was he going to get her there?

\* \* \*

Elizabeth's eyes popped open at just before six o'clock on Sunday morning. Hopping out of bed, she stretched and began her morning routine. While showering and drying her hair, her thoughts turned to the events of the previous day. It had been wonderful—with the exception of meeting Charles at the diner.

It had been strange to find him there, after his repeated dismissals of the place. But she had no right to be suspicious of him. He'd never been anything but honest with her. And jealousy just wasn't his style: confidence, overconfidence maybe, but not jealousy.

As for Nicholas . . . she shook her head sadly. This was practically their second last day together. He'd be leaving soon, and then their strange, uncertain relationship would once again be relegated to mailing letters back and forth. She sighed. She'd have to remember to get the address for the air force academy in Pretoria from Nicholas. Without that, she wouldn't even be able to write to him. . . .

As Elizabeth's thoughts turned to letters, she remembered one in particular, lying at the bottom of a drawer in her desk, a letter which had been weighing heavily on her mind ever since she'd read it. A frown clouded her face, and she walked from the bathroom to her desk. Going down on her haunches, she opened the letter drawer and retrieved a still-dusty envelope from beneath a stack of other letters. She carefully opened the envelope and reread the letter.

Her bedroom door was locked, so there was no chance of anyone walking in on her and catching her by surprise.

Reaching the end of the letter, Elizabeth shook her head. It still made no sense to her. Her father couldn't have betrayed his best friend. He *wouldn't* have! She was sure of it, but then how could she explain the letter and Lawrence's accusations?

Perhaps she could ask her father about it. She wouldn't reveal the letter to him, of course. If he was innocent, it would upset him too much, and if he were guilty . . . well, he'd probably be just as upset. But surely she could discover something more by talking to him? She could ask under the guise of innocent curiosity. But she'd need the right opportunity. Ideally, one where she could get her father by himself, without her mother, sister, or Nicholas around.

Putting the letter away, Elizabeth finished getting ready. Then, leaving her room, she strode down the hallway to the living room. There she found exactly what she'd been hoping for: her father, sitting on a couch in the living room, all by himself, and reading the morning paper while drinking a cup of coffee. Taking a seat in one of the armchairs beside the couch, she stared at her father's newspaper until he noticed her.

“Good morning, Elizabeth,” he said, lowering his newspaper with a smile. “Did you sleep well?”

“Very well, thanks. Anyone else up yet?”

“Your mother is in the kitchen getting breakfast ready, but I haven’t seen Hattie or Nicholas yet.”

Elizabeth nodded absently, wringing her hands. Noticing the nervous gesture, Edwin set his paper aside, and frowned, his gaze pointedly resting on her hands.

“Something on your mind?”

Elizabeth met his worried frown with a small, sympathetic smile. She hated to ask, knowing that even the mention of Lawrence would spoil his morning, but she had to know.

“How did Uncle Lawrence lose his job, Dad?”

Edwin blinked once, twice, three times—his frown slowly fading to a blank, faraway look. A long moment passed in which he said nothing and didn’t move a muscle.

“Dad?” Elizabeth prompted, her voice sounding small and frightened, even to her own ears.

\* \* \*

Constance could hardly believe her ears when she heard Elizabeth’s softly and innocently voiced question come rolling into the kitchen from the living room.

“How did Uncle Lawrence lose his job, Dad?”

After all this time, was Elizabeth finally putting two and two together? Had she connected the phone call she’d overheard to the subsequent events?

Constance scowled even as her hands started shaking, and she propelled herself on wooden legs to the open, doorless frame which led from the living room to the kitchen.

First Mr. Gaines, and now her daughter—that was all she needed! Constance stood to one side of the door frame, hidden from view and listening keenly.

\* \* \*

When Edwin finally recovered enough to speak, he found that his mouth was too dry for the task, so he took a sip of his coffee first.

He decided that there was no point prevaricating. *Why not give credit where credit is due?*

“It was my fault, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth blinked in shock even as her jaw dropped. The letter was true, then! And her father wasn’t even trying to deny

it. Could he be so callous that he simply didn't care what he'd done to his best friend?

"How could you?" Elizabeth finally asked, a tearful quaver in her voice.

Edwin's eyes flashed briefly with shock and pain, but then he gave the barest nod, accepting his daughter's disappointment. "I wasn't able to help him when he needed me the most. I tried, but not hard enough, and I simply couldn't cover for all of his mistakes. I suppose that in the end, one of them must have caught up with him."

Elizabeth's eyebrows drew together in a tight knot of confusion. "I don't understand. . . . If you were helping him, why did he pick a fight with you at the airport?"

Edwin shook his head wearily. His eyes were red and glassy with unshed tears, and his heart was aching. By the look of her, Elizabeth wasn't doing any better. He forced a smile for her sake. "Lawrence had this strange idea that I'd betrayed him somehow." Edwin sighed. "I think the stress of everything was finally getting to him and . . ." Edwin trailed off and began shaking his head again. "He wasn't thinking straight. He was making all kinds of irrational accusations. He wasn't making any sense, and he wasn't listening to reason."

"It's possible that one or more of the board members found out about my trip to Canada—or worse, why I was going—and then summoned him to a board meeting in which they confronted him about it. He probably reasoned that I was the one who told them."

Elizabeth saw her father give a helpless shrug. "Apart from a sudden mental break, it's the only way I can imagine that he might have thought I'd betrayed him." Edwin sighed. "And after our fight . . . when he appeared in the morning news with a story about how he'd knocked me unconscious at Cape Town International . . . I think that must have been the last straw. He was probably dismissed by a unanimous vote."

"Oh . . ." Elizabeth's voice sounded small and soft, and guilty. She heard her father snifle, then saw him pull a handkerchief from the top pocket of his tweed jacket and wipe his nose with it.

"Why do you ask?"

Elizabeth hesitated, then said, "I got to thinking about it this morning, and it occurred to me that Uncle Lawrence losing his

job was probably what pushed him over the edge. And I wasn't even sure why he'd been fired."

Edwin nodded and smiled at Elizabeth to show that there were no hard feelings. She obviously hadn't brought it up to upset him. She was just trying to understand what had happened. He'd done the same thing, asking himself those same questions (and many more) over and over again in the wake of Lawrence's funeral. Both to understand what had happened, and to silence his guilt. If only he hadn't been so absorbed with himself, maybe he could have done something more. Instead, he'd gone on vacation to Siesta, leaving his best friend to handle the problems with the company all by himself, with no one to turn to as the walls of his life came crashing down. Those crucial three weeks could have made all the difference. Edwin could have offered to take over while *Lawrence* went on vacation.

Instead . . . Edwin swallowed past the lump in his throat. "There was nothing you could have done about it, Elizabeth, so you mustn't worry about these things." *That's my responsibility*, Edwin thought. Elizabeth nodded but said nothing. "Well, go on then, go say good morning to your mother and see if you can help her with breakfast. We're going to be late for church otherwise."

Nodding again, Elizabeth stood up from her chair and left for the kitchen. As she did so, she heard her father give a long, heartfelt sigh. She felt a piercing stab of guilt followed by a sudden flash of anger at Lawrence and the letter he'd written. *Mentally unstable, indeed. He must have been if he blamed Dad for losing his job.* The letter was the work of a fevered mind, and didn't deserve to be read ever again.

She was going to burn it.

Feeling some righteous satisfaction at that thought, Elizabeth entered the kitchen with a smile on her face.

"Hello, Mom," Elizabeth said, with forced joviality. Her mother was down on her haunches in front of the refrigerator with the door wide open. "Need any help?"

Her mother straightened and turned from the refrigerator. In her hands she held a dozen eggs and a packet of bacon. She was smiling broadly as she gave her reply: "Thank you, Elizabeth. Your help would certainly be appreciated. You can make the toast while I cook the eggs and bacon."

## Chapter 10

**F**rom his place at the breakfast table, sitting opposite Elizabeth and Hattie, Nicholas was aware of an acute, somber silence. No one was saying anything; the only sound was the clatter of knives and forks on plates.

Nicholas gave a nervous chuckle. "So, who died?"

Suddenly he found himself confronted by three sets of eyes, all wide and staring, and the clatter of knives and forks nearly ceased. Only Hattie hadn't abruptly stopped eating.

"Excuse me?" Constance asked.

"Ah . . ." Nicholas felt a sudden sweat break out on his forehead. "It's just that everyone is so quiet this morning. You know, like somebody died. . . ." Then a horrible thought occurred to him. "Someone didn't *actually* die, did they?"

The very air seemed to take a deep breath, and for one, heart-stopping moment nobody said anything. Then Constance broke the tension with a laugh. "Of course not! I think everyone is just a little tired this morning."

Nicholas allowed a short laugh of his own. "You had me worried for a moment!"

The silence returned, and Nicholas had to force himself not to grimace. But this time Constance alleviated the oppressive quietude. "Have you and Elizabeth made any particular plans for today?"

"Well, I was thinking that Elizabeth and I might go out to a restaurant tonight." Elizabeth diverted her attention from her food to send him a smile that was half surprised and half approving.

Constance began nodding. "Oh, that sounds nice. Where are you planning to go?"

Nicholas paused to spear some scrambled eggs with his fork,

then said, "I don't really know the area, but I was thinking maybe The Spur, in Cape Town, but as I don't have a car . . . getting there would be a problem."

Edwin started to say something, but Constance silenced him with a look that Nicholas didn't quite miss. His eyes widened by a fraction of a degree. *What was that about?* he wondered.

Constance began nodding. "Yes, that is a problem. Perhaps you shouldn't be so ambitious. There are a few restaurants here in Wellington, and the two of you could easily get to them on bicycles."

Nicholas had his mouth full and waited to swallow before giving his reply. "Such as?"

"I'll give the matter some thought and let you know," Constance replied. She smiled then. "Don't worry, the details have a way of sorting themselves out."

Nicholas nodded absently while reaching for his water glass. He certainly hoped the details would sort themselves out. Especially one detail—that of what Elizabeth's reaction would be to his heart-on-his-sleeve confession of how he felt about her.

\*            \*            \*

After church Nicholas and Elizabeth spent some time in the park, and then went for another bike ride. They stopped for drinks again afterward, but this time Nicholas picked the location randomly, a spur-of-the-moment decision that Charles couldn't possibly predict.

Not even Elizabeth had known where they were going, and Charles had been nowhere to be seen. It was almost suspicious. Was it possible that Elizabeth had set him up yesterday?

Nicholas thought about it as he played Rummy with Elizabeth. He considered which of the two cards in his hand he should discard.

They were playing on the coffee table in the living room, sitting side by side on the couch—not a very practical arrangement given the ease with which they could see each other's cards.

"So, where are we going tonight?" Elizabeth asked.

Her tone was eager and her eyes dancing with curiosity. Nicholas couldn't help but smile. He discarded one of his cards and said, "It's a surprise." *Even to me*, he thought. Constance



hadn't been forthcoming with the names of any restaurants in the area, even though he'd asked her about it several times since the topic had come up at breakfast.

If she didn't think of something soon, he was going to have to ask Elizabeth's father. Surely it couldn't take all day to remember what restaurants were in the area?

"Well, can you at least give me a hint?" Elizabeth persisted, half turning from the coffee table to face Nicholas.

Nicholas turned his sole remaining card away from Elizabeth. "Hey, no peeking!"

"I wasn't."

"Really?" Nicholas looked doubtful. "To answer your question . . . I haven't actually decided where we're going yet."

"Oh."

"I asked your mother a couple of times about where we might go, but she kept telling me that she'd have to think about it."

"Well, it's almost five o'clock, so we should make up our minds soon. I'm sure she's thought of something by now, why don't we go and ask her?"

"Don't you want to finish our game first?" Nicholas asked, sounding smug.

Elizabeth flicked a glance between his one remaining card and the four she was holding. "Why bother? You've already won." She threw her cards down on the coffee table in disgust and rose from the couch.

Nicholas grinned at her. "That's not a good attitude to have."

Elizabeth turned a dry look on him. "Easy to say when you're winning."

"And all the more important to believe when you're not."

Elizabeth conceded that with a shrug. "Come on, let's go find my mom. If she hasn't thought of anything by now, then she's not going to, and I'll think of someplace we can go."

"Okay." Nicholas followed Elizabeth around the house looking for her mom. They eventually found her in the backyard, watering the garden.

"Mom," Elizabeth began, coming to a stop alongside her mother. She was watering a patch of red flowers under the eaves of the house.

"Yes, dear?"

"Nicholas and I were wondering if you'd managed to come up with any ideas about where we could go for dinner tonight?"

Constance stopped watering the flowers. For a long moment she said nothing, her eyebrows drawing together in silent contemplation as she gazed absently off into space. She looked like she was trying to remember some important detail which had slipped her mind.

"Oh, yes!" She turned a smile upon her daughter. "You've had a stroke of luck in that area, my dear." Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "It occurred to me that the two of you might be able to go to Cape Town, after all."

"Dad's going to take us?" Elizabeth asked, a hopeful lilt in her voice.

"Even better than that. I called Charles and he agreed to lend you and Nicholas the use of his chauffeur for the evening."

"Wow, that was nice of him! Don't you think so, Nicholas?" Elizabeth asked, turning to him.

"Yeah, *super* nice..." Nicholas couldn't quite keep the sarcasm out of his voice. Something about Charles's sudden generosity bothered him. It didn't make any sense in light of his attitude at the diner. Not to mention that he didn't want to feel indebted to that smarmy snob.

Constance glanced at her watch. "Oh, dear! Your chauffeur should be here any minute. You two had better get ready."

"When is he coming?" Elizabeth asked, sounding anxious.

"Five o'clock, and it's a quarter to right now."

Elizabeth's eyes bulged. "That doesn't give us much time. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Constance affected an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, dear. I entirely forgot about it until you asked me. Don't worry, though—" Constance went back to watering the flowers. "—I'm sure he won't mind waiting for you to finish getting ready."

\* \* \*

Nicholas entered the living room, now dressed and ready to take Elizabeth out on a date. He was wearing his dress uniform from Saint Andrews, the fanciest pair of clothes he owned. It was a black blazer with the school's crest sewn onto the breast pocket.

Nicholas took in the living room with a glance. It was empty save for Elizabeth's dad who was reading a book on the couch. Nicholas took a seat in one of the armchairs arrayed around the coffee table to keep himself from pacing. Edwin didn't look up from his book.

Nicholas glanced at his watch. It was just past five. Charles's chauffeur was due to arrive any second. That only added to his pre-existing anxiety about tonight. He'd been mentally rehearsing the scene in his head over and over again, and each time it played out differently. He tried different lines, imagined different reactions from Elizabeth, different settings . . . and each time his anxiety ratcheted up a notch.

*Come on, Nicholas, pull yourself together. People tell each other how they feel about one another all the time. There's nothing to it. . . .*

*Except that they usually don't tell someone who already has a serious relationship.*

*But so what? I've known her longer than Charles has. There's every reason to believe that our relationship is just as serious as theirs.*

Nicholas let out some of his anxiety in a long breath—

Only to have it suddenly surge with the sound of the doorbell. Edwin looked up from his book, gave Nicholas an appraising look, as if noticing him for the first time, and then sighed. "I suppose I'd better get that," he said, starting to close his book.

"No, don't worry," Nicholas replied, rising from his chair. "I'll get it."

"Well—thank you," Edwin said.

Nicholas reached the door just as the doorbell rang again. He put on a gracious smile for the chauffeur as he turned the door knob.

When Nicholas opened the door, however, his smile abruptly faded, and he froze. In the course of a second, all his hopes for a romantic dinner alone with Elizabeth caught fire and burned to a dusty pile of ashes. He had a sinking feeling that he would soon be eating those ashes, since no matter how good the food tasted tonight, that was exactly what it would taste like when eaten in present company.

"Hello, Nicholas," Charles said in a jaunty voice. He flourished a beautiful bouquet of flowers and took a moment to smell them. "I've come to take you and Elizabeth out to dinner. Is Elizabeth ready yet?"

## Chapter 11

**“W**hat are you doing here?” Nicholas demanded, eyeing the bouquet of flowers that Charles was holding and the tuxedo he was wearing.

Charles did a good job of looking surprised, and he hesitated before replying. “I just told you. I’ve come to take you and Elizabeth out to dinner. . . .” His expression grew thoughtful. “You didn’t know I was coming?”

“Mrs. Smythe said you’d agreed to lend us the use of your chauffeur for the evening. She said nothing about it being a package deal.”

Charles grinned. “Well, I’m afraid it is. But don’t worry, you won’t have to spend your precious pennies, dinner’s on me.”

Nicholas’s eyes flashed. “You can keep your money to pay for your own meal. I have enough for Elizabeth and me.”

Charles acknowledged that with a nod, and then they stood there glaring at each other for a few long seconds. Finally, Charles spoke: “Aren’t you going to let me in?” Before waiting for an answer, he started forward, but Nicholas didn’t budge, and Charles almost walked right into him.

They stood there, chest to chest, their faces only inches apart. The muscles in Nicholas’s jaw bunched as he gritted his teeth, and he actually thought he saw Charles flinch. But as much as he wanted to shut the door in Charles’s face, it wasn’t his home, and he was willing to bet that Charles’s coming wasn’t a surprise to everyone. Elizabeth’s mother had likely known all about it.

Nicholas’s eyes narrowed at that thought. “Your breath stinks,” he said, then stepped aside to let Charles in.

Nicholas was gratified to see Charles cup his hand in front of his face and breathe into it as he walked inside.

"Hello, Charles."

Nicholas turned to see Constance enter the foyer from the hallway leading to the living room, a sly smile on her face.

"A pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Smythe," Charles replied.

"You knew that he was coming?" Nicholas did nothing to conceal his indignation.

Constance turned to him with an uncomprehending look. "Of course, I invited him."

Nicholas's eyes flashed angrily. "Really? Some warning might have been nice."

