

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT

Africa's Snow White,

Prince Charming (The 3rd 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 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**

ADDITIONAL NOTE TO THE READER:

Download all these Novels FREE at:

<https://amongfriends.us/downloads.php>

ALSO ... PLEASE VISIT OUR FACEBOOK PAGE AT:

[www.Facebook.com/AfricasSnowWhite](https://www.facebook.com/AfricasSnowWhite)

*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 v3

Prince Charming (Kindle version)

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

Download the novels FREE at:

<https://amongfriends.us/downloads.php>

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,



Betty and Veronica (Archie Comics) were born in the 1940's. They finally graduated recently, and got married. Denise and Elizabeth were born in the 1950's, are long since graduated and both are married with Children - two lovely daughters and two charming sons resp. They've stayed friends throughout life and across continents.

Vol-3: Prince Charming (PDF e-Book)

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

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

Copyright © 2013 by Eureka Publishing

THE AUTHORS RETAIN ALL RIGHTS FOR THIS BOOK

Published by Eureka Publishing: **Eureka.Publishing@gmail.com**

Printed in the USA by: www.PrintShopCentral.com

Reproduction or transmission of this book, in whole or in part, by electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or by any other means is strictly prohibited, except with prior written permission. You may direct your inquiries to **Eureka.Publishing@gmail.com**



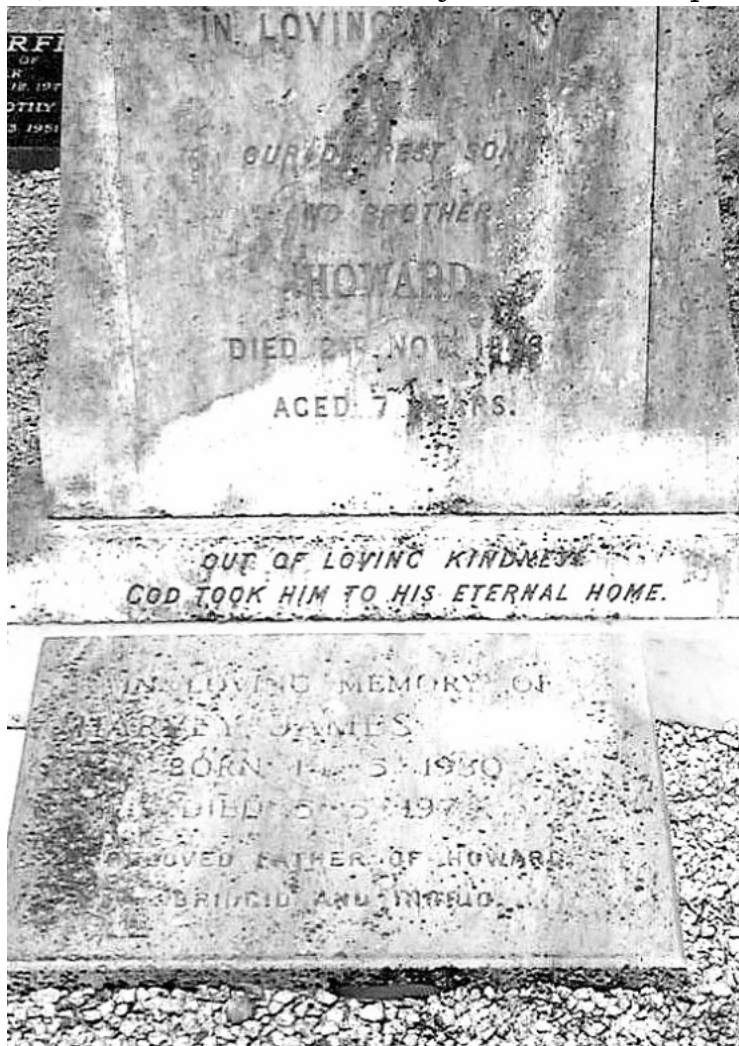
Thanks to Facebook photos, we can safely say that Denise and Nicholas were both enjoying teenage summer romances at separate seaside resorts where their families vacationed each Christmas. Their moms (best friends) paired them off in their teens, so they wisely agreed to date others whilst away from each other – as conventions allowed. Then when they got home, they compared notes and continued normal lives.

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 Hugenote 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 family shown in this photo.



The sur name on Lawrence's tombstone is obscured to protect this family's identity. His real-life name was HARVEY - and you'll read in the final book how that ties-in to *long overdue justice*.



Revenge

rologue

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.

Chapter 1

Monday, February 26th, 1973: Edwin was sitting in his office at Western Tanning, behind his big executive desk, looking dwarfed by it. He was a small man, five foot seven on a good day, without the weight of the world unceremoniously resting on his shoulders—this wasn't one of those days. He ran his hands through wavy, thinning ash brown hair, and narrowed his characteristically slanting, brown eyes—the only part of him that didn't look distinctly British—to slits. In front of him sat a detective and two policemen. All three of them looked very uncomfortable, especially the plump, pasty-faced detective.

“Well?” Edwin prompted.

The detective dropped his gaze, removed his glasses, and pinched the bridge of his nose. His eyes squinted shut as if he had a headache. Edwin struggled not to fidget, remembering the exchange which had brought them all into his office:

“I’m afraid I have some very bad news for you, Mister Smythe,” the detective had said.

“What do you mean?”

“I think we’d better discuss this in your office.”

Well, we’re here now, what’s he waiting for? Edwin thought.

The detective looked up, his eyes opening as he slid his glasses back on. “Perhaps we should start with introductions.” He extended his hand across the desk. “I’m Detective James Petrus.”

Edwin nodded, mechanically accepting the handshake. He’d already given the detective his name.

“What is this about, Mister Petrus?”

The detective's hand returned to his lap, and he let out a quiet sigh. “Three days ago, Lawrence Benjamin Stevens apparently broke into your home—”

Edwin blinked. "What?"

"There were no signs of forced entry; however, the lock on the sliding doors leading to your bedroom appears to have been defective."

Edwin shook his head. "I don't understand."

The detective frowned. "The investigation is ongoing—"

Realization finally setting in, Edwin's eyes grew round. "Where's my wife? Where's—" Edwin rose half out of his chair before the detective stopped him with an upraised hand.

"Sit down, Mister Smythe. Your wife and daughters are fine. They are staying in a local hotel. I'll take you to them as soon as we're done here."

Edwin sat down slowly, his face ashen. He swallowed visibly. "And Lawrence?"

"Dead."

Edwin reacted as though he'd taken a punch in the gut, slumping back in his chair. He croaked a soft question, squeezing it past a suddenly dry throat.

"How?"

The detective took his pad of notes from the desk and flipped past the most recent ones. "What we've managed to determine is that at around 9:30 on Friday, February 23rd, Mister Stevens apparently broke into your master bedroom, while your wife was in the living room, and your children were away on a school camping trip. According to your wife, she happened upon him shortly after he'd broken in. The lights were off, so she didn't recognize him at first. She threatened him by saying that she had a gun, which she didn't. He returned her idle threat with a real one by pulling a loaded revolver out of his coat pocket."

Edwin couldn't believe what he was hearing. It didn't make any sense.

"At which point, he pointed the gun at his head, and attempted to pull the trigger. Apparently he'd forgotten to take the safety off. As he was in the process of rectifying his mistake, your wife stepped in and physically tried to stop him."

Edwin's eyes were wide and unblinking, his mouth slightly agape. Exclamations were rising deep within his chest, getting caught in his throat and screaming impotently inside his head.

"There was a struggle, and a shot was fired into the bedroom closet. The second one was fired point blank into Lawrence's—"

Edwin held up a hand. "Stop." His voice was a soft and anguished croak. His eyes squinted shut as he struggled to push back the encroaching tears. He began slowly shaking his head. "Why would he . . ."

"Go to your house to kill himself?"

Edwin's eyes cracked open. That hadn't been his question.

"I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you this, Mister Smythe, but your wife is a suspect in this investigation. In fact, she's the only suspect." Edwin's eyes were fully open now, and angrily glaring. "There were no witnesses besides her, and her fingerprints were found on the gun right beside Mister Stevens's."

"What are you saying? Lawrence broke into my home and my *wife* is the suspect? You think she killed him?"

The detective held up his hand. "Please don't misunderstand me. My job is to establish the facts beyond a reasonable doubt, and unfortunately there is some doubt as to what actually occurred between your wife and Mister Stevens. I hope she's telling the truth, but I can't assume that."

"This is ridiculous!"

"The gun that killed Mister Stevens was owned by him, and apparently brought with him when he broke into your home, but that doesn't eliminate the possibility of murder, quite possibly in self-defense."

Edwin's lips formed a hard line. "Then it wouldn't be murder, would it?" The muscles in Edwin's jaw were visibly trembling.

"I suppose not. Nevertheless, there's an important distinction between that and the suicide which your wife claims it was."