"Didn't I mention it earlier?" Nicholas shook his head. "I'm sure I must have. . . ." she trailed off, absently staring over his shoulder. Meeting his eyes once more, she shrugged. "Well, I didn't think you'd mind. Wasn't it just this morning that you said you'd like to take Elizabeth to Cape Town for dinner, but didn't know how you might get there?"

"Yes, I did say that, but I was meaning to take her to dinner *alone*." Nicholas shot Charles an irritated glance.

Constance looked mortified. "Oh, dear! What a mess! That didn't even occur to me. I'm sorry, Nicholas. But after Charles has driven all this way, and gone to so much trouble to arrange a nice evening for you and Elizabeth, don't you think you could allow this one small alteration to your plans?"

Nicholas ground his teeth for a moment, thinking. He was tempted to say "no," but he couldn't really do that, could he? Everything was already arranged, and he'd really look like a heel if he tried to change things now.

His eyes narrowed a fraction as he cast them back and forth between Constance and Charles. Was it really an innocent misunderstanding? Or was she deliberately trying to sabotage his chances with Elizabeth? Nicholas frowned. If the latter, then she deserved an Oscar for her performance. Nicholas was just about to consent to the odious arrangement, when Elizabeth entered the foyer, looking worried and confused.

"Charles? What are you doing here?"

He offered her a winning smile, but it was Constance who explained, as she had earlier, still sounding regretful for her part in the matter.

After her mother's explanation, there was a long silence in which Elizabeth was left looking very uncomfortable as she flicked nervous glances between Charles and Nicholas.

Charles broke the silence by taking a few steps forward and thrusting his bouquet of flowers in front of Elizabeth. "These are for you."

Elizabeth gazed uncertainly down at the flowers, then sent Nicholas an apologetic look, and took them from Charles. "Thank you, but you *really* shouldn't have."

"Well, should we get going, then?" Nicholas asked, pouring a bit of cheer into his voice.

Elizabeth flashed him a grateful smile. "Yes, just let me put these flowers in some water, and I'll be right with you—both of you," she added.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Constance said, reaching for the bouquet. "I'll take care of the flowers, dear. You three go have fun."

Yes . . . Nicholas thought to himself as he reached out to open the door for Elizabeth, only to find that Charles had already beaten him to it. Charles sent him a smirking look even as Nicholas took advantage of the gesture and walked out the door after Elizabeth, leaving him behind. *Yeah, right. "Fun." That's what this will be.*

\* \* \*

Nicholas walked down the pathway from the Smythes' home, keeping close beside Elizabeth, making sure to take up all of the available space on the path so that Charles would be forced to walk behind. At the end of the path, parked in front of the house, Nicholas saw Charles's chauffeur, a black man, impeccably dressed in his black uniform, standing beside a black Mercedes that was so lovingly polished, it caught and reflected every stray detail: the dimpled cement of the sidewalk, the flowering hedge in front of the Smythe's home, and the glowing amber of the streetlights. They reached the car, and the chauffeur nodded to each of them in turn.

"Miss Elizabeth, Master Charles—and you must be Nicholas." The chauffeur made an-after-you gesture toward the car, and opened the rear door for them.

Nicholas smiled, urging Elizabeth toward the car with his hand resting lightly at the small of her back. "Thank you . . ."

"James Ekwensi, but you may call me James."

Nicholas smiled, but his expression quickly changed to a curious frown. "Ekwensi? That name sounds familiar. Where are you from?"

"The Transkei, Master Nicholas."

Nicholas's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Really? That's where I come from! Have you ever been to Sterkspruit?"

"My family lives very close to there."

"Wow, that's an amazing coincidence. You might know my father then. He's the doctor."

Now it was James's turn for surprise. "Doctor Strauss is your father? I owe him a great debt! When my wife and daughter came down with Typhoid Fever, your father came to our village to treat them. He saved their lives."

Nicholas shook his head wonderingly and stuck out his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, James."

James hesitated before accepting the handshake. He shook his head, his eyes shining in the dim streetlight. "No—" He accepted Nicholas's handshake with a crushing grip. "*—it's my pleasure to meet you, sir.*"

Nicholas grinned. When he finally turned to the open door of the car, about to get in, he saw that Charles had taken advantage of his distraction to climb in beside Elizabeth. The two of them had scuttled to the far side of the backseat, leaving only one open spot for him—beside Charles.

Grinning smugly, Charles said: "Come on, Nicholas. Hop in, then!"

Nicholas frowned and climbed into the car beside Charles. James shut the door after him, and then took his place in the front seat. A moment later the engine hummed to life and they were on their way. Elizabeth caught his eye and gave him an apologetic look. Nicholas smiled to show there were no hard feelings. She'd probably have tried to sit between them if Charles had given her that choice. These were not little things. Nicholas sighed - he suspected the night would be full of them.

\* \* \*

"Welcome to the Château de France," Charles said as they walked inside the restaurant.

Nicholas found that he was impressed in spite of himself. The Château de France was actually a five-star hotel in a heavily populated section of Cape Town called Sea Point. The restaurant was part of the hotel and offered authentic, French cuisine, along with a high vantage point from which its patrons could enjoy an unobstructed view of the ocean and the Sea Point Promenade—a paved walkway which ran the length of

the nearby beach and waterfront.

Scattered through the restaurant were maybe two dozen white-clothed tables, subtly lit to a glowing gold by overhead chandeliers and flickering candles. The tables were arrayed, wherever possible, in front of the high, lattice windows which looked down on the ocean view. Both the hotel and restaurant were decorated with ornate moldings and finishing's and large, canvas paintings such as one might expect to find in a castle.

Nicholas was overwhelmed. He'd never been to such a fancy place in all his life.

The three of them stopped in a designated receiving area, and waited there for the maitre d' to show them to a table. When the maitre d' arrived—an apparently middle-aged man of average height, with dark hair and a well-trimmed mustache—his face flashed with recognition, and he smiled. Like Charles, the maitre d' was wearing a tuxedo, though his had longer coattails and a black tie instead of a bowtie.

"*Bonsoir*,\* young Mister Atherton!" he said.

"*Bonsoir*," Charles returned.

The man's gaze traveled to Elizabeth and his smile broadened. "Ah, the beautiful Elizabeth! *Comment allez vous?*"†

Elizabeth cast Charles a helpless look and he answered for her, speaking in flawless French. Nicholas tried to hide his irritation. *Show off*, he thought, pretending to study the walls.

"And you brought a friend!"

Deducing that he was the "friend" in question, Nicholas turned to meet the maitre d's gaze. "Actually, I'm a friend of *Elizabeth's*." Nicholas nodded sideways to Charles. "He's just an acquaintance."

Charles added something to that in French which got the maitre d' laughing. Nicholas scowled, thinking that it was probably at his expense.

"Your usual table, *monsieur?*"

"Thank you, Louie. That will be just fine."

The maitre d' led the way to a secluded corner of the restaurant with its own high, lattice window to look out on the promenade below.

Upon reaching the table, Louie pulled out a chair for

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\* *Bonsoir*: good evening

† *Comment allez vous?*: How are you?



Elizabeth before either Nicholas or Charles could move a muscle. Once Elizabeth was seated, they sat down to either side of her, across from each other.

Louie snapped his fingers in the air and a waiter appeared beside their table with a pitcher of water. Louie bid them adieu and the waiter began placing menus and pouring water.

Charles offered Nicholas a tight-lipped smile which turned out looking more like a sneer. Nicholas ignored it in favor of opening the menu which the waiter had just placed in front of him. He balked at the prices. Perhaps he'd have to let Charles pay the bill after all.

"An aperitif to start with, *monsieur*? The waiter asked, holding a wine list out to Charles.

Charles shook his head. "Thank you, but we've already had one on the way over. Rather, let's have a bottle of *Dom Pérignon*. We have something to celebrate."

The waiter's eyes widened fractionally and he nodded his approval. "Very good, *monsieur*. Any particular vintage?" The waiter rattled off a list of the vintages they had in stock. Charles selected one of the more recent ones and the waiter hurried off to bring it to them.

"So, what are we celebrating?" Nicholas asked.

Charles grinned. "Your pending induction into the air force, of course."

"Hah!" Nicholas huffed. "That's nothing to celebrate."

"No? Some patriot you are. I was under the impression that it's an honor to serve one's country. . . ."

Nicholas's mouth curved wryly. "Perhaps you should sign up, then. We could use more willing patriots like you."

Charles affected disappointment as he shook his head. "Alas, it's not my country, and not my fight, but I wish you all the best in yours."

"Charles," Elizabeth began. Charles's head turned to regard her. "Which way is it to the *loo*?"

Charles pointed, then said, "I could escort you there if you'd like."

Elizabeth shook her head as she stood up from the table. "No, don't worry; I can make it there on my own."

And with that, she left Nicholas and Charles alone. They sat there for a moment, glaring at each other. Once he was sure that Elizabeth was out of earshot, Charles spoke. "You know,

Nicholas, you may as well forget about Elizabeth. You're going to be gone for two years—"

"Eighteen months," Nicholas corrected.

"Nevertheless. You need to accept the reality of your situation. You can't possibly compete with me, even if you were here." He gestured to the restaurant around them. "Could you afford to take Elizabeth here? To anywhere even remotely as nice?"

Nicholas's jaw clenched and his lips pressed into a thin line. "I might."

Charles feigned surprise. "Really?" The question was rhetorical, laced with doubt. "You know what that bottle of champagne I ordered costs?" Nicholas kept his expression even, making no move to encourage Charles's answer. He had an idea that all the money in his wallet wouldn't cover a bottle of that champagne. Charles told him anyway, but Nicholas didn't give him the satisfaction of a reaction.

"You see, Nick, you and I move in very different circles. I went to school with Prince Andrew, attended all the finest parties, wined and dined with royalty . . . you, on the other hand . . . Well, you see my point. I can treat Elizabeth in the style to which she has become accustomed—and many times that—without coming even close to the end of my means. But with you she'll be taking a mighty step down. For her sake, Nicholas, let her go. Let her down gently, by all means, but don't make this any harder on yourself than it has to be. Because I assure you, in the end, you *will* lose her." A hint of his habitually smug smile graced his dimpled cheeks.

Nicholas was fuming. At that moment, he would have liked nothing better than to launch across the table and wipe that smug smile off Charles's face. He spent a couple of seconds imagining himself doing just that, but eventually his more sensible half took hold.

"You're wrong," he said quietly.

"Am I?" Charles asked, sounding amused. "Please, do tell."

"Your money doesn't matter to Elizabeth."

Charles began chuckling softly. "Don't be so naïve! Money matters to every woman. She might pretend indifference out of service to some misplaced principle, but deep down she can't help but recognize the value in having a husband who will never struggle to provide for her."

"Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself?" Nicholas asked.

Charles smiled condescendingly. "Every woman assesses the men she dates with an eye towards marriage, whether she's ready for marriage or not."

Their waiter chose that moment to return. Popping the cork on the bottle, he began pouring the champagne. Maybe Charles was right. Maybe it would be better if he let Elizabeth go.

"May I get you an appetizer?"

"Yes, well have the *Escargot a la Bourguignone*," Charles replied without consulting the menu.

"An excellent choice, *monsieur*. Would you like bread with that?"

"Of course."

The waiter nodded and left.

Nicholas elicited a brief smirk as he closed his menu, privately reveling in Charles's mistake.

Charles didn't miss that look. "What?"

Nicholas just shook his head, smiling. "Nothing." Charles was so confident that his wealth made all the difference to Elizabeth, yet he was just about to get a taste of how much Elizabeth would appreciate the fancy lifestyle he could buy for her.

Elizabeth returned to the table and sat down. "So, what have you two been talking about behind my back?"

"Economics," Charles said.

Nicholas almost snorted. *Not too far from the truth.*

Elizabeth shook her head. "Well, the two of you certainly do talk about boring things! Yesterday it was politics, and today it's economics."

"Oh, I assure you it's quite interesting," Charles said, finding Nicholas's eyes with his. "Excellent topics for keeping the world in perspective, wouldn't you say, Nicholas?"

He was ready with a sarcastic reply, but had to swallow it with a grimace when Elizabeth turned an innocent look his way, also waiting for his answer. Instead, Nicholas reached for his champagne glass and gulped back a greedy mouthful. Maybe if he finished more than his share of the champagne, Charles would be forced to buy another bottle. If not, at least he could dull his wits a little for what was promising to be a very unpleasant evening.

Seeing Nicholas drinking his champagne, Elizabeth noticed hers, and her eyes widened in delight. "Champagne!" she exclaimed.

"Naturally," Charles replied.

"I thought you ordered wine?" she said, lifting her glass and taking a sip.

"*Dom Pérignon* is a champagne. One of the finest, in fact," he added with a smirk in Nicholas's direction.

Nicholas was still smiling. "Very true. It should go exceptionally well with the snails Charles just ordered for us."

Elizabeth froze halfway through setting her glass back down. Her face scrunched up in a look of horror and disgust. "*Snails?*"

"*Escargot à la Bourguignone*, to be precise," Charles corrected.

"What's that?" Elizabeth asked, looking momentarily confused.

Nicholas's smile broadened into a grin. "Snails," he repeated gleefully.

"Yuck!" she turned to Charles. "Why would you order something like that?"

His expression was priceless. *Not so haughty now, are you?* Charles's face had fallen a mile. He was looking speechless in the face of Elizabeth's tactless candor. Impulsive honesty was both one of Elizabeth's most endearing and most embarrassing traits.

Sending Nicholas an accusing look, Charles said, "Don't be so crass, Nicholas. The proper name for the dish is *escargot*."

"But they are, actually—" Elizabeth grimaced. "*—snails?*" she persisted, looking thoroughly disgusted.

Charles hesitated. "Yes, but they are broiled and served in a delightfully rich butter garlic sauce. Truly delicious if you just forget about what they are and appreciate their—"

Elizabeth cut him off with an involuntary shiver. "I think I'll wait for the main course."

Nicholas sent Charles a triumphant look.

Charles glared sullenly back at him as he raised his champagne glass. "A toast," he said. Elizabeth raised her glass, and Nicholas hesitantly followed suit. "To Nicholas's upcoming adventure in the air force, where he'll be spending the next two years—"

"Eighteen months," Nicholas corrected.

"—far away from everything and every-one that he holds near and dear to his heart—all in service to his country." Charles shook his head in mock reverence. "Nicholas, I'm not sure if your country truly appreciates your sacrifice, but I do—" *I'll bet*, Nicholas thought. "—and I salute you for it." Charles raised his glass still higher and inclined his head respectfully. "To Nicholas."

Nicholas wasn't buying it, but Elizabeth completely missed the subtext and softly parroted Charles's words: "To Nicholas," and then they drank the toast together.

Nicholas spitefully endeavored to drain his glass, with Charles watching on in horrified silence. He set the glass down with a hollow clink and met Charles's wide-eyed stare.

"Not bad," Nicholas said. "Got any more?"

Charles's jaw was moving, but no sound was coming out.

Yet it was Elizabeth who finally admonished him. "You shouldn't drink so fast, Nicholas. You'll get drunk."

That sobered him. Despite his anger at Charles and his burning desire to get even anyway he could, Nicholas realized that he wasn't going to accomplish that by making himself look uncultured. That would be playing right into Charles's hands. Apparently, Charles had come to the same conclusion and was already snapping his fingers at their waiter to pour Nicholas another glass of the expensive champagne. The waiter promptly did so.

Disgusted with himself, Nicholas resolved not to touch his champagne for the rest of the evening.

The escargot came and Elizabeth, while morbidly curious, did nothing but experimentally poke one of them in the shell. It jiggled on the plate and she shuddered.

"You should try it," Charles insisted to Elizabeth, while spooning a few onto his plate. "All you can taste is the garlic. Honestly."

Elizabeth shook her head vigorously, instead reaching for a slice of French bread from the breadbasket. "That's okay."

Charles shrugged. He didn't bother offering any to Nicholas, but it wouldn't have made a difference if he had. Nicholas wasn't about to try them either. For his part, Charles seemed to be relishing the slimy little creatures. Feeling his stomach give an uncomfortable lurch, Nicholas averted his eyes and

followed Elizabeth's lead by taking a piece of the French loaf. At least that was edible.

As he ate the bread, Nicholas realized, to his immense satisfaction, that there was an unintentionally positive side effect to the fact that Charles was the only one consuming the snails. The escargot was literally dripping with garlic, and Charles's breath was bound to reek of it for the rest of the evening. Nicholas smiled, and had to stop himself from taking a celebratory sip of his champagne. *Little victories*, he thought.

He had to take them where he could.

\* \* \*

Elizabeth was doing her best to pay attention to Charles as he prattled on about an occasion in which he'd had a chance to go to dinner with Prince Andrew, but she was finding it hard to concentrate with intermittent gales of Charles's snailly breath wafting her way. They'd only just ordered the main course, so Charles had eaten nothing since the plate of escargot. To make matters worse he was leaning close across the table as he related his story—*too close*, Elizabeth thought. Perhaps he was doing it to make Nicholas jealous. He probably wasn't above that. But whatever the case, Elizabeth was desperately close to turning her head the other way, rude gesture or not. She tried breathing through her mouth for a while, but then it occurred to her that she was inhaling micro-particles of snail, and she quickly shut her mouth again. Maybe she could hold her breath.

*One, two, three . . . ten . . . come on, Charles! Get to the point! Or at least take a sip of your champagne!*

But he just droned on and on . . . and on! She sent Nicholas an urgent look. She'd have to breathe again soon. He was frowning at them, no doubt annoyed that Charles was focusing so devotedly on her. But she didn't have time to feel sorry for Nicholas.

*Help. Me.* She mouthed the words to him.

\* \* \*

Nicholas was glaring across the table at Charles. He found Charles's story about dining with Prince Andrew to be an extremely irritating one. Besides the fact that Charles was leaning inappropriately close to Elizabeth as he told his story, it had grown readily apparent to him that the story actually had no point except that it gave Charles a chance to boast

about his royal connections. *Yeah, we get it, Nicholas thought, you know a Prince. Or so you say, anyway.* Nicholas wasn't sure they could take Charles's word for it; he was just pretentious enough to make up stories like that.