"Such as?"

"Mister Smythe, surely you know that some people still consider suicide to be damning. If nothing else, Mister Stevens's relatives could conceivably find some solace in knowing that he didn't kill himself."

"How do we know that Stevens didn't break into your home, threaten your wife with his gun, and end up getting accidentally or purposefully shot in the ensuing struggle? You have to admit, that seems a lot more likely than the idea of him going to your home to kill himself. Why there? Why not somewhere private? Why, specifically, *your* home?"

"Now, according to Mister Stevens's secretary . . ." The detective paged through his notepad. "He was fired earlier the

same week that he allegedly killed himself. Also according to her, around the same time that he was fired, you and he had a fight in the Cape Town International Airport, which ended with you being knocked briefly unconscious.”

The detective looked up from his notes. “Is it possible that the fight you had with Mister Stevens might have somehow provoked his later actions?”

Somehow, the detective had missed the point in his monologue where Edwin’s face had gone from ashen white to boiling red.

“No. It’s not possible.”

The detective cocked his head. “What was the fight about, Mister Smythe?”

“Get out of my office.”

The detective’s eyes narrowed. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Get out.”

“It really would be better if you cooperate in this investigation, Mister Smythe. It will only cast suspicion on you and your wife if you refuse to answer my questions.”

Edwin’s jaw began trembling, but he managed to hold his tongue.

The detective gave a tight smile and inclined his head. “Perhaps another time, then.” Standing up from his chair, he withdrew a business card from his pocket. Flipping it over and placing it on the desk, he wrote on the back of it, and then handed it to Edwin. “That’s the name of the hotel where your family is staying.”

Edwin gave a bitter smile as he accepted the business card and studied the name scrawled on the back. “Kicked out of our own home, are we?”

“Quite the contrary. Your family was allowed to move back in as of yesterday morning, but your wife has been understandably reticent to go back there.”

Edwin gave no reply; he just sat there, staring intently at the business card, barely noticing as the detective and two policemen turned to leave. He heard the door to his office open, and then the detective’s voice: “I’ll be in touch.”

* * *

Constance was sitting in an armchair by the open window of her hotel room, looking down from the second story on a liquid-blue pool that was sparkling cheerfully in the afternoon

sun. She was unconsciously biting her nails as she watched her daughters, Elizabeth and Hattie, tanning on bone-white chaise lounges beside the pool. The air was still and painfully silent, but for the nearby *krrrrr*, *OO-oo*, *oo* of a pale brown dove picking its way along the windowsill beside her.

Ordinarily, the quiet would have been peaceful, but now it only gave Constance more time alone with her thoughts—thoughts which now dwelled on the nightmares that had haunted her every night since Lawrence's death. The scene kept replaying over and over, each time subtly different, each time more frightening than the last.

Even the noisy shouting and splashing of children playing in and around the pool would have been preferable to the haunting silence, but that would've made the scene below too carefree, too normal. No one was swimming; instead, everyone—the small handful of people that there were—was lying unnaturally still, faces turned up toward the sun, eyes closed, like corpses in a mortuary.

It was as if the whole world had stopped to observe a moment of silence for Lawrence. And in a way it had. The small town that it was, Wellington had felt his passing particularly acutely, and the story of his death had made the front page in the local newspaper. Lawrence would not soon be forgotten. He was held up as a martyr, while she was all but blamed for his death. The mystery surrounding how and why he'd come to die in *her* home left a lot of blanks, which squinty-eyed old ladies filled in with horrified glee as they gossiped to their neighbors about how they'd always been suspicious of her. Constance hadn't heard any of the gossip personally, but she could see it etched on people's faces everywhere she went. It was as though she could hear the whispers as she walked down the street.

Constance looked away from the window, to the tan and brown wallpaper of the far wall. Her pale blue eyes were unfocused, unseeing, as she bit her lip and her thoughts retreated further inward. Nothing had turned out the way she'd expected it to. No matter how meticulous her plans, no matter what gains she'd made, there was always some little detail she'd overlooked. In securing Lawrence's job for her husband, she'd left a trail which could ultimately point back to her and ruin everything. In Lawrence's death, a trail of evidence had been left which could, again, ultimately point to her. . . . *But*

that was hardly planned. Even in trading homes with the Stevens family, she hadn't imagined that Lawrence might later trash the property value by dying there. And now . . . *now some stupid, bumbling detective, along with everyone else in Wellington, is insinuating that I killed him!* Constance smirked. *And isn't that just ironic?*

At least one good thing had come of it all: Edwin wouldn't be able to contact Lawrence now to find out more about how his friend had lost his job.