For her part, Elizabeth appeared to be paying rapt attention to the story. Nicholas frowned. Maybe that kind of thing really *did* turn her head.

Then he saw her head turn—literally. She looked right at him, and as plainly as if she'd said the words aloud, he understood what she was saying: *Help. Me.* She looked away, reassuming her façade of attention. Nicholas grinned. *Not so charming, after all, hey Charles?*

"Excuse me," Nicholas said, holding up a hand. "I have a story."

Charles stopped talking and turned to regard Nicholas with a look that approximated the one Elizabeth had favored the snails with earlier. "Good for you. Wait your turn." And with that, he turned back to Elizabeth.

"It's a *funny* story. . . ." Nicholas persisted.

"Let him tell his story, Charles," Elizabeth said, sounding relieved. "I think you've told me yours already, anyway."

Charles sat abruptly back in his chair and waved his hand dismissively. "Fine, tell us your story, Nicholas. *Amuse* us."

Nicholas had a brief mental image of a king delivering those same words to his jester. *Oh, I'll amuse you all right.*

He proceeded to tell them the story of how Shorty Beckett had stolen "rare Argentinian" rabbits from the zoo in Bloemfontein; how Shorty had subsequently been vaccinated against rabies; how he'd had to return the rabbits in the middle of the night; and how Shorty had got revenge by planting cigarettes in his, Nicholas's, locker. He ended the story with how he and Bakkies Baker had conspired to get even by dropping Shorty's monkey claw in the oatmeal on the last day of school, forcing Jamie to eat the whole pot full when the prefect found out.

As he finished the story, Nicholas held up a hand for silence amidst Elizabeth's laughter and Charles's more muted chuckling. "And, there's a moral to the story," he said, looking meaningfully at Charles.

"Oh, and what's that?" Charles asked.

Nicholas gave Charles a predatory grin. "Don't mess with—"

He gave a short pause under the guise of taking a sip from his water glass, and pretended not to notice as Charles's eyes narrowed. "*—rabbits,*" he finished, setting his glass down with a grin.

Charles's eyes narrowed still further. "That's not much of a moral."

Nicholas shrugged. "It would have kept Shorty out of trouble."

Elizabeth laughed at that.

Their waiter returned and placed Elizabeth's entrée in front of her. It was *Vol au Vent*—a light, golden pastry filled with large prawns and covered in a creamy white sauce. Elizabeth smiled hungrily at the sight of her food, picked up her knife and fork, and began cutting into one of the pastries.

\* \* \*

Charles ate his entrée in relative silence, intermittently sending Nicholas vitriolic looks. *This* was his competition for Elizabeth? What could she possibly have seen in him? Perhaps she'd just been stringing Nicholas along, using him to have fun on her holidays, all the while secretly thinking to discard him later.

No, that wouldn't be like her. But then again, he'd never have thought that she would be interested in an amoral cad like Nicholas, either. Perhaps she didn't know what he was really like, or what he was *really* after? Charles frowned at that, while cutting off a succulent forkful of his filet mignon. Looking down at his plate, he realized with dismay that his meal was almost gone. Unfortunately, "gourmet" often also meant "miniature." Charles popped the forkful of filet mignon into his mouth and chewed, his mind returning to the matter at hand. If even Elizabeth didn't know what Nicholas was like, then how could her mother have known to tell *him*? Could Elizabeth really be naïve enough to have missed all the subtle cues that would have given Nicholas's intentions away? Swallowing, he began nodding as he realized the truth. Elizabeth tended to think the best of people, and she was certainly naïve enough not to spot any warnings to the contrary. So it would be up to him to make her realize the truth about Nicholas.

Finishing the rest of his meal, Charles wiped his mouth with his napkin and fixed Nicholas with a penetrating stare. A few minutes passed as Charles thought how best to expose



Nicholas. Then it struck him, and a faint smile touched his lips. He took a sip of his champagne and then began:

"Nicholas, I wonder if I could get your opinion on something."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows from his plate while collecting the last bite of his entrée from its shell—it was lobster Thermidor. "I suppose," Nicholas said as he popped that last bite into his mouth.

"I have a friend who came to me for advice the other day. His girlfriend has been subtly pressuring him to take their relationship to the next level—physically." Nicholas's gaze sharpened and flicked quickly between Charles and Elizabeth. Noticing the alarm on his face, Charles began chuckling. "Don't worry, it's not me." Nicholas appeared to relax, but only slightly.

Charles went on, "Anyway, until now he's had only a moderate amount of trouble warding off his girlfriend's advances, but recently she abandoned all attempts at subtlety and put it to him in plain English.

"He told her he felt they should wait, but that wasn't good enough for her. She told him if that was how he felt, he could jolly well wait forever." Charles shook his head sadly. "They haven't spoken to each other in over a week, despite his frequent attempts to call. Now he's thinking of going to make up to her in person, but he knows that nothing has changed, and he's wondering if he should compromise his principles on the matter in order to avoid losing her.

"I told my friend I wasn't sure what advice I could offer him, but that I'd give him my opinion by tomorrow. At the moment, I'm still undecided, but I thought that maybe you would have some fresh insight on the matter."

Nicholas visibly hesitated, then reached for his water glass. He took a sip, then set the glass down with a frown. "Well, that is an awkward situation. I've also had a few girlfriends who tried to push me farther than I was willing to go."

Charles smiled. "And? What did you do?"

Nicholas shrugged. "I politely, but firmly told them no."

Charles was frowning now. "You weren't even tempted?"

Nicholas gave a short laugh. "Of course I was! But that doesn't mean I gave in."

"Good for you, Nicholas," Elizabeth said, patting him on the arm.

"Perhaps you weren't tempted to the same extent that my friend has been. Would you still have said no if you had known it would have meant the end of your relationship?"

"Of course. What's a principle if you hold to it only when it's convenient?" Charles's brow was deeply furrowed. Seeing this, Nicholas began to wonder if Charles disagreed. "Don't you feel the same way?"

The other snorted. "Of course I agree. I'm just surprised that *you* have such a rigid moral code. And frankly, I'm not sure whether I should believe it. You could be saying all of that just to make yourself look good in front of Elizabeth."

"As could you." Charles's eyes narrowed, and Nicholas shook his head. "I can't make you believe me, but I am being honest."

"Indeed," Charles replied. "Perhaps your girlfriends have been, well, less than . . . appealing. I wonder if you would have had the same response if it were Elizabeth putting the moves on you."

Elizabeth began choking on a mouthful of *Vol au Vent* and abruptly reached for her glass of water.

Charles shot her a curious glance, then turned back to Nicholas with a look of open hostility. "Well? Hypothetically speaking, what would you do then?"

Nicholas frowned. "I thought we were talking about your friend."

Charles glared at him for a handful of seconds, then something in his expression flickered, and he affected a tight smile. "Of course. Forgive me, I seem to have become sidetracked. Well then, what would you advise my friend to do? Given that he really is in love with his girlfriend and can't stand the thought of losing her."

Nicholas gave himself a few seconds to recover from the suddenly personal turn of the conversation. "Well, if it were me, I'd ask myself whether my girlfriend really loves me if she's willing to force me to do something which I'm not comfortable with, and to end our relationship if I don't cede to her demands. That sort of behavior strikes me as particularly selfish. He might be better off without her, but he should at least give her a chance to be more reasonable.

"So I would recommend that he apologize to her for any misunderstandings. He should then tell her how he feels about her, and explain that his desire to wait doesn't come from a

lack of interest in her." Nicholas shrugged. "If she's still unreasonable after that, then, in my opinion, he should let her go. If her needs are so much more important to her than his, then he really is better off without her."

A long silence greeted Nicholas after that. Charles was staring at him with eyes narrowed in a mixture of suspicion and disbelief. Elizabeth, on the other hand, was smiling. She was the first to break the silence.

"Wow," she said. "Bravo Nicholas. I had no idea you were so . . ."

"Phony?" Charles interjected.

Elizabeth turned to Charles with her own eyes narrowed. "No—" She turned back to Nicholas. "*—wise.*"

Charles snorted.

"I take it you disagree with my advice?" Nicholas asked.

"Hardly," Charles replied. "I just don't think *you'd* really do that."

"If I were in your friend's situation?"

"Right."

Nicholas shrugged. "I believe I would."

"Well, I believe you," Elizabeth said, sending Charles a warning look.

Charles returned her look with another tight smile. "Well," he affected a cheerful voice, "shall we order dessert?" Nicholas nodded and Elizabeth voiced her agreement. Charles signaled to their waiter and proceeded to order dessert for them. With that done, and the waiter gone, Charles allowed his irritation with Nicholas to bubble to the surface of his thoughts. *You're slick, I'll give you that, but there's more than one way to skin a cat. If I can't show Elizabeth what you're really like, then I'll just have to undermine her feelings for you.*

Charles could think of no better way to do that than to replace her feelings for Nicholas with feelings for *him*. Turning to Elizabeth, and flashing her one of his most charming grins, he waited until she met his polished mahogany gaze. "Elizabeth," he said, allowing his voice to drop to a husky whisper. Her eyebrows elevated curiously. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

## Chapter 12

**I**t took Nicholas a long moment to process what he'd heard. All the while, Charles's words echoed unintelligibly through his mind: "*Elizabeth, do you have any idea how much I love you?*"

By the time he'd finally processed what he'd heard, he saw everything unfold as if in slow motion: Elizabeth staring blankly at Charles; Charles smiling back at her; muted laughter and indistinct whispers of conversation coming to them from a nearby table; and the angry roar of blood rushing in his ears. It was as if the world around him had just taken a deep breath and was now frozen before the inevitable plunge. This was supposed to be *his* date, *his* chance to tell Elizabeth how he felt about her and now this . . . this . . . *pretentious snob* was beating him to it!

"Charles!" Elizabeth said in a fierce whisper. "I appreciate the sentiment, but this is hardly the time or the place to tell me how you feel!"

*You bet it isn't!* Nicholas thought.

"Well, it's true," Charles said, "and I don't care who's around to hear. *I. Love. You.*" he went on, placing careful emphasis on each word.

Elizabeth flushed bright red, and Charles grinned, obviously pleased by her reaction.

Nicholas was shocked into silence, able to do nothing but stare across the table at the two of them. Somehow, when he wasn't looking, Charles had scooted his chair closer to Elizabeth, and now, looking at the two of them sitting so close, with him far away on the other side of the table, it was almost as though *he* were the one intruding on *their* date. It was all he could do not to leap across the table and wipe that stupid grin off Charles's face.

It wasn't as though he could compete. There was no way that he could redeem the situation by telling Elizabeth how *he* felt about her. It would sound like a cheap imitation.

The evening was fast going from bad to worse.

Nicholas cleared his throat. "You guys know I'm still here, right?" he asked, not sure how else to intrude upon the moment. He had to say something!

Charles's head wheeled slowly around, his expression brimming with condescension. He waited a couple of seconds, then said, "I'm sure you have a point, so I'll wait for you to make it."

"Charles . . ." Elizabeth began.

"What?"

"Be nice."

Charles shook his head angrily. "He's just jealous."

"And you're not?" Elizabeth countered. "Don't think I haven't noticed the looks you've been giving him—" She held Charles's gaze for a second, then turned to look at Nicholas. "—and the subtle threats you've been making. The two of you have been fighting right in front of me all night, and I'm sick of it! You should be ashamed of yourselves!" Turning back to Charles she said, "And Charles, I'm not sure what you expected when you offered to take us out tonight, but the fact that we accepted your invitation does not mean that I'm your date."

Charles started to object but Elizabeth silenced him with an upraised hand. "Please. Spare me the excuses. The evening is almost over, but for what little of it remains, I want the two of you to treat each other with the same courtesy that you'd extend to me." And with that, Elizabeth left the table before either Nicholas or Charles could say a thing. They watched her weave a path through the tables to the restrooms at the back of the restaurant.

When she disappeared through the ladies' room door, their heads turned and they spent a full minute glaring across the table at each other. Momentarily cowed by Elizabeth's words, neither of them had anything to say, and both quietly blamed the other for upsetting Elizabeth.

Nicholas was the first to say as much. "This is all your fault."

"My fault?" Charles echoed. "How did you arrive at that deranged conclusion?"

"If you weren't so bloody insecure, you wouldn't feel the need

to spend every waking moment intruding on my time with Elizabeth.”

“Insecure?” Charles laughed. “You must be joking! And I suppose *you’re* the reason that I’m insecure? Don’t be ridiculous! The only reason I’m here tonight is because I can’t trust you. And for your information, I’m not the only one who feels that way.”

Nicholas narrowed his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

Charles shook his head impatiently while looking searchingly in the direction that Elizabeth had gone.

“Never mind.”

“No, not ‘never mind.’ Tell me: who, besides you, feels that they can’t trust me?”

Charles met his gaze. “It’s none of your business, but let’s just say that I’ve got a vote of confidence with Elizabeth’s mother that *you* do not, and never could.”

Nicholas blinked. Suddenly, Charles’s unwelcome intrusions were making a lot more sense, but he was at a loss as to why Elizabeth’s mother didn’t trust him. *And besides, what has her mother to do with it? Even if she prefers Charles to me, it’s not her choice to make. Elizabeth has her own mind.*

Nicholas said as much to Charles: “Even if that’s true, I don’t see what Elizabeth’s mother has to do with who she dates.”

Charles was looking for Elizabeth again, his body language clearly dismissive. At length, he gave Nicholas his attention. “Then you must be daft. If there’s one person who could tell Elizabeth to jump off a cliff and have her do it, it would be her mother.” Charles shook his head and allowed a faint smile to spring to his lips. “I’m afraid you don’t stand a chance without dear mummy’s approval.”

“I think you’re wrong. Elizabeth is more her own person than you give her credit for.”

Charles shrugged and resumed his search for Elizabeth. “I’m just telling you the facts, Nicholas. It’s no skin off my teeth if you don’t believe them.”

Their earlier silence returned, with Charles doing his best to ignore Nicholas and Nicholas silently processing what Charles had revealed. In a way, it made a sickening kind of sense. He remembered the beautiful, shimmering blue dance dress that Elizabeth had once received for a Christmas present, and how important her mother’s opinion of it had been. He also

remembered how just a few words from Constance had been enough to turn the beautiful Calla lilies that he'd often found and picked for Elizabeth into poisonous weeds.

But Elizabeth wasn't her mother, and when they had a disagreement about something really important, would they agree to disagree, or would Elizabeth eventually come around to her mother's point of view? It was an interesting question, but academic in light of the fact that he and Elizabeth were about to be torn apart by circumstances far more insurmountable than her mother's disapproval. How was he supposed to compete with Charles from a distance? It was difficult enough when all three of them were together.

Nicholas was so absorbed in his thoughts that he almost didn't notice when Elizabeth returned.

"So," she began, retaking her seat and subtly shifting it back to the midpoint between Nicholas and Charles. "Have you two found a way to peacefully coexist?" Her gaze flicked warningly between the two of them.

"That won't be necessary," Charles said, sending Nicholas a quick scowl.

"I saw that," she replied.

"Sorry. Force of habit," Charles said, allowing an innocent smile to dimple his cheeks.

Dessert arrived, and with so much animosity out in the open, no one felt much like talking, so they ate in silence. When they were finished and the bill arrived, Charles promptly handed it to Nicholas.

Nicholas accepted the bill with a wrinkled brow. "What's this?" he asked, his eyes skipping down to the bottom of the bill and widening as he read the total: four hundred and fifty-seven *rand* and thirty-five cents.

"The bill," Charles replied, looking smug.

"I can see that. Why are you giving it to me?" Nicholas asked.

Charles shrugged. "Well, yesterday, in the diner, you insisted that you be the one to pay the bill the next time we went out—should there be such a time—and *this* is that time. I thought you might like the chance to repay my generosity."

Nicholas made a choking sound. "You bought two Coke floats yesterday—this . . . *this* is dinner at a five-star restaurant! That wouldn't exactly make us even."

Elizabeth was gaping at Charles. "You're not serious, are

you?" she asked.

"Why not?" Charles turned to her. "I supplied the transportation." Turning back to Nicholas, he went on: "And besides, Nicholas, as I recall, earlier this evening when I told you that tonight would be my treat, you told me to *keep* my money. You said that you'd have enough to pay for you and Elizabeth. So, that's what I'm going to let you do. You pay for your meal and hers, and I'll cover mine and generously throw in that expensive bottle of champagne while I'm at it."

Nicholas blanched, rendered suddenly speechless as his mind tallied up his and Elizabeth entrées and desserts. It was almost two hundred *rand*. He'd be lucky to have enough left after that to purchase his train ticket to Pretoria.

"Charles! I swear, if you make him pay . . ." she broke off, shaking her head.

Charles turned his gaze upon Elizabeth. "Why shouldn't I make him pay? He's been nothing but bloody jealous and ungrateful all evening. Why should I repay him for that?" Charles rounded on Nicholas, who was still staring at the bill in his hands. "What's the matter, Nicholas? Can't pay? Oh, too bad. I guess I can't relate to the travails of poverty." Charles shrugged. "But I suppose *you* must be used to it by now."

Elizabeth was gaping at Charles again, taking her turn at speechlessness while Nicholas recovered his voice. "Don't worry, I can pay," he said, sounding resigned as he reached for his wallet. He cast a numb look between Elizabeth and Charles. It wasn't so much the fact that he was going to be rendered penniless when all said and done, as it was that he was being forced to pay a fortune for one of the worst nights of his life. Tonight had been his last hope, his one chance to find some way to get through to Elizabeth and to forge a meaningful connection which might somehow last until he could see her again—and now even that hope was gone. *But*, he considered as he silently counted the bills out of his wallet and onto the table, *at least I finally got closure*.

Nicholas was feeling so overwrought that he barely felt the hand on his arm. He looked up to see Elizabeth staring at him. She was shaking her head.