Constance frowned as that thought triggered another, more disturbing one: *the detective might easily put those puzzle pieces together for Edwin in the process of his investigation. . . .*

Constance was so absorbed in her thoughts that she barely noticed the soft knocking at the door. Her head turned slowly toward the noise.

Then it came again, a soft rapping sound. With a sigh, she got up from the chair and went to answer it. As she opened the door, her face lit up with surprise. "Edwin! You're back already?"

"You sound as if you weren't expecting me." Edwin was frowning, his eyes taking in his wife's disheveled appearance. Her darkly-dyed hair looked unwashed and uncombed, and the gray was showing through the colorant; her blue dress was rumpled, as if she'd slept in it; dark circles colored the bags beneath her eyes; and her face was slack and lined.

"I wasn't—I mean . . ." Constance's expression drew a blank as her mind did the same. "What day is it?"

Standing there in the open doorway, Constance looked small, more than usually so. At just five foot three, with a narrow frame, she might ordinarily have been called "petite," but now she looked *frail*.

Edwin nodded sympathetically. "Monday. Do you mind if I come in?"

She shook her head slowly, dazedly, and opened the door a little wider, standing aside to let him pass. As Edwin walked through the door, his eyes took in the messy hotel room—two unmade beds, dirty clothes strewn over the chairs and floor. Edwin frowned, but not because of the mess—that was understandable under the circumstances. He cast his eyes around the room a moment longer, seeming lost. The door clicked shut as Constance closed it behind him.

"Where are the girls?"

"They're down by the pool."

Edwin nodded, but didn't turn around or meet his wife's gaze, instead finding a neutral point on the floor to stare at. After a long, indecisive moment of wondering what to say, and how to say it, Edwin's head came up and he turned to meet his wife's blank stare. She was still standing by the door, seeming almost equally shell-shocked. "Constance, what happened?" His eyes were wincing.

Keeping her expression carefully blank, she said, "You know about it, then." It was a stupid comment, and she knew it. If he was here, at the hotel, instead of at home, he must have found out what had happened.

Edwin nodded. "I went to fetch some things from my office first. . . . And I ran into the detective there."

Constance's eyes narrowed, and she walked briskly from the door to the window, brushing past him as she went. She stood there by the window, with her back to him, silent for an uncomfortably long moment.

"And what did he have to say?"

"He said that Lawrence broke into our house and tried to . . . kill himself. And that you tried to stop him."

Constance nodded slowly, absently watching Elizabeth and Hattie again. Now they were lying on their stomachs.

"He also said that you are a suspect, that your fingerprints were found on the gun." Edwin's voice was closer now, coming from just behind her.

"How else was I going to stop him? I didn't have time to worry about incriminating myself!"

Edwin frowned, thinking that his wife's tone was too defensive. Then again, she'd probably had her fill of insinuations.

"I know."

"So, what then?" she demanded, whirling on him. "Are you saying you think I killed him, too?" There was a tremor in her voice, and she clicked her mouth shut to clamp down on it.

"Of course not. Whatever happened, it wasn't your fault. I'm just saying—" Edwin reached out to squeeze her shoulder lightly. "—you can tell me. No matter how bad you think it is, you can always tell me the truth."

"That is the truth!" she said, shrugging his hand off her

shoulder. "Every bit of it—except for that detective's ridiculous insinuations. Lawrence broke in and tried to kill himself. I tried to stop him. He managed to do it anyway. The end!" Constance's eyes were smoldering.

"I'm lucky he didn't accidentally shoot me instead of the closet! Maybe instead of joining Mister Petrus on his witch-hunt, you could show a little bit of concern for your wife." Constance brushed past him again, and began pacing around the hotel room like a caged lion. "I could have been killed!"

"I know, and I'm sorry. What you tried to do was incredibly brave. . . ." Constance nodded absently. "And equally stupid."

Constance stopped pacing and looked up, her eyes narrowing. "What?" She crossed her arms over her chest, and Edwin covered the distance between them in a few quick steps.

When he spoke again, his voice was gentle, almost a whisper. "You said it yourself, you could have been killed. What were you thinking, trying to wrestle the gun away from Lawrence?" Edwin shook his head. "I could've lost you so easily."