"You don't have to pay, Nicholas."

He smiled back at her. "Don't worry about it. I made a lot of money when I was working for Denise's family this year."



Elizabeth frowned uncertainly back at him. She didn't withdraw her hand.

Nicholas added, "Consider it a parting gift."

Finally, after a long, indecisive moment, she let go of his arm and settled back into her chair with her arms crossed over her chest. She was glaring at Charles. Charles either didn't notice or didn't care. He was grinning smugly from ear to ear as he watched Nicholas go back to counting the money out of his wallet.

Nicholas realized with some relief that he would have enough left for his train ticket tomorrow. But only just. It was an expensive way to come to his senses. He gave a brief, self-deprecating smile. How could he have been so stupid? What had he been thinking? That a short, three-day visit would be enough to make Elizabeth realize that she should be with him instead of Charles? That she would dump Charles and agree to wait the eighteen months until he came back from the air force?

He shook his head, feeling a lump form in his throat. Charles had done him a favor by taking them out tonight. If he'd been alone with Elizabeth, he would have made a fool of himself by telling her how he felt about her.

Having finished counting out his money, Nicholas looked up and across the table at Elizabeth and Charles. Putting on a cheerful smile, he said, "Well, shall we go, then?"

## Chapter 13

**F**or the second night in a row, Nicholas lay tossing and turning in bed. Because he and Elizabeth had gone on a date, they hadn't been confined to Elizabeth's usual curfew of nine o'clock, so he'd only managed to get to bed shortly before midnight. Given that, he should have had no trouble sleeping. And he would've liked nothing better than to do exactly that—to obliterate the painfully recent memories of the evening with the sweet oblivion of sleep. Unfortunately, however, it seemed that the harder he tried to forget, the easier it became to remember, and with the memories came all the associated feelings of frustration and helplessness which had so far epitomized his time in Wellington.

Despite having earlier thought that he now had closure where Elizabeth was concerned, it didn't feel like it. He still didn't know how Elizabeth really felt about him, and she likely had no clue how he felt about *her*.

Nothing had changed since last night, except that he was now more realistic about the chance that Elizabeth might reciprocate his feelings. And even if he did tell her, he only had tomorrow—not even a full day—in which to do so. With no money left to take her out again, he wouldn't even have the advantage of a romantic atmosphere. It had been a scant hope to begin with, but now it was beyond imagining.

So why couldn't he accept that? Why was there still a burning desire to *know* that it was over? There was still a relentless flicker of hope, like a candle burning past the end of its wick.

Nicholas groaned and smothered his face with his pillow. For three years, through constant doubt and uncertainty, Elizabeth had held a special place in his heart, and now he

was just going to let her go without a fight? It wasn't like him, and he knew that in the years to come he'd always wonder about what might have been if he didn't do *something*.

And yet . . . what could he do?

Feeling suddenly stifled, Nicholas removed the pillow from his face and took a deep breath. Letting his breath out in a long sigh, Nicholas turned over on his side and tried again to sleep. Just before he closed his eyes, he perceived a small, dark rectangle on top of the bedside table. His eyes narrowed slightly as he tried to ascertain what it was. After a moment, they widened in recognition. It was the pocketbook Bible his mother had given him. She'd packed it amongst his things when he'd been sent to boarding school at the age of eight, and it had traveled with him ever since. Now it was going to accompany him to the air force.

A thought struck him then: perhaps that little Bible contained some relevant advice for his current situation. He'd always been taught that the Bible was a book of profound wisdom and insight. He'd never found much of that in there, but he hadn't really had occasion or cause to look. And if there had ever been a time when he needed divine guidance, this definitely was it.

Skeptical, but just desperate enough to try, Nicholas reached for the Bible and turned on his bedside lamp. Propping a pillow against the headboard, he sat up and leaned back against it to read.

Flipping randomly through the pages, his eyes lit upon a particular passage:

*<sup>9</sup>Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted:*

*<sup>10</sup>But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away.*

Nicholas smirked, having a sudden image of Charles as a withered flower. The passage wasn't totally irrelevant. He turned the page and read the next verse that popped out at him:

*<sup>7</sup>But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.*

Nicholas sighed. If there was profound wisdom in those words,

he couldn't find it; it seemed more like profound gibberish. *How can anyone understand this?* He shook his head wearily and began reaching for the bedside lamp. Wherever God was at the moment, He wasn't here, with him.

Nicholas had to strain to reach up into the lampshade and pull the short chain to turn off the lamp. In doing so, he accidentally tipped the Bible off his lap and onto the floor. Muttering under his breath, Nicholas turned the light back on and reached for the fallen book. Upon hitting the floor it had splayed open. He hoped the pages hadn't crinkled. If nothing else, the book had sentimental value to him. Leaning over the side of the bed, Nicholas retrieved the Bible from the floor—

And froze. The Bible had left a small, white flower to mark the spot where it had fallen. For a moment, Nicholas just stared curiously down at it. Then, his eyes widened with a flash of recognition, and he picked up the memento.

He'd forgotten all about that little flower, pressed securely between the pages. He'd intended to give it to Elizabeth at some point during his visit—something to remember him by—but now, as he sat up in bed, gazing down at the delicate flower in his open palm, he was struck by a profound sense of loss.

Dried out and pressed flat as the flower was, it would only take the faintest breath of wind to pluck every satin-white petal from its stem. And yet, it was still perfectly intact. It was a small miracle that it hadn't shattered upon falling out of the Bible.

Somehow, that gave him hope. It seemed emblematic—if pathetically so. Smiling faintly to himself, Nicholas gave the barest nod.

He had an idea.

It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing, and maybe—just maybe—it might be enough. Taking care to make sure that the flower in the palm of his hand didn't catch a stray draft and blow away, Nicholas got out of bed, walked over to the desk standing in one corner of the room, and pulled out the chair in front of the desk with his free hand. Taking a seat in the chair, he began searching the drawers of the desk. In the third drawer down Nicholas found everything he was looking for: envelopes, blank sheets of paper, pens—even stamps.

Pulling out a piece of paper, an envelope, and a pen, he set

them in front of him. He then carefully tipped the flower out of his hand and onto the desk. Turning his attention to the blank sheet of paper in front of him, he found that he needed more light, and turned on the desk lamp.

It was going to be a long night, but that was okay. It hadn't been promising much sleep anyway.

\*            \*            \*

Elizabeth turned on her desk lamp and opened the bottom drawer of her desk—her letter drawer. At the bottom of the drawer, beneath all the letters and mementos which she'd saved over the years, were stationary and envelopes—everything she'd need to write an apology to Nicholas. It was the only thing she could think of to redeem Charles's abhorrent behavior. She still couldn't believe that he'd made Nicholas pay for dinner! Just thinking about it made her angry. Why had Nicholas agreed to pay? What had he been trying to prove? That he could match Charles's extravagance? She shook her head, frustrated by Nicholas's pride.

As Elizabeth dug through her pile of letters and mementos, she encountered a book among them. Pausing in her search, she smiled down at the book, remembering. She wondered why she'd kept that particular memento—or rather, the memento which the book contained—for so many months. It was silly, she supposed, but she wasn't of her mother's opinion that all sentimentality was bad. Reaching down, she withdrew the book and opened it in her lap. After a moment of searching she found the right page. She gazed down at the little flower and lightly touched it, remembering; it had been her way of keeping Nicholas's memory alive in the months since they'd parted.

Breaking out of her reverie, Elizabeth closed the book and placed it back inside the drawer. Now she dug to the bottom of the drawer and removed an envelope and a sheet of paper. Taking a pen from the cylindrical holder on her desk, she began to write. After a few minutes, she paused, thinking:

*I can't believe I allowed Charles to spoil our time together, and I'd like to make it up to you somehow.*

But how? Elizabeth thought about that for a long moment, wondering what she could possibly do. Then, suddenly, she had it. She knew exactly what she could do to make it up to

him. The problem was, it would almost certainly anger Charles.

And yet, did he deserve any better? After breaking his promise to stay away for the duration of Nicholas's visit, after trying to make a fool of Nicholas at every opportunity, and then finally forcing him to pay for an outrageously expensive meal which was supposed to have been *his* treat . . .

Elizabeth shook her head angrily. She fished through another drawer in her desk for the invitation that she would enclose with the letter. Charles would just have to live with it. After all, it was *his* fault that she no longer wanted *him* to take her.

When she'd finished writing her apology to Nicholas, she folded the letter and opened the envelope to place it inside. But when she opened the envelope, she found another letter already inside. Her brow furrowed in confusion. Out of curiosity she withdrew the letter, unfolded it, and began reading.

It only took her a few seconds to recognize the letter, and when she did, her face immediately clouded over. Hastily refolding the letter, Elizabeth grasped the edge of it between the thumb and forefinger of both hands and started to tear.

But then a thought struck her: what if one of her parents—or even Hattie—found the pieces in the garbage and was curious enough to put them back together? No, there was only one sure way to be rid of the letter. She had to burn it.

She had already resolved to do so, but she'd been so distracted by Nicholas's visit that she'd promptly forgotten her plans for the hateful *reminder*.

*Well, I've remembered now*, she thought, nodding resolutely to herself. Her letter to Nicholas momentarily forgotten, she stood up, pushing her chair out from the desk. Lawrence's letter in hand, she began making her way to her bedroom door. The matches were in the kitchen. Given how late it was, there would be no better opportunity. No one would even be awake to ask why she needed the matches. Reduced to ashes—much as Lawrence himself had been—his letter would never be read again. *And so much the better*. Her dad was right: Lawrence really had lost it. How else could he have thought that her father was even *capable* of betraying him?

Turning her doorknob with exaggerated care, Elizabeth stepped out into the hallway. She was dressed in her pajamas,

but no one would see her anyway.

When she reached the kitchen, Elizabeth didn't even stop to turn on a light. She headed straight for a set of three drawers to the right of the kitchen sink. In the second drawer down, below the one where the cutlery was kept, she found matches, steak knives, and barbecue tongs. Withdrawing the matches, she closed the drawer.

Feeling suddenly anxious that someone might catch her and inquire what she was doing, Elizabeth set Lawrence's letter down on the kitchen counter, withdrew a match from the box, and with a shaking hand, struck it on the side. It ignited in an incandescent flash of orange light, momentarily dazzling her eyes. Without waiting for her eyes to recover, she picked up Lawrence's letter and held it above the flame.

After a moment, she realized that she was holding the letter too high above the flame for it to catch alight. The corner of the envelope was blackened, but not burning, so she lowered the letter into the flame. Immediately the flame flared and wreathed the blackened corner of the letter in an amorphous orange glow.

In the dim, flickering light of the flame, Elizabeth could just barely see the corner of the envelope turning black and curling as the flame crawled slowly higher.

"You know, you could just turn on the light. . . ."

Upon hearing the voice, Elizabeth jumped with fright and dropped both the match and the letter. Turning toward the voice, she blinked—once, twice, against the sudden darkness, but all she could see was a hazy silhouette standing in the entrance of the kitchen. The voice was familiar, and masculine—Nicholas? Or her father? The figure pointed to the floor in front of her.

"What's that?"

Elizabeth followed the gesture and realized with a sudden jolt that he was pointing at Lawrence's letter, where it lay burning at her feet—now completely engulfed in flames.

## Chapter 14

**“It’s nothing!”** Nicholas heard Elizabeth say.

Nicholas frowned. “It doesn’t look like nothing.” Elizabeth gave no reply, but the flames went out. Only blackened ashes remained. He watched as she fetched a dust-pan, then swept up the ashes and disposed of them.

“What are you doing up so late?” Elizabeth asked in a tremulous voice as she straightened up.

Nicholas opened his mouth to object to the sudden change of topic, but then he realized that whatever Elizabeth had been doing, she obviously didn’t want to discuss it with him. But he *was* curious—she’d been burning something, but it had been too dark to see what.

“I was going to ask you the same question,” he said, his eyes going to the once-blazing object which she was again holding in her hands. He watched her fold it and stuff it into her pajamas’ pocket, and his frown returned.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Elizabeth explained. Walking over to him, she flicked on the light and they both spent a moment squinting against the sudden brightness.

“Ouch. I think I preferred it without the light on,” Nicholas said.

Elizabeth smiled at him, her expression looking only half genuine—the other half looking distinctly sheepish. “What’s your excuse?” she asked, absently noting Nicholas’s clinging, off-white nightshirt. It was at least two sizes too small and showed off every rippling knot of muscle underneath.

He shrugged. “I like to wander the halls at night and scare people. You’re my first victim.”

Elizabeth began laughing at that, but Nicholas had the impression that she was laughing more out of nervousness



than genuine amusement. A second later, she abruptly caught herself with a hand over her mouth. "Oops," she said. "That was loud, wasn't it?"

One corner of Nicholas's mouth turned up in a wry grin. "Yeah. It was. I think you might have woken my next victim."

Elizabeth grinned at him, and began shaking her head. "Stop being silly."

"Silly?" Nicholas sounded dismayed. "That's not very scary. Perhaps I should give up and go back to bed."

Elizabeth laughed again, more softly this time. "Come on, be serious. What are you still doing up?"

Nicholas hesitated, then shrugged again and said, "I couldn't sleep either."

Elizabeth nodded distractedly, her gaze wandering to the line of bar stools arrayed along the kitchen's island counter. She turned to look back up at him, her head tilted curiously to one side. "Well, so long as you can't sleep, would you like some company?"

"That would be nice."

"You want a cup of tea?" Elizabeth asked, barely waiting for him to finish talking. A hint of a frown touched Nicholas's lips. She was still acting jumpy—as if she were hiding something. "I find it helps me to sleep," she quickly explained.

Nicholas arched an eyebrow at her. "Caffeine helps you to sleep?"

Elizabeth had already started toward one of the kitchen cupboards. She withdrew a teapot from the cupboard. "It's herbal tea—*rooibos*."

"Oh. That makes sense. Yeah, I'd love some," Nicholas replied. Heading over to the line of bar stools, he climbed atop one of them, then spent a number of minutes quietly watching as Elizabeth made the tea.

When she was done, she poured two steaming cups of the herbal brew and placed one in front of him. "Sugar? Milk?" she asked.

He smiled and nodded. "Both, please." She turned her back to him and went to another cupboard to retrieve the sugar.

"Elizabeth, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure . . ." Sensing the tone in his voice, Elizabeth hesitated. "What is it?"

Nicholas took a deep breath, steeling himself. "How do you

really feel about Charles?”

Elizabeth turned and started toward him with a pot of sugar in her hands. She looked distinctly uncomfortable. As she set the pot of sugar down in front of him, she sighed. “Right now? Angry.” Elizabeth turned and withdrew a spoon from one of the drawers behind her. She handed it to Nicholas, and he began spooning sugar from the pot into his cup.

“Angry?” Nicholas echoed. “Why?”

“After tonight . . .” she trailed off, shaking her head. “I’m just really mad at him.”

Nicholas held the sugar spoon out to Elizabeth. She took it from him and began spooning sugar into her own cup. “Hopefully not on my behalf?”

“Of course, on your behalf!” Her tone was exasperated. “Nicholas . . .” He looked up at her. “Why on earth did you agree to pay for dinner?”

Nicholas merely shrugged and took an experimental sip of his tea to spare himself the need for a reply.

“You don’t need to impress me,” she added.

Nicholas set his teacup down and grimaced as if the tea had been bitter. “Don’t I?” he asked, to which Elizabeth shook her head. “Funny, that’s not the impression I got.” He lifted his teacup for another sip, and belatedly winced as his words echoed through his head. Elizabeth’s brow fell in a heavy frown.

“Sorry.” Nicholas replaced his teacup on the counter. “I don’t know why I said that.”

Elizabeth nodded, as if she understood exactly why he’d said that. “It’s okay.” She went to the fridge, removed a bottle of milk, and set it on the counter before him. “I don’t blame you for being angry. I’m sure this hasn’t exactly been the vacation you were hoping for.” Picking up her cup of tea, Elizabeth walked around the island counter and took a seat on the stool beside Nicholas. “It certainly hasn’t been the one *I* was hoping for.”

Nicholas sent her an affectedly cheerful smile. “Well, it’s not over yet.”

“Always the optimist, huh?”

“Most of the time.”

Elizabeth sipped her tea and Nicholas added milk to his.

“Now it’s my turn to ask a question,” Elizabeth said.

Nicholas spent a moment absently warming his hands around his cup of tea. Even in Wellington, a winter's night was still a winter's night.

"And what question is that?"

"How do *you* feel about Charles?"

Nicholas gave a sudden snort to conceal his disappointment. For a second he'd almost believed that she was going to ask him how he felt about her. Instead, she had asked him how he felt about her current boyfriend. That was the sort of question one might ask a friend, not a . . . Nicholas trailed off, wondering: what exactly was he to her?

Nicholas shook his head to clear it. "Honestly?" He turned to face her, his eyes quietly asking if she really wanted him to be honest. She nodded once for him to go on. "I think he's a pretentious snob."

Elizabeth's face immediately clouded over and she sat up straighter on her stool. Realizing that she was offended on Charles's behalf, Nicholas felt a flash of regret. He was tempted to apologize, but his regret was quickly stifled beneath the weight of his irritation with Charles, and he simply said, "You asked."

"Yes . . . I did." She took another sip of her tea, and Nicholas decided to use the opportunity to get something else off his chest.

"I have another question along a similar line," Nicholas said. She eyed him curiously over the rim of her teacup. "How does your mother feel about me?"

Elizabeth's eyebrows beetled together, and she slowly lowered her teacup. "I think she's very fond of you. Why do you ask?"

Nicholas shook his head. "Never mind. Just something Charles said while you were in the *loo* earlier tonight."

"What did he say?"

Nicholas drank some more of his tea, considering whether or not he should tell her. He decided that it couldn't hurt. Charles might have just been making things up to intimidate him, and if that was the case, he'd definitely lose a few points in Elizabeth's esteem. That could hardly be a bad thing.