Constance was nodding. "Yes. You could have. I suppose I just couldn't bear the thought of doing nothing." Constance uncrossed her arms and looked down at the floor. "He was your best friend. If only for your sake, I had to try to stop him." Constance felt Edwin's hand on her arm, and his other hand came up beneath her chin, gently tilting her eyes up to his.

"Thank you, but he was only my friend—you're my *wife*. I would never have wanted you to risk your life for his."

Constance smiled up at him. Taking that as his invitation, Edwin drew closer until he could hear his breath, shaky and erratic, reverberating back at him. The sound came in tandem to the feather-light touch of Constance's own breath piling hotly upon his lips.

He pressed his lips to hers, and they kissed, softly at first. Then, Edwin released her chin and circled her shoulders with his arm, clutching her possessively to him. Constance responded with an almost angry heat that sent a paradoxical chill skittering down along his spine. He blamed it on the sudden gust of wind that swept in through the open window.

* * *

Elizabeth was acutely aware of the silence in the car as her father drove them home. *Home*. Would it ever feel that way again? How could you feel a sense of comfort and security from

a place that had seen so much sadness? So much death. First Lawrence's son, Benjamin, and then Lawrence himself. *And how much worse for my Mom and Dad, who will have to sleep in the room where . . .*

Elizabeth shook her head. Having been away at camp with her sister, she hadn't been home since it had happened. Now she wondered what would it feel like to walk through the door, to walk past her parents' room, to see. . . .

The police had cleaned up after collecting evidence, but they had warned that the bloodstains could only be removed by replacing the carpet. Elizabeth shivered at the thought, and she felt her flesh begin to prickle with goosebumps.

She wished her parents would have stayed in the hotel long enough to replace the carpets. Until they did, she wasn't going to set foot in her parents' bedroom. And maybe not even then.

The car rolled down the driveway and coasted to a stop in front of the garage. Almost reluctantly, Edwin turned the key in the ignition, killing the idling hum of the engine.

For a long, silent moment, no one dared to leave the car, as if it were still moving. No one wanted to be first. Elizabeth heard her mother sigh and mutter something under her breath, and then she opened her door. Her father followed suit, and soon all four of them were walking down the pathway to the front door.

Elizabeth went through the door last, hesitating on the doorstep until everyone else had gone through. As she stepped through the door, she froze in the foyer, unable to go any further. Her mother and sister continued walking down the hallway to the living room with long, purposeful strides, while her father closed the door behind her with a soft *click*. After a moment, his face swam into view and she caught a glimpse of the grim, determined set of his mouth.

"Try not to think about it, Lizzie." And with that, he disappeared down the hallway, too.

Elizabeth watched him go, her blue eyes wide and staring. She was absently biting her lip and shaking her head. Her long, chestnut brown hair swayed with the movement. She made no move to follow. But eventually, she decided that the safest place in the house was probably her room. There, with her door closed and locked behind her, with her nose in a book, she would have the best chance of taking her father's

advice.

She passed her mother and sister on the way to her room. They were standing outside the master bedroom, peering in with morbid curiosity. Elizabeth was the same height as her mother, and marginally shorter than her younger sister, so she couldn't see past them as she hurried by. But she didn't want to. She kept her eyes fixed dead ahead, focused on her bedroom door—and the sanctuary beyond.

As she was closing the door, she heard her mother call: "Elizabeth!"

Reluctantly, Elizabeth opened the door and stepped into the hallway again. "Yes?"

Her mother was still standing in front of the master bedroom, but Hattie had gone. "Your father and I will be sleeping in your room until the carpets have been replaced in ours."

"Why? Can't you stay in the spare room instead?"

"We *could*, but your room is the only other one with an attached bathroom."

Elizabeth sighed quietly. "Okay."

Constance nodded, then turned and walked down the hallway toward the living room.

So much for sanctuary, Elizabeth thought.

* * *

Constance found Edwin in the kitchen, standing beside the telephone, the receiver pressed to his ear. *Who could he be talking to?* She made a pretense of going to the sink with a glass in order to listen in.

"What do you mean you're not making the arrangements?"

Constance opened the tap to fill her glass while Edwin waited for a reply on the other end.

"Well, who is making the arrangements, then?"

He sounds annoyed, she thought, turning around to watch him as she put the glass of water to her lips. He was fiddling with a pen and pad of paper. When he was done writing on it, he rattled off a string of numbers—it sounded like a telephone number.

"You *think* that's it? You want me to repeat the number?"

There was an unnaturally long pause, after which, Edwin said, "Hello . . . hello?" He shook his head angrily and slammed the receiver down.