"He said that your mother doesn't trust me."

Elizabeth's eyebrows shot up. "That's ridiculous. Why wouldn't she trust you?" Nicholas shrugged as if to say that he

had no clue. "Are you sure you didn't misunderstand him? Maybe he was saying that *he* didn't trust you."

Nicholas gave a short, mirthless laugh. "Yeah, he said that, too."

Elizabeth was taken aback. A long silence stretched between them as she digested what Nicholas was saying. Then the silence was broken as someone harrumphed from the entrance of the kitchen. Nicholas and Elizabeth turned in unison to look.

"And what, may I ask, are the two of you doing up so late?" Constance was frowning as her gaze flicked back and forth between the two of them.

Elizabeth fumbled over her own tongue and succeeded in making little more than a startled squeak.

"We couldn't sleep," Nicholas said, speaking for the both of them. He lifted his teacup. "Elizabeth made us some herbal tea to help with that." Raising his teacup the rest of the way to his lips, Nicholas drained it, hopped off the barstool, walked over to the sink, and placed the empty cup in the sink. Then, turning to Elizabeth, he said, "Thanks for the tea. I think I'll be able to get some sleep now." And with that, he left the kitchen, nodding once to Elizabeth's mother as he walked by her.

Elizabeth recovered her voice just as Nicholas left. "I hope we didn't wake you."

Constance spent a long moment frowning at her daughter from the entrance of the kitchen. Finally, she shook her head, and said, "No. You didn't." She pointed to Elizabeth's cup of tea. "Do you have some more of that tea? I think that perhaps I could also use something to help me sleep."

## Chapter 15

**M**onday morning after breakfast, the first order of business was to go to the train station to purchase Nicholas's train ticket. It was an unfortunate reminder of his impending departure, and as far as Nicholas was concerned—a rotten way to start the day.

Elizabeth suggested that they bike to the train station, even though they could have walked, because that way they could go for another bike ride through the vineyards afterward. Nicholas had agreed, having noted the clear blue sky and accompanying sunshine.

When they arrived at the train station, they leaned their bikes up against the back of one of the terminal buildings and walked out on to the train platform. The station and platform were deserted.

"You think the ticket office will be open?" Nicholas asked as they walked down the platform.

"It should be," Elizabeth replied. "The stationmaster keeps it open pretty much all day to get extra business."

To their amusement, they found the stationmaster lounging in a chair behind the black iron bars of the ticket office, his feet propped on the wooden counter behind the bars, his face buried up to his eyebrows in a paperback romance novel.

Nicholas cleared his throat, and after a moment of waiting, the book lowered just enough to permit Mr. Gee's blue eyes to peer over the top. His gaze flicked between them, then tightened into a smile which he revealed in all its toothy glory as he put his book down.

"Well well well, what can I do for the two of you?"

Nicholas explained that he needed to buy a train ticket to Pretoria. Mr. Gee replied by shaking his head sadly and

explaining that Nicholas would have to take several trains to get there.

"The first stop is in Worcester. There you'll have to get off and board another train."

Nicholas frowned. This was getting complicated. He asked Mr. Gee for a description of all the stops he'd have to make as well as the estimated cost of all the tickets he'd have to purchase along the way. The stationmaster obliged by taking out a piece of paper and a pen and starting to write it all down for him. Elizabeth excused herself to the washroom, and Nicholas nodded absently. He worried his lip as he watched Mr. Gee writing the information down. He really hoped he hadn't overextended himself by buying dinner last night. He'd anticipated spending a similar amount of money to what he had spent getting from Sterkspruit to Wellington. If it were much more . . . He really didn't want to have to ask Elizabeth or her parents for a loan.

Mr. Gee finished writing and handed the piece of paper to Nicholas through the bars of the ticket office.

Nicholas examined the page, tallying ticket prices in his head. . . . He breathed a quiet sigh. He would have enough money to get there—just barely.

Pocketing the piece of paper, Nicholas nodded to Mister Gee. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Now as for your ticket to Worcester, young man—" Mr. Gee turned in his chair and busied himself with a typewriter. A few seconds later, he tore the ticket off at top of the machine and handed it to him through the bars. "The train arrives at four thirty, and leaves shortly thereafter. Try to be here early."

"Okay." Nicholas took out his wallet. "How much?"

The stationmaster quoted a modest price. Nicholas handed him the money and watched as Mr. Gee promptly filed it into the cash register and gave him his change. As Nicholas placed his change inside his wallet, he became aware of Mr. Gee staring curiously at him—his toothy grin now back in full force. Nicholas raised his eyes from his wallet. "Is something the matter?"

The old man shook his head. "Don't mind me, I was just remembering a young man who arrived at the station a couple of days ago." He pointed through the bars to a nearby bench.

"He was sitting right over there, waiting for a girl to meet him here. Come to think of it..." Mr. Gee ran his fingers thoughtfully through his grizzly beard. "He looked a bit like you."

Nicholas grinned and shook his head. "Good to know I look like myself."

Mr. Gee's toothy grin broadened, revealing a few golden teeth. "Tell me, then—" He leaned conspiratorially close, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Have you told her yet?"

Nicholas frowned and raised his eyebrows. "How I feel about her?" Mr. Gee nodded, and Nicholas shook his head.

The older man's smile abruptly faded. "Why not?"

Nicholas hesitated, his eyes widening slightly and going out of focus as he stared past Mr. Gee and disappeared into his thoughts. After a good night's sleep, he'd reread his letter to Elizabeth and spent fully half an hour vacillating over whether or not to give it to her. He'd ultimately decided that he *couldn't* give it to her, because even if she did reciprocate his feelings—*partially* reciprocate them, for he daredn't hope that she would feel the *same*—it would only prolong the inevitable, give him hope where none should rightfully exist. She had Charles, and he had Denise. Even if she liked him more than Charles, 18 months was a long time, and he couldn't expect her to wait for him. Besides that, even he had to concede that Charles would be good for her—in the long run, possibly even better for her than he would be. Yes, Charles was a snob, and money might not make people happy, but it sure didn't hurt.

No, it was time to say goodbye. He was done with farewells. That was the only way he would be able to get any closure. . . .

Nicholas's eyes snapped back into focus, and he replied to Mr. Gee's question: "It's complicated."

Mr. Gee snorted and was about to say something to that when Elizabeth returned from the washroom and asked, "What's complicated?"

Nicholas turned to her with a wide and blinking stare. She looked to Mr. Gee, silently asking him the same question. The stationmaster just shook his head and looked away, busying himself with something inside the ticket office.

Nicholas finally replied: "Nothing, just something Mister Gee and I were talking about. Come on," he said, reaching for her hand. "Let's go for that bike ride."

Elizabeth looked uncertainly between Nicholas and Mr. Gee, feeling that she was missing something important. Nicholas gave her arm a little tug, and they turned from the ticket office to head back to their bikes.

As they left, Mr. Gee called out behind them: "Remember what happened to me, Nicholas. Don't make the same mistake that I did!"

Nicholas nodded, but kept his back turned to the stationmaster. "I'll try!" he called back.

\* \* \*

The rest of Nicholas and Elizabeth's time together passed uneventfully, and too quickly, with a heavy, foreboding sense of melancholy. The only good thing about the day, as far as Nicholas was concerned, was that Charles hadn't dared to show his face—*yet*. But now, with less than an hour before he had to leave, Nicholas considered that the chances of Charles showing up were rather slim. He and Elizabeth would have to start walking to the train station soon.

At the moment, they were sitting on a bench beneath the shade of a large oak tree, in a pretty little park close to Elizabeth's home. They were just killing time—marking the minutes as the seconds slipped away. Nicholas's black leather suitcase sat on the grass close beside him. It contained everything he'd need for the next 18 months—everything he needed less one thing.

Elizabeth.

Nicholas smiled wryly. Unfortunately, he was pretty sure she wouldn't fit.

"Hey," Elizabeth said, interrupting his thoughts and squeezing his hand. "Don't you think we should get going? You don't want to miss your train."

He sent her a grim smile. "Oh, I don't know about that. If there were any way I *could* miss this train, I would definitely want to."

Elizabeth's eyes shined sympathetically back at him, and she gave his hand another squeeze. "It's just eighteen months Nicholas—one and a half years. It'll be over like that," she said, snapping the fingers of the hand which wasn't holding his. "I'll write to you. I promise."

He raised his eyebrows. "You don't even know what my address will be."



"That's because you haven't told me, silly. Don't you think that now would be a good time for you to do that?" Nicholas visibly hesitated, and her expression flickered. "Unless . . ." He tilted his head curiously to one side, waiting for her to finish that thought. "Unless you don't *want* me to write to you . . ."

Nicholas smiled at the absurdity of that thought. "Of course I do! It's just that even *I* don't know yet what my address is going to be."

"Oh."

He hesitated again. "I'll write to *you*." It was a lie; he had no intention of writing to her.

"You mean like you did earlier this year?"

Nicholas frowned, remembering how he had neglected to write to her for so many months. "I—" he cut himself off and just went on frowning. Was she a mind reader?

"For a while there I was wondering if something had happened to you," she said. "You even missed my birthday." Nicholas swallowed visibly, but said nothing. "I was beginning to think you didn't care," she said.

A handful of seconds passed in which Nicholas still said nothing. What *could* he say? That no, he really did care, more than she could possibly imagine, and that his reticence to write to her had been born of doubt, fear, and uncertainty—the same feelings which were threatening to overwhelm him now?

Nicholas sent Elizabeth a helpless look, and she frowned back at him. "Don't you have *anything* to say in your defense?"

Nicholas opened his mouth, but had to stop himself from blurting out *I love you*.

*Yeah that would be real smooth. Better just to forget and be forgotten, to make a clean break.*

But that didn't make it any easier.

"I think we'd better start walking to the train station," he said, his voice sounding dull and lifeless.

Elizabeth merely nodded and stood up from the bench, letting go of Nicholas's hand as she did so. She started walking without him.

He shook his head wearily and swallowed past the growing lump in his throat. Standing up from the bench now, too, he picked up his suitcase and started after her.

\* \* \*

*I'm coming!* Edwin thought as the phone began its fifth ring.

He'd just arrived home and hadn't even had a chance to change out of his suit. Was a moment's peace too much to ask? Where was Constance, anyway? He grimaced and shook his head as he hurried down the hallway to the living room. Upon entering the living room, he crossed over to the end table, picked up the receiver, and put it to his ear. "Edwin Smythe speaking."

"Hello—" The voice on the other end hesitated. It was a woman's voice. "Is Constance there?"

"I believe she is, if you'll give me a moment to find her for you. May I ask who's calling?"

"Tell her it's her new friend."

Edwin hesitated, thinking, *That's rather vague*. "Just a minute." He put the receiver down on the end table and went to fetch his wife. After a short search, he found her in the master bathroom.

"Constance?" He knocked gently on the door.

"Yes?" came her muffled reply.

"There's a phone call for you."

After a few seconds, she emerged from the bathroom. "Who is it?"

Edwin shrugged. "She told me to tell you it was your '*new friend*.'"

A frown wrinkled Constance's forehead. She hadn't made any new friends that she was aware of, but instead of asking Edwin questions he obviously couldn't answer, she walked silently past him to the phone on the nightstand beside the bed. She picked up the receiver and said, "Hello?"

"I have some homework for you, Amelia," came the cultured male voice on the other end.

Constance's heart nearly leapt into her throat. She *knew* that voice. *But Edwin indicated the caller was a woman!*

"Oh? And what might that be?" Constance was peripherally aware of Edwin leaving the bedroom and his footsteps receding down the hall.

"Have you forgotten our arrangement already? My silence in exchange for your cooperation—should I ever need it. And, as it happens, I've found the need."

Now there was no doubt in her mind: the caller could only be William Gaines, the chairman of Western Leathers International. Constance glanced quickly about, making sure

that no one was around to hear, then whispered viciously into the receiver: "You might have picked a better time to call! My husband picked up before I did. Don't you think hell find it strange that you're calling for *me*?"

"That's why I had my secretary call and speak first. Now pay attention." Constance bristled at his commanding tone, but gave no reply. "I need your assistance in a matter of some delicacy. Are you listening?"

"Do I have a choice?" she shot back.

At this William Gaines began laughing. "No. I'm afraid you really don't."

\* \* \*

Nicholas and Elizabeth arrived at the train station with 10 minutes to spare. The train was already waiting amidst billowing clouds of steam on the tracks outside the station.

The walk from the park had been uncomfortably silent, and it had been all Nicholas could do to not change his mind about Elizabeth. He still had the letter he'd written to her. He could give it to her now, and he wouldn't even have to be around when she read it. But what would that accomplish? He would get absolutely no closure from that. And yet, was closure what he really needed? His plan to make this goodbye wasn't giving him the peace of mind he'd thought it would.

Nicholas grimaced as he and Elizabeth walked down the platform toward the queue waiting to board the train. He'd thought giving up would be a relief, but the closer they got to that line of people and the time when he would have to board the train with them, the closer he came to a state of sheer panic.

They reached the lineup for the train, and Nicholas shook his head. *Pull yourself together, Nicholas. Just a few more minutes, then there'll be no going back anyway.* His heart began pounding and he felt his palms begin to sweat. He tried to distract himself by removing his train ticket from his pocket and checking it. Finding everything in order, he slid the ticket back into his pocket and checked his watch. Just five more minutes.

\* \* \*

Silence. By the time they reached the train station, Elizabeth was sick of it. She shot Nicholas a disbelieving glance as they walked—*silently*—down the platform. *Is this how you want to*

*part ways, Nicholas? Walking calmly and resolutely out of my life?*

She shook her head. It wasn't how *she* wanted to part ways. While they were in the park, she'd meant to give Nicholas the apology she'd written re Charles's behavior. But Nicholas's reluctance to tell her why he hadn't written to her earlier in the year—even just to wish her a happy birthday—had upset her to the point that she really didn't feel like apologizing anymore. He was acting very strangely.

They stopped upon reaching the line of people waiting to board the train, and Elizabeth watched as Nicholas removed his train ticket from his pocket. He spent a moment studying it, then put it back in his pocket.

Feeling certain that Nicholas was finally going to say something, Elizabeth almost sighed with relief. . . . Then she saw him check his watch. Exasperated, she resolved that she wasn't going to be the one to break the silence. Why was Nicholas being so uncharacteristically quiet? He'd been unusually subdued all day.

Then a thought occurred to her: perhaps it was because of Charles's behavior last night. Maybe Nicholas was angry with her. Or maybe . . . maybe he'd given up trying to compete with Charles. Maybe he thought that she'd already chosen Charles over him.

Elizabeth shot Nicholas a suddenly comprehending look. Maybe he wasn't fighting for her now, because he thought there wasn't anything to fight for. Given Charles's behavior over the past few days, and her quiet acceptance of it, what other conclusion could he reach?

\* \* \*

Constance put the receiver down with a shaking hand.

"Well, who was it?" Edwin asked from the couch, where he was looking through the contents of his briefcase and arranging an assortment of papers and folders before him on the coffee table.

Constance turned to him with a slow and blinking stare. "Hmmm?"

"The woman who called you . . ." Edwin specified, a curious frown touching his lips.

Constance hesitated for just a moment, then her expression flickered into a pleasant smile. "Oh, just someone I met in the

hair salon the other day.”

Edwin nodded absently as he continued sorting through his briefcase.

Constance dithered over the implications of the chairman’s phone call for a couple of seconds before she glanced at her watch and realized what time it was. Thanks to Mr. Gaines’s inopportune timing, she’d all but missed the window of opportunity.

Picking up the phone again, Constance began dialing. It was doubtful if Charles could make it to the train station before Nicholas left, but he could at least be there to take Elizabeth out for a date after the fact. She couldn’t be allowed time to wallow over Nicholas’s departure. That would just be inviting trouble.

\* \* \*

“Nicholas.”

He sent Elizabeth a questioning look.

“What’s got into you?” she asked. “You’ve only five minutes before you leave, and you haven’t said a word to me since we left the park! Are you angry with me over something?”

“Of course not, Lizzie,” Nicholas forced a smile for her sake. “What could I possibly be angry about?”

They shuffled forward a few steps as the line to board the train grew shorter. Nicholas was almost at the front of it now.

Elizabeth frowned. “About last night, maybe?” She reached into her handbag and withdrew an envelope. “I wrote you an apology. Here,” she said, and held the envelope out to him.

Nicholas’s eyebrows shot up and his face blanked with shock. Hesitating for just a moment, he reached for the envelope. But Elizabeth didn’t let go. “Promise me you won’t read it until you’re on the train.”

He nodded absently as he stared curiously down at the envelope. Elizabeth let go of it, and then he looked up and asked, “What do you have to apologize for?”

Elizabeth sighed. “Everything. For Charles’s constant intrusions on our time together, for me allowing them . . .” She shook her head.

Nicholas swallowed visibly. “You didn’t have to apologize for him.”

“Yes, I did. This was supposed to be our time together. He ruined it, and I allowed him to.” She shook her head again and

looked away. "I don't understand it, though. I made him *promise* before you came that he would stay away." She frowned and met his gaze once more. "Apparently his promise didn't mean as much to him as it did to me."

Nicholas nodded, his eyes glazing as he disappeared into his thoughts.

Noticing his preoccupation, Elizabeth asked, "Hey, what's wrong?"

It was a couple of seconds before he withdrew from his thoughts and refocused his eyes on her. He smiled uncertainly and said, "Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Okay, well . . ." Elizabeth steeled herself for what she was about to say. It was already in the letter she'd written, but she realized that she wanted Nicholas's answer *now*.

In person.

"I've been thinking about something," she said, prevaricating just a little more. Nicholas tilted his head to one side, giving her a curious look. "Nicholas, I'd like you to take—"

The train's whistle blew, and both their heads turned toward it. Elizabeth noticed then that Nicholas was the only one left waiting to board the train. The conductor waved beckoningly. Nicholas half turned back to Elizabeth even as he took a step toward the conductor and fished into his pocket for his train ticket. "You were saying?"

She shook her head, realizing there wasn't time. "No, never mind. It's all in the letter I gave you."

Nicholas frowned uncertainly, then looked curiously down at the envelope, as if tempted to open it right away.

"In the train." Elizabeth reached out and took hold of his hands in hers. "You don't have time to read it now," she said, nodding to the conductor.

Nicholas gazed down into Elizabeth's eyes with an expression that looked almost as torn as he felt. Seeing the way he was looking at her, she made a weak attempt at a reassuring smile.

Nicholas just stood there, frozen in indecision. A gust of wind buffeted him toward the train, and he let it carry him, his hands slipping through her fingertips as he turned to face the conductor.

\* \* \*

Charles's knee was bouncing impatiently as his chauffeur drove the 15-minute distance from Paarl to Wellington. He'd

left almost as soon as he'd got the call from Constance, stopping only to pack a quick picnic of champagne and tuna sandwiches. It was a strange combination, but he hadn't had a lot of other choices; the tuna sandwiches had already been made, and time was of the essence.

Charles pressed a button in the back of the car, lowering the tinted glass window which divided the front and back halves of the car. "How much farther, James?" he asked, poking his head through the gap.

"Five minutes, sir."

*Five minutes!* He sat back and glanced at his watch. It was 4:27. He sighed. Five minutes or half an hour—there wasn't much difference if he were too late to interrupt Nicholas and Elizabeth saying goodbye.

He'd been surprised that he hadn't thought of Constance's idea for himself. After going to such trouble all weekend to come between Nicholas and Elizabeth, now he was going to permit them the luxury of a memorable goodbye? Charles didn't believe in half measures. It was no longer a question of Nicholas's intentions, but rather of sabotaging him to the point that he never came back.

"Can't you go any faster, James?"

"I can try, sir. Perhaps you'd like me to switch on the radio? Some soothing music might help to calm your nerves." Without waiting for Charles's reply, James turned the radio on and tuned in to some classical music.

Charles took a deep, calming breath, closed his eyes, and tried to relax and appreciate the music. A few moments later, the soothing melody of Handel's Water Music was cut off in midstream, replaced by the jarring monotone of a newscaster speaking in Afrikaans:

"Attention travelers, Du Toitskloof Pass on the way to Worcester has been closed due to an accident involving an overturned Coca-Cola truck. The road is littered with glass, and authorities say that the cleanup will take several hours. Travelers going that way are advised to take another road. . . ."

Charles didn't understand a word of it, so he asked James to translate for him. James gave him the short version, and Charles nodded. They weren't going that way, so the accident wouldn't delay them. Handel's Water Music resumed, and Charles glanced down at his watch again. 4:30. If the train

were on time, it would be leaving any second. He looked out the window, studying the scenery in an effort to approximate the remaining distance to the train station. *Almost there*, he thought.

\*            \*            \*

Nicholas handed the conductor his ticket, then stopped and turned around.

"Elizabeth . . ." his voice cracked and he was forced to leave that thought trailing off into an awkward silence. He closed his eyes and swallowed. Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself—

"Don't worry. This isn't the first time we've parted." His eyes opened to see Elizabeth smiling up at him. "It's just farewell, not goodbye. Remember that."

Nicholas returned her smile, his lips seeming to tremble with the effort. Then, heedless of the envelope in his hands, he took a quick step toward her and took her in his arms.

His lips collided with hers in a firm, desperate kiss, which she began to return with equal fervor. She let her hands rove up over his chest and shoulders, feeling the tense, rigid muscles standing out beneath his shirt. A frisson of goosebumps swept from the nape of her neck, where his one hand was alternately grasping and massaging her hair, all the way down to her knees.

Then the train blew another blast from its whistle and the fight went abruptly out of him—his lips and muscles going simultaneously soft. He pulled away, and Elizabeth was left feeling emotionally raw, confused, and wondering why this time his farewell felt more like *goodbye*.

"I'd better go," Nicholas said, his voice sounding hoarse.

Elizabeth nodded, but didn't let go of him.

"Lizzie . . ." he said, glancing pointedly down at her arms where they were still wrapped around his neck.

"You *will* remember to write to me?"

He hesitated, then nodded.

"As soon as you can," she pressed. "Promise me, Nicholas."

His expression flickered uncertainly, but he nodded again. He could always write her one last letter. "I promise," he said.

Apparently satisfied, she smiled uncertainly up at him and then allowed her arms to slide down his shoulders and back to her sides. She pointed to the now slightly crinkled envelope



which he was still holding. "Don't forget to read it."

He grinned wryly back at her, an expression which belied the unshed tears shining in his eyes, and picked up his suitcase. He began backing away. "As soon as I get on the train." Then his grin faded, replaced by a look that was equal parts sad and wistful. "Goodbye, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth opened her mouth to object, to remind him that it was just farewell, that they'd see each other again—and maybe even sooner than he thought! But she knew there wasn't time for all of that, so she just smiled and blew him a kiss. "Until we meet again!" she said, shouting to be heard above a sudden blast of steam from the train, which billowed out across the platform and quickly enveloped them. She was just barely able to see him catch her kiss with the hand that was holding her apology. He placed it over his heart, envelope and all.

Then she watched as he turned from her and took the ticket stub which the conductor was holding out to him. From there he ascended the short staircase to the train car and disappeared inside.

## Chapter 16

**N**icholas climbed the short staircase to the coach with slow, plodding footsteps, trying to ignore the hollow ache in his chest. When he reached the top of the stairs, he considered turning around to see if Elizabeth was still there, but his heart wrenched at the thought. It was hard enough to say goodbye without constantly looking back to remind himself of who he was saying goodbye to. He proceeded into the coach and began looking for a place to sit. The train wasn't very full, so it didn't take him long to find what he was looking for: a group of four empty seats. He took one of the window seats, and placed his suitcase on the seat beside him to discourage anyone from sitting there. Unfortunately that would do nothing to prevent people from sitting in the pair of seats facing him. Ordinarily, he would have welcomed the company, but right now he just wanted to be alone.

Placing Elizabeth's letter on top of the suitcase, Nicholas settled in for the long train ride to Pretoria. But with nothing to occupy him save for his thoughts, the anxiety that had been lingering in the back of his mind suddenly exploded into full-born dread.

He took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh, attempting to release some of the tension. It didn't work. Glancing absently out his window for the first time, he spotted Elizabeth: still waiting on the platform, watching amidst a handful of other people as the train made ready to leave. Nicholas winced and forced himself to look away. His gaze fell upon Elizabeth's letter atop his suitcase. A half-remembered pang of curiosity struck him. Elizabeth had been about to tell him something . . . no, to ask him something, when the train's whistle had blown, interrupting her. When he'd asked her about it, she'd said that

it was in the letter anyway.

Picking up her letter, he flipped it over and began opening the envelope. He discovered that the envelope wasn't sealed, so he lifted the flap, withdrew the letter, unfolded it, and began reading. As he read, his expression went from curious, to sad and wistfully smiling, to a rictus of horror and regret. He froze, his eyes riveted to the final paragraph:

*I can't believe I allowed Charles to spoil our time together, and I'd like to make it up to you somehow. I'd like to invite you to my matric farewell dance,\* that is, if you'd be willing to take me. The invitation is enclosed with this letter. Please let me know if you can make it. You can call me at 775-9566.*

Nicholas's heart was pounding, sending blood roaring in his ears. Slowly, numbly, he reached inside the envelope and pulled out the invitation.

<p>THE STANDARD 9 CLASS OF <i>Huquenot High School</i> CORDIALLY INVITES YOU AND YOUR PARTNER TO THE <i>Matric Farewell Dance</i> ON FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 20, 1974 AT 7:30 P.M. IN THE GYMNASIUM R.S.V.P. MUSIC: Nigel Classen and His Band</p>
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He couldn't believe that he'd so thoroughly misread the situation. Here Elizabeth was, asking him instead of Charles to take her to her *matric* farewell dance. And all on the *chance* that he might agree to take her! She couldn't have been more eloquent about her feelings for him if she'd tried. She was willing to take the leap of faith, to gamble that he felt more for her than he'd ever put into words . . . so why had he been so scared to do the same? What had stopped him? Worse, he'd been planning to end their relationship because of his uncertainty.

---

\* *Matric farewell dance*: Senior prom, organized by the standard 9 (grade 11) class for the Grade-12 (Matric) class who'll shortly be graduating and leaving high-school

From Elizabeth's perspective they'd just parted ways again. It was nothing new. But from his perspective it had been far more final than that.

He remembered the letter he'd written to Elizabeth last night, and his decision not to give it to her. What had he been thinking? His mind drew a sudden blank. He no longer had an answer for that.

The train blew a third and final blast from its whistle, signaling its departure from the station and jolting Nicholas out of his self-recriminations with an almost imperceptible tug. The train was moving. Nicholas cast a hurried glance out the window—

And found Elizabeth still standing there on the station platform. Suddenly, he knew what he had to do. He should have done it hours ago. Hopefully he still had enough time. Hurrying now, he grabbed his suitcase, flipped it over the armrest and onto his lap, and popped the clasps. Digging madly through the contents, he withdrew the envelope containing the letter he'd written to Elizabeth last night. He quickly set his open suitcase on the seat beside him, opened his window, popped his head and arms out, and began waving and shouting to Elizabeth.

\* \* \*

Elizabeth was standing on the platform watching the train, her eyes scanning the windows along the side, looking for a familiar face. She was determined to wait until the train was fully gone before she left. The train's whistle blew a third time, signaling its departure, and a fresh cloud of steam billowed out along the platform. Then, just as the train started moving, she noticed a familiar head and set of arms pop out one of the windows. It was Nicholas. Her brow furrowed in confusion.

"Elizabeth!" Nicholas was waving—an envelope?—in the air like a madman. The letter she'd written? She blinked in surprise and confusion. Obviously he'd already read it, and now he was waving it at her to get her attention. Maybe he had a response for her? Realizing she was still frozen in place and that the train was busily picking up steam, she began running toward the train.

It would take a while for the train to get up to speed, but the platform wasn't particularly long. She wouldn't have more than a handful of seconds—and then only if she ran. But maybe

that would be enough for a few last words.

\* \* \*

"Elizabeth!" He watched her head turn to him. For an interminable moment, she just stood there staring back at him, uncomprehending. He responded by waving his arms even more desperately. Then, to his relief, she began walking—no, *running*—toward him. She reached the side of the train, and kept pace just below his window, having to jog to keep up.

"I almost forgot," he said, yelling to be heard over the rising chugging and clanking of the train. "I have a letter for you as well." He held it out to her through the open window, and she reached up to grab it, but the train was moving faster now, and Elizabeth was struggling to keep up. Her fingertips brushed a corner of the envelope, failing to reach it. She tried a second time, pouring on a burst of speed that defied her heels and dress to tell her she couldn't. Nicholas strained a few inches closer to her through the open window. It was no use; she didn't even manage to touch the envelope. The train was speeding away, and she couldn't keep up. To make matters worse, the train platform was running out ahead of her.

Elizabeth realized that she had to stop running or she would catapult over the side of the platform and fall in a tangled heap in the gravel alongside the tracks. Her eyes widened in despair and she began slowing down. The distance between them immediately lengthened, first to a couple inches, then a foot, then two feet—

Realizing what was happening, Nicholas's own eyes widened in despair, and then he did something unexpected. He let go of the letter.

It fluttered down, down—

Right into her, hitting her in the chest before she managed to reach up with both hands to catch it. The train platform abruptly ran out ahead of her and she came to a sudden stop.

Standing there at the end of the platform, panting from the exertion, she watched as Nicholas receded into the distance—grinning wryly as he went. "Until we meet again, Lizzie!" he shouted to her over the steady clanking and chugging of the train. He gave her a sloppy military salute. She just stood there, gasping, trying to catch her breath, looking and feeling bereft, too stunned and tired to respond. And then the train curved around a corner, and Nicholas was gone.

# Chapter 17

**E**lizabeth continued watching from the end of the platform until the train dwindled to a speck in the distance. She turned around with a sigh and wandered back along the platform, gazing absently down at the letter which Nicholas had managed to give to her at the last minute—a letter which she had taken great pains to get from him.

Stopping at a bench under the eaves of a small gray and brown terminal building, Elizabeth sat down, opened the envelope, and started reading:

## **Summer Love** \*[\[Click here for the AUDIO version\]](#)

*by Nicholas Strauss*

*As I walked into that little store,  
She turned, I turned, our eyes met, she smiled.  
She transfixed me to the core . . .  
This beautiful young woman with the face of a child.  
For there she stood, smiling ever so softly at me,  
Her eyes fixed upon me in a most disarming gaze.  
This lovely young mermaid from that wondrous sea,  
She whom I'd seemingly lost in that relentless maze,  
Reappeared to me now as if through a swirling ocean mist,  
Her chestnut golden hair cascading around her shoulders bare.  
I simply had no choice; speechless, quite helpless to resist,  
I stood there, motionless, enchanted, held captive by her stare*



---

\*"Summer Love" was written by the real "Nicholas Strauss" for the real "Elizabeth" - only now it's possible to illustrate it with period photos and paintings. It was a most desperate "hail-Mary" pass... to win her heart.

*Gracefully, she moved out towards the sun,  
Following seemed the most natural thing for me to do,  
My legs regaining movement now—trying hard not to run.  
So, with her smile beckoning, out we went, just us two.  
Of course I had completely forgot what I should get,  
As we left both through that door,  
Somehow it seemed required that again we'd met,  
There in that dear little store!  
Beside me was the most enchanting of young women,  
And strangely once again this day, our paths had crossed  
, So, "surely," I thought, "this must be love's omen?"  
for just hours before I'd given her up as lost.*



*Love at first sight is very rare indeed,  
I could not have foreseen it, there by the sea,  
But it felt like all of Heaven had that day decreed,  
That such a love should happen all at once—to me.  
There I was, stung by Cupid's many arrows,  
Perhaps all twelve of them in my heart,  
Caring little about love's possible sorrows,  
Simply thinking, "Oh, what a beautiful start!"  
Somehow I felt I'd known her all my life,  
As we walked on down to those streams,  
With destiny whispering warnings of heartless strife—  
But also of love's most wondrous dreams!*



*There on the river's bank we sat and softly talked.  
For quite some time, both pleasantly at ease,  
And later, quite unforced, we held hands and walked  
, On winding paths, past all those countless trees.  
I smiled as I looked at the milk money still in my hand,  
And as we meandered along the river's bank,  
Our feet playing joyfully upon that river's pleasant sand,  
We both knew this much: we had Heaven to thank! Later  
—at night, under the moon's soft and pleasant light, We  
would dance . . . and danced and danced and danced,  
There where jazz bands played all night,  
She'd cast love's spell over me, and I was entranced!*



*On we swayed, gently on our dancing floor,  
Holding each other closely, tight,  
Till my 16-year-old heart could take no more.  
So out we went, on into the African night.  
There amongst the swaying palms we walked,  
And over the distant strains of the tenor-sax,*

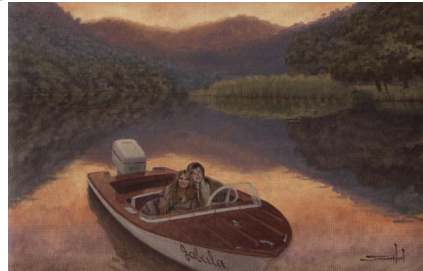
*Lizzie and I stood and softly talked,  
The warm sea breeze now at our backs.  
Colorful Hibiscus flowers grew freely there,  
On the moonlit banks of that dark stream,  
And our love we felt we had to share,  
We shared such a lovely dream!*

*The glowing moon shone bright above,  
As we first kissed under a tall palm tree,  
Knowing that our childhood summer love  
Was good and clean and free!  
I remember well: our eager lips drew near,  
Our teenage hearts now beating fast,  
I gently touched her ear—  
We made the moment last!*

*In the distance, the band was playing our song,  
Lizzie looked up at me, the moon now gleaming in her eyes,  
And we kissed again, this time our passions running strong  
— Passion that must live on, the kind that never dies!*

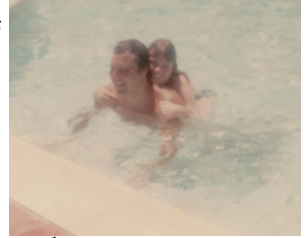
*We left at midnight by boat,  
From that, our first of many a dance,  
And slowly down the river we did float,  
Both so grateful for love's chance!  
We hugged, we kissed, we bade goodnight,  
Beside a small, dark tree,  
Under the moon's now gentle light.  
Sweet Elizabeth and me.  
Later, as I lay there in my bed,  
Our love felt strong and warm,  
Soft music still playing in my head,  
Elizabeth had taken my heart by storm!*

*I slept that night a happy sleep,  
Amid her siren's song.  
In my heart it had found a home to keep,  
And it's never sounded wrong.  
Awakening, all my dreaming done,  
My heart overflowing with love,  
I rushed to greet the rising sun,  
And my little turtle dove.  
Again we sat, we walked—  
Happy and carefree.  
We kissed and we talked,  
Just Elizabeth and me.*





*For days we walked and talked, always holding hands.  
We swam and romped there in the roaring waves,  
And ran and played along the beach's sands,  
Then dried and dressed amongst those rocky caves  
. There, sheltered by the dunes, we huddled,  
Just us two, on nature's turf,  
There, too, we kissed and cuddled,  
Overlooking that endless, pounding surf.  
We were oblivious to all others.  
That's normal, I suppose, for those in love.  
Back then we were blissfully ignored—even by our mothers  
. That protection of our love was a gift from heaven above.*



*In a canoe we paddled, daily, up the streams,  
To our secret place - along the cliff's sheer side,  
The tropical jungle seeing our tender dreams,  
Had helped us there to hide.  
Brightly colored birds flew overhead,  
And as we drifted there all alone,  
Floating white lilies witnessed what was done and said.  
Ours was a loving match—Heaven must have known!  
Two sweethearts, cradled in our little shell,  
My heart had wanted to shout:  
“This match was made in Heaven, not in Hell!”  
Of that I had no doubt!*