"Who was that, Edwin?"

He turned slowly from the phone, looking sheepish and angry at the same time. "Rebecca."

Constance frowned. "Stevens?" Edwin nodded, and her frown deepened. "Why would you want to call *her*?" "She's with the kids now."

About time, Constance thought. Rebecca Stevens had abandoned her family only months prior in order to be with the mechanic she'd been cheating on Lawrence with. "I was calling about the funeral."

Constance blinked. "Haven't they already had that?"

Edwin shook his head. "The investigation has delayed things a bit."

"I see." Constance finished her water and half turned to place the empty glass next to the sink. "You want to go." She turned back in time to see him nod.

"Whatever happened in the last few weeks, he was still my friend, and I'll remember him as such."

"I see. And you don't think that it will be awkward for us to attend with all the speculation that I may have killed him?"

Edwin's lips pressed into a thin line. "It might be. Nevertheless, I'm going. You don't have to join me, if you don't want to."

"Of course, I don't have to." She took a few steps forward and stopped in front of him. "But I wouldn't dream of leaving you to endure it alone," she said softly.

Edwin's jaw began to tremble and his eyes filled with tears. He gave a firm nod and turned back to the phone. Clearing his throat, he said, "Well, I'd better get us an invitation, then."

Constance smiled to his back. "You do that, dear. I'll be in the living room if you need me." There was more than one reason to go to the funeral.

As she left, a thought occurred to her, and she turned from the entrance of the living room. "When you're done . . ." Edwin stopped halfway through dialing another number and turned to face her, his eyebrows raised, the receiver pressed to his ear. Constance went on: "Perhaps you could make the arrangements to have the carpets in our bedroom replaced. I want the exact same ones. Make it as though it never happened. Oh—and the closet needs fixing, too."

Edwin nodded mechanically and began dialing again.

Chapter 2

Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion, as though they were underwater. Constance watched Lawrence's face carefully—his eyes glittering piercingly in the darkness, his expression unreadable. Her mind inferred an angry sneer, and then, somehow, despite the darkness, she saw exactly that—his upper lip curling back from dagger-like teeth. A bolt of fear shot through her like an electric shock, leaving her nerves raw and tingling. She was hyper-aware of every movement and every sound. In an instant, she realized that she'd misjudged the situation. Her words had not provoked the intended response.

Lawrence inclined his head to her. "Thank you for telling me," he said, sounding strangely reasonable as he forced the words past his curling upper lip. His eyes dipped to his revolver where it lay in Constance's open palm, and she felt an overwhelming urge to run. But instead, for an interminable moment, she found herself unable to turn or look away. Her eyes widened with horror as Lawrence's hand shot out and snatched the revolver from her.

She just stood there, waiting, watching, morbidly curious about what he would do next. The slice of moonlight spilling in through the gap in the curtains was glinting ominously off the barrel of the gun, allowing Constance to see where he was pointing it.

He was pointing it at her.

"I'll see you in hell."

Constance began shaking her head. "This isn't real," she whispered. "It didn't happen like this."

Lawrence's sneer widened into a broad rictus of a grin, and then his finger twitched, pulling the trigger. An 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 and pain raised goosebumps on her exposed skin, and she felt herself falling. She heard a bloodcurdling scream, followed by the sound of Lawrence laughing hysterically.

* * *

She woke up screaming, with the sound of Lawrence's laughter still echoing in her ears.

Her heart was beating wildly, and her skin was prickled with sweat and goosebumps. Constance sat up in bed. The blankets pooled in her lap, exposing bare shoulders running with sweat. The sudden cold of the air against her skin sent a shiver skittering down her spine.

The nightmare was already beginning to fade from her memory, but the feelings of horror and revulsion lingered. Constance reached around to feel the side of her face and the back of her neck, where she imagined she could still feel the sticky warmth of blood clinging to her skin.

Her skin was clean, but her hand stayed there on her neck, checking and rechecking. That part of the dream, at least, had actually happened. It hadn't made any sense in the dream; if Lawrence had shot her, she shouldn't have felt blood *hitting* her. But those sensations had come directly from her memories of what had actually happened, making it all the more frightening. The whole nightmare had been a disturbing mixture of fact and fiction.

Constance forced herself to stop massaging her neck, and clasped her hands in her lap to keep them from trembling. She let out a shaky sigh and cast her eyes around the room, trying to ground herself in reality. It took a moment to recognize her surroundings: the desk sitting in front of a broad window with decorative pink curtains, turned a hazy gray by the moonlight; the dressing table, too small to be her own, standing at the foot of the bed; Edwin snoring softly beside her, somehow not having been awakened by her scream, and taking up too much space on the bed.