*For only could Heaven have sent,  
Such a sweet angel to me.  
A helping hand it had us lent,  
Then set our Spirits free!  
There we lay, floating amongst Snow-white flowers,  
Entranced —in Cupid's spell,  
I held captive by her powers.  
Oh, she knew her part so well!  
Eventually, we sighed and left each other's arms,  
And I started again to row,  
Still dazzled by her many charms,  
The blazing sun was now fast dipping low.*



*As the golden sun sank behind the jungle's hills,  
The African night was fast approaching now,  
With menacing shadows dancing on the water's frills,*



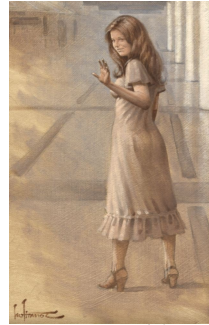
## P.S. I LOVE YOU

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*We knew we must get back, somehow!  
Finally, safely standing upon those sandy banks again,  
Our families we did meet,  
And there, amidst the noise of drinking men,  
Our suppers we were given to eat.  
But we had no need of food,  
We could have lived on love alone.  
And with both of us still in such a heavenly mood,  
Beside the river, waited our loving throne.*



*For there on the edge of that watery trench,  
At the meeting of two streams,  
Upon our favorite gray, old bench,  
We shared so many happy dreams.  
Always the remaining days went by too fast,  
And there in that most pleasant land,  
I vainly wished they could forever last,  
Somehow for time quite still to stand.  
But alas, back home she would soon be going,  
And our love would have to wait another year,  
My heart broken, its sadness showing,  
As it cried a little tear.*



**PS.** *Dearest Elizabeth, I'm so sorry it took me so long to say this much to you. I've tried, more than once, to tell you in person, but something always got in the way. Do you remember once, when we were in each other's arms at our waterfall, with you feeling very guilty for how you'd acted, how you promised me that one day, if the need ever arose, you'd give me one last chance to remind you of how very special our summer romances were? Well Elizabeth, I'm taking you up on that kind offer—I simply have no choice, at this critical time for us, but to use-up my one and only chance in life to do so. And now, when I finally do get around to telling you what I need so desperately for you to know, I find that just 3 little words I've long agonized over, for far too long, seem so inadequate—yet, they're all I now have left to convey the depth of my feelings for you ...*

*Elizabeth ... I love you! I always have, and I always will! Whatever happens, please remember that though I can't be there for you right now, I will be back! I promise you, I will! Somehow, sometime, some way, somewhere ... I'll be back! Life is short Elizabeth, and true love is hard to find—but we've found it! So please, Lizzie, hold me close in your heart, even while I'm so very far away, and all, for us, seems so very hopeless.*

*With all my love, Nicholas.*

## Chapter 18

Elizabeth sat there, eyes wide, blinking, staring down at the letter in her hands. She was shocked, stunned beyond belief, with only one thought playing over and over through her head: *If only I had known.*

"If only . . ." she whispered to herself.

"If only what?" came a voice from behind her.

Elizabeth jumped with fright and turned to look.

seeing the stationmaster peering at her through the black iron bars of the ticket office, Elizabeth smiled in spite of herself. "Oh, Mister Gee, it's you. You scared me," she said.

"Sorry, didn't mean to." He gave her a toothy grin, then pointed to the letter in her lap. "What you reading?"

Elizabeth frowned. "It's from Nicholas."

"I gathered as much - saw you running after him. What's it say?"

Elizabeth sighed and shook her head. "Everything."

The stationmaster's grin broadened into a happy jack-o'-lantern smile. "Well, hallelujah! He told you after all."

Elizabeth looked up at him, her eyebrows knitting together curiously. "What do you mean?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "Long story. Wouldn't want to bore you with the details. So, are *you* going to tell *him*?"

"Tell him what?"

"How you feel about him."

Elizabeth gave a bitter little smile. "I can't."

The stationmaster's head cocked to one side. "Why not?"

Elizabeth turned to look down the railroad tracks. "Because he's gone. I don't have his address, so I can't even write to him" adding "In the 1700's, in France, my ancestor Genevieve, stood on the dockside watching her true-love sail off with his family to, well, right here, actually - the new home for French Huguenots in Africa, and read a letter just like this one, in which he told her that he loved her, he always had! They never were able to re-establish contact mostly because her parents wanted her to stay in England. She never saw him again, to tell him that she felt the same way about him!" Then, tears pooling in her eyes, Lizzie said "Oh Mr. Gee, I think that's just also happened to me here today! I now finally know that he's always loved me, but I cannot tell him that I've also always loved him. What if we never meet again?" Mr. Gee smiled, and said "You can still catch him, you know."

Elizabeth turned back to the stationmaster with a disbelieving look. "How?"

Mr. Gee's jack-o'-lantern smile returned and he shrugged. "Well now, let's see . . . we know that he's got to stop in Worcester to board another train, and *I* happen to know that the railway takes a very different route through the mountains from the highway. It was built long before the highway, and a car could easily beat Nicholas to the train station in Worcester. Would you like me to take you there?"

Elizabeth's eyebrows shot up as her eyes suddenly widened. "Really? Would you?"

Mr. Gee was just starting to reply when a flicker of movement behind Elizabeth caught his attention—

"Would *who* do *what*?"

Elizabeth turned to look.

"Charles!" Elizabeth's tone was more surprised than happy.

"At your service, princess," he said, bowing slightly as he stopped in front of her.

"Who's the dandy?" came Mr. Gee's voice from behind Elizabeth.

Charles's head came up sharply, and his gaze quickly arrowed in on the source of that voice. "I beg your pardon?" he asked, squinting into the darkness of the ticket office.

Elizabeth interrupted before Mr. Gee could give a reply. "Charles, what are you doing here? I'm still angry at you for last night."

Charles's eyes panned from the ticket office to meet her gaze with a frown. "Why, what did I do?"

"You know what you did, but never mind that. If you want to make it up to me, here's your chance." Charles went on frowning, quietly waiting for her to go on. "Nicholas just left on the train for Worcester, but the stationmaster has just been explaining to me how the highway takes a different route from the railroad, and how we could beat the train to Worcester in a car. If you really care about me, Charles, you'll drive me there. There's something I have to say to Nicholas."

Charles's frown deepened, and he looked away, out toward the railroad tracks. After a moment, he looked back at her and smiled. "Worcester you say?" Elizabeth nodded and Charles pursed his lips.

"Please, Charles! We don't have much time."

He nodded abruptly. "Well, if it means that much to you—"

"Thank you!" Elizabeth jumped up from the bench and threw her arms around his neck in a quick hug. She noticed over his shoulder that she was still holding Nicholas's letter, and she quickly broke out of the hug to stuff the letter into her pocket.

Charles noticed and pointed to her pocket. "What's that?"

"Never mind, I'll tell you later. Let's go!"

"Right." Charles turned and began striding down the platform. Elizabeth started after him, then stopped and looked over her shoulder to the ticket office.

"Thank you for your offer to take me, Mister Gee. I didn't want to trouble you, so I asked Charles instead."

"Dis 'n plesier," came the stationmaster's gravelly voice. "But the only thanks I need is for you to beat Nicholas to that station. Now hurry!"

Elizabeth nodded and then ran after Charles.

\* \* \*

"James! We have an urgent mission," Charles said as he and Elizabeth climbed into the back of his dad's Mercedes.

"Sir?" the chauffeur asked, making eye contact in the rearview mirror.

"Drive with all possible speed for Worcester. We have a train to catch."

"But, sir—"

"No buts, James!" The driver hesitated. "Quickly now!"

"Yes, sir," James said and started the engine. "Shall I go around the mountains on the old road?"

"Of course, not. What a stupid question, James! How are we ever to catch a train if we take the slowest possible route? Take the Du Toitskloof Pass."

The chauffeur's eyes met Charles's in the rearview mirror. "But Du Toitskloof Pass is—"

"The fastest way to get to Worcester, I know!" Charles said, interrupting his driver loudly.

"Yes, sir." And with that, James pulled the car out of the parking lot and onto the street. They heard the car's engine rise to a screaming whine and then fall into a steady hum as it geared up. The scenery began flashing by at an alarming rate.

Charles flicked a switch, raising the tinted privacy window between the front and back seats. He turned to Elizabeth with a smile. "Well, now all we have to do is wait."

Elizabeth nodded, worrying her lip anxiously as she gazed out the passenger's side window. Noting her preoccupation, Charles added, "Don't worry, we'll make it. I'm sure we will. If there's a driver who can outrace a train, James could outrace *him* on a scooter."

Elizabeth smiled at that and tore her gaze away from the window. She decided to humor his attempt to lighten the mood: "On a scooter? I doubt it."

Charles grinned wryly back at her. "Well, not just *any* scooter, obviously."

"Obviously."

"You want a glass of champagne while we wait? You look like you could use it."

"You brought champagne?"

He nodded. "I brought it for the picnic I was planning for us."

"You were planning a picnic? Is that why you came to the station?"

He nodded again. "I was going to take you to the botanical gardens in Stellenbosch."

Elizabeth's expression flickered guiltily. "I'm sorry, I've been so preoccupied that I didn't even think to wonder why you'd come."

Charles shrugged. "That's okay. I understand. And we can just as easily have our picnic in the Hex River Valley. It's beautiful there, too."

Elizabeth's eyebrows elevated slightly. She looked away from Charles and back out the window to hide the uncertain look which was creeping across her face. Charles's words echoed unsettlingly through her mind: "*That's okay. I understand.*" She didn't doubt that he meant them. After all, he was taking her—no questions asked—to meet Nicholas in Worcester. What kind of boyfriend would do *that*?

*Only the very best*, she realized with a grimace. The way Charles was acting now, she was having trouble staying angry at him . . .

Elizabeth gave a short gasp, remembering that she'd invited Nicholas to her *matric* farewell dance. What would Charles do when he found out? Elizabeth bit her lip. What had she done?

"Hey, do you want champagne or don't you?"

Elizabeth turned from the window and affected a cheerful smile. "Yes, please."

\* \* \*

It wasn't even half an hour before the car began slowing down. With a frown, Charles punched the button to lower the tinted privacy window. "What's the matter, James? Why are you driving so slowly? We can't be there already."

"There's an obstruction ahead, sir," James said, sounding irritated as he pointed to the road up ahead. Charles followed the gesture with his eyes.

"Oh, dear . . ."

"What is it?" Elizabeth asked, poking her head into the gap between the two front seats. There was a police roadblock ahead, recognizable from the flashing red and blue lights of the squad cars. Twisted and mangled bits of wreckage were strewn from one end of the road to the other, and what looked like glass, lots and lots of glass, lay glittering like a sea of diamonds all over the road. Policemen and highway workers were walking gingerly between the pieces of the wreckage with brooms, sweeping those diamonds into piles. Elizabeth's gaze fell upon one of the larger bits of wreckage, what looked to be the twisted wheelbase of a semi-trailer. Barely visible on one side of the wreckage was the familiar white text on red background which read: Coca- . . .

*Cola*, Elizabeth added quietly. It was an overturned Coca-Cola truck. From the look of the policemen's progress, there was no doubt that it would take them hours to finish cleaning up the mess. Elizabeth sat back with a despairing sigh and observed a moment of silence for the driver of that truck, realizing that he almost certainly had bigger problems. And yet, she couldn't help feeling sorry for herself, too. She was never going to be able to beat Nicholas's train to Worcester now!

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth," Charles said, his voice laced with regret.

"Well, sir?" came James's still-irritated voice. "What now?"

Charles ignored his driver and went on speaking to Elizabeth. "We can't possibly catch up to Nicholas."

Elizabeth nodded, barely hearing Charles.

Charles's head turned and he spoke to the rearview mirror, where his driver's eyes were visible. "Turn the car around, James. I believe I spotted a lookout just a little ways back from here. If nothing else, we can still have our picnic."

James rolled his eyes and began wheeling the car around.

"Whatever you say, *sir*."

Charles frowned. He would have to have a talk with his driver after this.

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, the car came to a rolling stop at the lookout. Elizabeth was gazing numbly out her window. Disappointment and despair were coming off of her in waves. *Let her brood*, Charles thought. It could do nothing to dampen his spirits. He tried not to let his feelings of triumph show. Elizabeth had asked him for a favor which, under ordinary circumstances, would have been an enormous sacrifice for him. But in light of the information he'd received via the radio on the way to Wellington, it had been no skin off his teeth. He'd known ahead of time that Du Toitskloof Pass was closed due to an accident, and that there had never been a chance of catching Nicholas.

Well, perhaps they still might have caught him if they'd taken the old road as James had suggested, but Elizabeth had no way of knowing that. Charles smiled inwardly. This little favor was making him look positively sterling in Elizabeth's eyes—if something of an idiot in his driver's. No doubt that was why James was acting so belligerently about their little detour. Maybe he thought that Charles had forgotten about the traffic update?

Well, no matter. James could think whatever he wanted.

Charles concentrated on his expression, trying hard to make it appear sympathetic before he called for Elizabeth's attention. He had to make several attempts to wipe the smug grin off his face.

Eventually succeeding, he said, "You know, Elizabeth, sometimes . . ."

She turned from the window. Her blue eyes gazed into his, looking uncharacteristically dull and lifeless in the pale golden twilight of the now-setting sun.

"Sometimes," Charles continued, "some things just aren't meant to be. Fate obviously has other plans for you than running helter-skelter after guys like Nicholas."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "Guys like Nicholas?"

*Oops*. They heard the front door slam as James stepped out. Charles pretended to be distracted by the noise, hoping that would give him enough of an excuse to change the topic. He



couldn't reveal to Elizabeth what Constance had shared with him in confidence. Elizabeth might not take it well that he and her mother had been working behind her back to sabotage Nicholas.

Turning back to Elizabeth, he asked, "Shall I get our picnic from the trunk?"

Elizabeth shrugged unenthusiastically. Charles got out of the car and closed the door behind him. As he made his way around to the trunk, he noticed his driver standing, smoking by the railing along the cliff side of the road. The end of a cigarette glowed bright orange as James withdrew it from his mouth and blew a cloud of smoke over the cliff. Charles stopped halfway to the trunk, and started toward James instead. Now was as good a time as any to explain the situation to his driver.

Coming up alongside James, Charles followed his driver's gaze down into the valley. His eyes widened. Far below, lay a set of railroad tracks where a train was steaming through a tunnel in the side of the mountain.

"Is that . . . ?" Charles trailed off uncertainly. *Surely not.*

James blew another cloud of smoke, then turned to him. "The train you were trying so hard *not to catch?*" He nodded. "That it is, sir."

Charles started laughing. This was just too much! *Goodbye, Nicholas!* Smiling jubilantly down at the train, he made a condescending little wave, bending his fingers at the knuckles a couple of times. *Goodbye, and good riddance!* Elizabeth didn't need guys like him in her life. Charles heard the train give a distant blast from its whistle, as if acknowledging his wave.

"Shall I take it that this charade of getting to Worcester with '*all possible speed*' was for Miss Elizabeth's benefit?" James asked.

Charles looked up from the train and gave his driver a brief nod. "You shall, but breathe a word of that to her and you'll be looking for work faster than you can say, 'sir.'"

The driver's eyes narrowed fractionally. "I shall exercise the utmost discretion, then . . . *sir.*"

Charles snorted and started back to the car. Heading over to the trunk, he withdrew the picnic he'd packed and then circled around and opened the back door. He slid onto the back seat beside Elizabeth. She was staring out her window, lifeless as a

statue. He grimaced. *Get over it, princess.*

Affecting a cheerful voice, he said, "Unfortunately all we've got are tuna sandwiches. . . ."

Elizabeth turned reluctantly from the window to face him with a look that was equal parts sad and sheepish.

"Charles, I have a confession to make," she said. His eyebrows shot up, and she sighed, visibly bracing herself. "I invited Nicholas to my *matric* farewell dance."

Charles blinked in astonishment. "You what?"

"I was so angry at you over what happened last night that I wrote an apology to Nicholas, and I enclosed the invitation with it." She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Charles. He probably won't be able to take me, anyway."

"You bet your hot lips he won't be able to take you!" Charles shook his head. "I can't believe that you would do that to me!"

"Well, you did make Nicholas pay for dinner last night."

"He insisted!"

"No he didn't."

"You didn't hear him back at the house. He told me to keep my money—that he had enough to pay for dinner."

"Whatever he said, he obviously didn't know that you were planning to take us to such a fancy restaurant. You *made* him pay, hoping to make him look foolish because he wouldn't be able to." Charles's cheeks bulged for a hasty retort, but Elizabeth held up a finger to stop him. "That's not the only reason I invited him. You promised that you'd stay away while Nicholas was here. Why didn't you?"

Charles just gaped at her, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Eventually, he shook his head. "I never would have broken that promise if your mother hadn't taken me aside and told me what Nicholas is really like . . . what he's *really* after. Honestly, Elizabeth, I'm surprised at you! After all the years you've known him, you of all people should know what he's like. What can you possibly see in him?"

Now it was Elizabeth's turn to gape. "My mother? What on earth are you talking about? She's known Nicholas as long as I have. She knows exactly what he's like! She's never expressed any doubts about him, and she's had absolutely no reason to do so!"

Charles frowned. "Maybe that's because she didn't think you'd listen."

"That's ridiculous! I always listen to her."

Charles shrugged. "Whatever, Elizabeth, I'm just telling you what she told me. You don't have to believe it."

"Well I don't!" Elizabeth said, crossing her arms.

"Fine. Don't, then." And with that Charles opened the door and stepped out of the car. "Have a nice picnic, *princess*."

And then he slammed the door behind him. She winced at the noise, feeling sick to her stomach. She was all alone in the back of the car—a barrage of thoughts bouncing angrily around in her head, alternately accusing Charles and then her mother of lying.

Elizabeth stared out the window, watching as Charles stomped off toward his driver. She heard his muffled shouting: "James! . . . *James!* Put out that cigarette! We're leaving."

Elizabeth looked away from the window, her eyes going out of focus as she stared unblinkingly at the back of the seat in front of her. Feeling suddenly bereft, she blinked away a few tears, and they rolled slowly down her cheeks.

Charles's words echoed ominously through her head: "*I never would have broken that promise if your mother hadn't taken me aside and told me what Nicholas is really like . . . what he's really after.*"

Elizabeth had a sudden revelation then, a flashback from the night before. She'd been sitting drinking tea with Nicholas in the kitchen, both of them unable to sleep. It had been right after he'd caught her trying to burn Lawrence's letter. . . .

*"How does your mother feel about me?" Nicholas asked, his green eyes intent upon hers over the rim of his teacup.*

*"I think she's very fond of you. Why do you ask?"*

*Nicholas shook his head. "Never mind. Just something Charles said while you were in the loo earlier tonight."*

*"What did he say?"*

*"He said that your mother doesn't trust me."*

Elizabeth shook her head, snapping out of her reverie. Why would Charles lie to both her and Nicholas?

*He wouldn't.*

*But that means . . .*

Elizabeth heard the car doors open and then shut as if from a great distance.

"Take her home, James. I think we've all had enough *fun* for today."

Elizabeth's head was swimming, and she was having trouble thinking straight. *That means . . .*

Some part of her brain absently noted that the car had started moving, but she barely felt it.

"Elizabeth?" The voice was Charles's. He sounded guilty. "Are you crying?"

But she had no response for that. Charles's words were too fuzzy and indistinct for her to make any sense of them, and the world around her was bobbing and swaying in a blurry, nauseating dance.

Shaking her head to clear it, Elizabeth turned to Charles. "I don't want to go home. Not until I absolutely have to. Please. Let's just go somewhere else."

Charles was frowning deeply, but he gave a brief nod. "Sure, Elizabeth. We can do that." He turned to look at the back of the driver's seat. "James? Take us to Cape Town rather."

"As you wish, sir."

\* \* \*

Standing beside the kitchen sink, waiting for her cup of herbal tea to finish steeping, Constance checked her watch and frowned. It was a quarter after midnight. Where was Elizabeth? Charles knew better than to keep her out past her curfew.

Then there came a knock at the door, and Constance smiled. She strode out into the living room and down the hall to answer the door. Under the circumstances, she supposed that she could forgive Elizabeth for being a little late.

Constance opened the door with her smile still in place, but Elizabeth was standing there, looking exhausted, impatient, and . . . angry?

"Hello, Elizabeth. Is something the matter?" Constance asked, her smile fading into a look of more appropriate concern.

Elizabeth flashed her mother a sarcastic smile. "I don't know, you tell me," she said, elbowing past her mother.

Constance turned to watch her daughter walk past. "Excuse me?"

Elizabeth continued walking as though she hadn't heard, not even bothering to take off her shoes before striding down the hall to the living room.

## Epilogue

**C**onstance let out a sigh and took a seat in the armchair in the living room. She spent a moment sipping her cup of herbal tea, which had finished steeping while she'd answered the door for Elizabeth.

As usual, she was having trouble getting into a proper frame of mind for sleep. It wasn't because Elizabeth had returned in a bad mood. That was puzzling, but not enough to keep her awake. She could deal with that in the morning—it was probably nothing more than teenage moodiness. No, the real reason she couldn't sleep, was the same reason as always. . . .

Sometimes she would fall asleep in no time at all, only to wake up from nightmares an hour later. Which was perfectly ridiculous. How could it still bother her, now, after almost a year and a half? What had happened to etch that night so indelibly into her memory? Even now, she could remember everything that had happened. She could relive every awful moment of it.

Not that she wanted to. That would only be asking for trouble. The panic attacks had more or less subsided—finally. She would only be inviting them back by remembering. . . .

Constance shuddered, then gritted her teeth against the sudden, sweaty surge of anxiety.

Maybe that was her problem. She was constantly *avoiding* reminders of what had happened—and in so doing, she was subconsciously telling herself that there was something to be afraid of. If she could find a way to make her peace with those memories, to accept everything that had happened, maybe then she would finally be able to get some sleep.

It was time to face her fears.

She remembered. . . .

Constance reached the open door to her bedroom, and blundered across the threshold before her brain registered what her eyes were seeing: a swiftly moving shadow, its dark outline briefly traced against the starlit glow on the porch beyond the bedroom's sliding glass doors; the shadow brushing past the curtains and into the bedroom; then, a soft, resounding clang as the doors closed, entombing her with the darkness and whatever it might contain. Her chest felt tight, and time seemed to be moving so slowly that it was as though she were caught in molasses.

Silence—so piercing, it hurt her ears to listen to it— then: the shuffling of footsteps, the rustling of fabric, a flicker of movement, and the barest hint of a shadow standing at the foot of her bed, just inside the glass doors.

"Who are you?! Identify yourself!" Constance yelled, her trembling voice splintering the silence. The darkness greedily swallowed every decibel. The shadow came to a sudden stop, its presence still all but invisible. "Watch it! I have a gun!" Constance said, gambling that the intruder was just as blind as she, and hoping that he/she/it would be scared off by the threat.

After a moment of deathly silence, a man's voice issued from the darkness, coming out in a toneless whisper as cold as ice:

"So do I."

Another rustle of fabric. She saw the shadow reach into its coat. Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness. Starlight was spilling into the room through a narrow gap between the curtains, allowing her to make out the barest features of the intruder. He seemed vaguely familiar.

She saw the starlight glint off something. Her heart gave a sudden leap, and her breath froze in her chest. She might not have a gun, but he certainly did. Her heartbeat became a steady rhythm in her ears: thump, thump; thump, thump; thump, thump...

Her head swam, and the dark, shadowy world seemed to sway as all the blood rushed to the muscles in her legs with an accompanying burst of adrenaline. Fight or flight—instinctively, her body was getting ready for one or the other. Yet something familiar about that cold, dark whisper kept her rooted in place. Curiosity winning over fear, she demanded again, "Who are

you?"

"You don't know?"

"Lawrence?" Constance couldn't quite keep the spike of fear from her voice. She'd been more right than she'd known when she'd talked to Edwin on the phone: Lawrence was dangerous.

Lawrence gave a short, bitter laugh. "I suppose I must be, then."

"Wh-what are you doing here?"

"Goodbye, Constance."

"Wait!"—He knows I did it!—"I can explain!"

She steeled herself for the bullet's impact, her eyes involuntarily squeezing shut.

Nothing happened.

Constance's eyes flew open, and in an instant, she understood. Lawrence wasn't aiming the gun at her. His arm was held at shoulder height, bent at the elbow, his pistol pointed at his own head.

"Huh. Safety's still on . . ." Lawrence mumbled, lowering his arm to study the gun.

Constance blinked a few times, her mind racing to absorb all the implications of what she was seeing. If he really knows what I did, he wouldn't be pointing that gun at himself. But then why is he here?

"Lawrence, what are you doing?" Constance asked.

"Bloody thing . . ." He wasn't paying attention to her.

"Lawrence."

He looked up. "Isn't it obvious?"

"If you really mean to kill yourself, why come here to do it?"

His teeth flashed. A smile? "You can thank your husband for that."

Constance shook her head imperceptibly, uncomprehending, and watched silently as Lawrence fumbled in the darkness with his pistol. The scene seemed so surreal, that for a moment she wondered if she was dreaming. Yes, that's it, I must have fallen asleep in the living room.

Then there was a near-silent click, and Constance saw Lawrence shift his posture from studying the gun in his hands, to pointing it at the far wall. Realizing why a second too late, her hands made it only halfway up to shield her ears before an earsplitting gunshot shattered the silence. There was a wooden crunch, and Constance realized he'd been pointing the gun at

her closet. Blinking rapidly, her eyes drawn to the point of impact, Constance tried to discern the extent of the damage. When the shock passed, her eyes flicked scornfully to Lawrence.

Slowly, as if he'd also been shocked by the loudness of the gun's report, Lawrence shifted his posture. "I guess it's working now," he said, his voice sounding strange and tremulous to Constance's ringing ears.

Constance watched the gun's movement carefully, her eyes burning with the need to blink, her heart pounding so hard she was sure he could hear it too. Whether or not he had the motive to kill her, Lawrence clearly wasn't thinking straight—for all she knew, he was drunk. There was no telling where he might point his gun next.

But his arm bent up at the elbow again and seemed to connect with his head.

"I'm surprised you haven't run for your life yet," Lawrence said, his voice sounding strangely conversational. It was as though he was buying time. "Don't worry, I'm not planning to kill you. My quarrel is with your husband—were he here instead of you . . ." A broken laugh skittered between his lips. "Well, I might not be so lenient." Lawrence was speaking quietly, calmly, as if making small talk over afternoon tea, instead of standing in her bedroom with a gun pointed at his head.

Constance's lips parted to form words, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, and all that issued was a strangled gasp.

"You don't want to see this. I'll wait until you leave, but lock the door behind you, just in case one of your daughters is coming to see what that noise was all about. They don't need to see this either."

Suddenly, Constance realized what Lawrence was waiting for. He was waiting for her to stop him, to talk him out of it. At least for her to try. Somehow, she managed to scrape a reply out of her dry throat. "They're not here."

"Oh." Constance heard him sigh. "Good. In that case, I'm just going to count to three."

"I'm not going anywhere, Lawrence."

"One."

"You're not going to pull the trigger."

"Two."

"You don't have the guts."

"Three."



Click.

Constance gave a shaky laugh. "You see?"

"What?" Lawrence asked, sounding confused, but the question was rhetorical. He lowered his arm again.

Constance frowned. What had seemed purposeful to her, was just an honest mistake—being a revolver, the gun had apparently had an empty chamber right after the first one.

Apparently realizing the same thing, Lawrence gave a shaky sigh. "Someone's trying really hard to stop me from going through with this."

He's losing his nerve! Constance realized. And in that instant, she realized something else: how perfectly it would solve all of her problems if only Lawrence would go through with it. Edwin would never have a chance to ask Lawrence about what had happened to cost him his job.

"Nonsense," Constance said. "It was just an empty chamber. You must have fired the gun at some point and forgotten to reload it."

He gave no reply for a long moment. Eventually, Constance realized that he was shaking his head. She bit her lip, wondering what to do. Then his head came up, and he was looking at her. "I can't do this." Lawrence took a step toward her; she flinched, but held her ground. He held the gun out to her—limply, pointing it at the ground. "Please, take it. I can't trust myself not to use it."

Constance took a few steps forward, cautiously sidestepping the path of the revolver. Careful to mind the trigger, she grasped the gun by the cold steel barrel, taking it from Lawrence's limp hand. "I didn't realize all men were as gutless as my husband," Constance said, laughing lightly. "Well, no matter. I'm sure you're doing the right thing. So what if your son died, so what if your wife left you . . . so what if your best friend betrayed you, and stole your job?"

Lawrence's eyes flashed in the darkness. "You know about that?" he asked, his voice fraught with suspicion and pain.

Constance shrugged and carefully laid the gun in the palm of her other hand. She held it up and slightly away from herself, as if studying it—or offering it back to Lawrence. "Of course, he told me all about his plan to get your job. I tried to talk him out of it, but I guess we can both see how that turned out."

A strangled noise escaped Lawrence's lips, but Constance

went on, pretending not to have heard it. "I suppose I should be angry with him for what he did to you, but you must understand that he only had the company's best interests at heart. Personal gain was secondary to his decision to get you fired. Unfortunately for you, any concerns he may have had for your welfare, weren't sufficient to dissuade him." Constance took a breath, searching Lawrence's face, and finding no resistance there whatsoever. "I'm afraid Edwin was never really your friend." Constance allowed her voice to be appropriately colored by sympathy as she added the final nail to Lawrence Stevens's coffin.

Lawrence's eyes dipped to his revolver, where it lay in Constance's open palm, then elevated briefly to meet her gaze. He inclined his head to her, as if acknowledging a subtle point of interest. "Thank you for telling me." With that, he snatched up the revolver, and his arm bent at the elbow once more as he pointed it to his head. Knowing instinctively that he wouldn't hesitate this time, Constance cringed away.

"Tell your husband I'll see him in hell."

Another earsplitting explosion rent the air, and Constance immediately felt a warm splash across the back of her neck and the side of her face. A wave of nausea raised goosebumps on her exposed skin as an involuntary scream simultaneously escaped her lips, all but drowning out the heavy thud of Lawrence's body hitting the floor.

Constance let out a long, shuddering breath and opened her eyes. Her level of anxiety was definitely heightened from the memory, but not raging out of control. She wasn't bathed in a cold sweat; her heart rate was only marginally elevated; and she didn't feel like she was suffocating. A thin smile graced her lips, and she took a sip of her tea.

She grimaced. The tea was cold. Well, no matter, she had a feeling she wouldn't need it to get a good night's sleep tonight.

# THE STORY CONTINUES ...

In real-life, and these novels, Elizabeth & Nicholas' three idyllic summer romances were at an end. There was one small hope left for them - Lizzie had made a promise to Nicholas, at their waterfall, that one day, if ever the need arose, she would grant him one last chance to remind her of the special feelings that existed between them. After waiting far too long, he finally used that last chance, and it may have worked - but in their final summer romance together, again back at their waterfall, she'd begged him never to just disappear out of her life without any explanation, leaving her forever wondering what had happened to him and their love. Nicholas solemnly promised, and kept his word - but Constance was in control of their lives now! She'd make sure that Elizabeth never got any letter from him - making it look to Lizzie that he had broken his promise. Thus the stage was set for Elizabeth to finally let go of Nicholas - she was free to fall in love with and to marry Charles! But sometimes the least powerful people stymie the plans of the most powerful.

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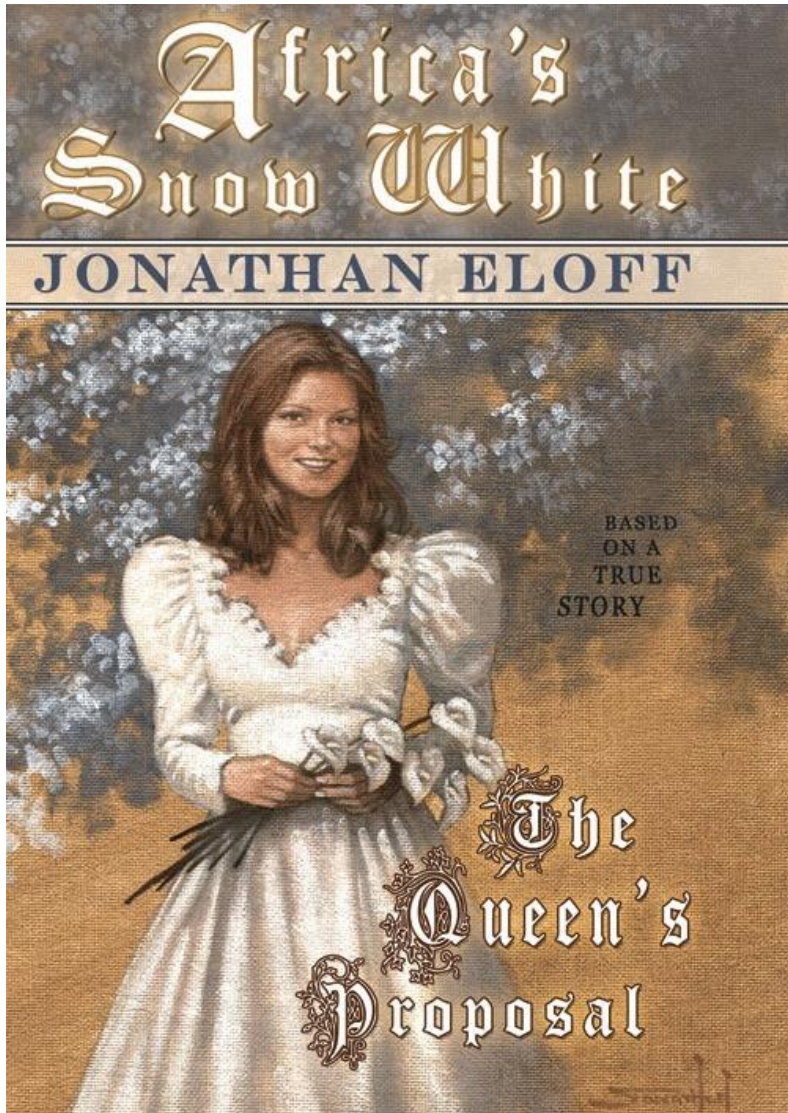
## Africa's Snow White

### he ueen's roposal **By:**

JONATHAN ELOFF (Some 2nd. Ed. Scenes co-written by Nicholas Strauss)

"It was a hopeless feeling - confronted with the very real possibility that the most loving relationship they'd enjoyed to date in life, was finally over - not because they'd done anything wrong - but because others wanted it so! Constance's covert control of Elizabeth's life was now fast becoming total. Lizzie trusted her far too much, with very sad consequences for Nicholas & her. This queen may as well have done all the proposing, as it was her idea anyway. The die was cast, Lizzie's future was pre-determined - and all was now lost. For 18 months Nicholas never heard or got any reply from Lizzie, of any sort - not even to his declaration of love, so he'd almost given up all hope, when suddenly a small opportunity presented itself - but Lizzie was already engaged to Charles! She'd set her heart against Nicholas when it had appeared to her, that he'd done that "one cruel thing" he'd promised (in their secret place) that he'd never ever do to her! But he hadn't! So how could all this be reversed at such a late stage? Well, miracles can happen, and when they do they unleash a dramatic chain of events - rather like dominoes falling! Look for the silver lining, it's there. Also look at how every other option for Nicholas, just get's shut down." -**Safely Anonymous.**

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