Then she remembered: she and Edwin were sleeping in Elizabeth's room until the carpets were replaced in theirs, while Elizabeth slept in the comparatively smaller spare room. She'd told Elizabeth they were taking her room rather than the

spare room because hers had its own bathroom, but of far greater importance was the fact that the spare room reminded her too much of the master bedroom . . . right down to the sliding glass doors.

Constance shuddered as she had a vivid flashback. She reflexively shoved it from her mind, but only half succeeded. She could still *smell* it—a nauseating, metallic tang. Almost at once she felt her heart rate accelerate, and a fresh sheen of sweat broke out on her forehead. Her hands began trembling despite being clasped together, and her breath began coming in shallow gasps.

Recognizing it for what it was, Constance carefully peeled the covers back, and got quietly, and somewhat unsteadily, out of bed. She headed straight for the door, and managed, with an enormous effort, to close it calmly behind her. She felt like she was suffocating—the need for fresh air was overwhelming. She began striding anxiously down the hallway, toward the living room. As she passed the master bedroom, she bit her lip to the point of pain in order to distract herself. It would have been faster to get outside through the master bedroom, but that would have been counterproductive. When Constance reached the doors in the living room, she closed her hands into shaking fists around the handles and impatiently wrenched at them.

Her hands tore free of the handles. *Locked!* Constance began fumbling with the lock, but her hands were trembling so badly that it took a few tries; then she swung the doors open and took a few hasty steps out onto the porch.

A gust of cool air slapped her in the face, and she took a deep breath. She closed her eyes, trying to focus on the floral and earthen smells of the garden. But keeping her eyes closed only provided less distraction for her mind, bringing the memories back with a vengeance in short, vivid flashes. Her eyes flew open, as if spring-loaded, and her heart rate surged again. She was hyperventilating, and had to focus to keep her breathing to a steady rhythm.

Breathe. Just breathe . . .

The minutes passed in a slow agony of anxiety. Eventually, Constance felt her pulse returning to normal, and she let out a long breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

A cool breeze swept up the steps of the porch, provoking an icy shiver when it met with the sweat trickling down from her

hairline. Constance crossed her arms over her chest, lingering despite the chill, afraid to go back inside where the feeling of being suffocated would return.

Abruptly she realized that she was standing outside in nothing but her nightgown, and began to worry that someone might see her. She frowned at that, and looked down at her wrist, turning her watch this way and that in the pale moonlight to get a glimpse of the time. It was three in the morning. Not a very likely time for someone to spot her; nevertheless, she turned around and went back inside. No sense in giving the neighbors anything else to talk about.

Closing and locking the doors behind her, Constance headed for the kitchen. While the nightmare was still fresh in her mind, it wouldn't make a lot of sense to go back to sleep. She needed something to take her mind off everything, so she set some water to boil and put a bag of herbal tea in a cup; then she went rifling through the kitchen drawers for a magazine to read.

When the water was done boiling, and her tea was done steeping, Constance walked carefully through the darkened living room and took a seat in the armchair facing the couch. Setting her tea to cool on the end table beside her, she flicked on the lamp and began flipping randomly through the magazine. A wry smile touched her lips as she reflected how remarkable it was that in just three days she was already beginning to adapt to the nightmares and panic attacks. She'd discovered this routine while staying at the hotel—get some fresh air to calm down until the panic attack was over, a cup of tea to get back to sleep, and a magazine or a book to take her mind off it all.

Constance sighed. Hopefully it wouldn't be necessary for very long. How long could it take to forget? Her thoughts surprised her with a ready answer:

This is just the beginning.

* * *

Once it was light enough for Constance to get out of bed without anyone realizing how little sleep she'd had, she took a quick shower, and then went to the kitchen and began fixing breakfast. It was a purely mechanical process, her hands moving without conscious effort, while her mind was elsewhere.

Breakfast went by in a similar daze, with everyone too focused on their food to disrupt the silence. No one seemed to be in the mood for small talk. As each one finished their breakfast, they excused themselves and rose quietly to put their dishes in the sink. Before long, Hattie and Elizabeth had gone back to school, and Edwin had gone back to work, leaving Constance alone in the silence. Deciding to take advantage of it, she found her way back to the armchair in the living room and picked up where she had left off with reading her magazine.

Time was drifting by too slowly. She was overly conscious of its passage as she read, as though there were a clock sitting beside her, and she could hear every *tick . . . tick . . . tick* of the seconds' hand. It was almost maddening enough to drive her out of the house. Almost. She knew there were worse things to confront out there, where she would have to endure the accusing looks and wary glances of every stranger, neighbor, friend, and passerby.

In the breaks between finishing one article and starting the next, there was always just enough time for the anxiety to begin gnawing at the edges of her thoughts. She felt like she was forgetting something important. Suddenly, she was struck by an overwhelming feeling of *déjà vu*, and she realized what it was: she'd been sitting in this same armchair, all alone, when Lawrence had . . . Constance closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, forcing her mind in a different direction. Her pulse sounded unnaturally loud in her ears: *thud, thud, THUD*—

The doorbell rang, and she jumped with fright. Constance breathed a shaky sigh, thankful for the interruption. She put her magazine down on the end table beside her and got up from the chair. *Who could it be?* she wondered as she padded down the hallway to the front door.

Upon reaching the front door, she stood on tiptoes to look through the peep hole. Seeing who it was, she grimaced, and considered pretending she wasn't home. But, it wouldn't do to seem like she was avoiding him. Constance turned the doorknob and tugged on the door. It was unyielding. Her brow beetled, and she stared at the door in confusion. The doorbell rang again, and then Constance realized what the problem was: the deadbolt was on. They'd never bothered to use it . . . before. With another grimace, Constance turned the lock and

heard an unfamiliar *thunk* as the lock retreated into the door. She fixed a smile upon her face as she opened the door, and pretended to be surprised to see the detective standing there.

“Oh—hello, Mister Petrus.”

The detective inclined his head to her. “Mrs. Smythe. May I come in?”

“Of course,” she said, standing aside, and gesturing for him to enter.

He removed his hat as he went inside, but didn’t bother to hang it on the rack by the door. “Is there somewhere we can talk?” he asked, turning to face her.

“Why don’t we go to the living room?” Constance said as she shut the door. The detective nodded, and she led the way.

Constance sat down again in the armchair, while the detective sat down opposite her on the couch. She didn’t want him to stay longer than was necessary, but decorum demanded that she ask: “Would you like something to drink—a cup of tea, perhaps?”

“No, thank you. Actually, what I have to say won’t take long.”

Constance worked hard to keep the smile from her face, while her mind exultantly said, *Good!*

The detective broke eye contact, and absently stared at a neutral point on the floor between them. Constance watched him turning his hat over and over in his hands, and frowned, wondering what he was working up to.

Abruptly, he looked up. “It seems like you’re off the hook.”

Constance’s eyebrows shot up. “Excuse me?”

“Mrs. Stevens found a suicide note, well, rather *two* suicide notes. One for each of her daughters. It seems his intention really was to kill himself, which gives credence to your story.”

Constance nodded and kept her face very still so as not to betray her relief. “You don’t seem very happy to have solved your case.”

“I’m not. In fact, there are still a lot of unanswered questions.” Constance heard the detective sigh, and watched as he appeared to be waiting for her to say something. Constance pressed her lips into a hard line. He wasn’t going to get anything out of her.

The detective’s eyes narrowed behind his glasses. “For example, why Mister Stevens would break into *your* home to kill himself . . .”

Constance shrugged. "He was a troubled man."

"Or who the mysterious informant was, who told the chairman of Western Leathers International about Mister Stevens's investment and got him fired."

Constance went suddenly rigid. A second too late, she adopted a puzzled look. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't know what you're referring to."

"Indeed." The detective smirked. "In my job, Mrs. Smythe, I have an opportunity to witness many different types of crime. Occasionally, I find one for which there are no laws to bring the criminal to justice." The detective spread his hands in an openhanded shrug. "I'm sure you can understand how frustrating that is."

Constance smiled. "It's all a matter of one's perspective, I'm sure. If there were laws to cover everyone's individual sense of right and wrong, we'd all be behind bars. For example, in my opinion, *trespassers* are let off far too lightly by the law."

The detective matched her smile with a tighter equivalent that didn't quite make it to his eyes. He stood up then, and put his hat back on his head. "Well, I can see that I've strained your hospitality. My apologies. I'll show myself out."

"Good. Bye." Constance was still smiling as she watched him leave. She listened eagerly for the sound of the front door closing, then let out an angry sigh when she heard it. Now that he was gone, she allowed the scowl she'd been suppressing. "May God do to you what he did to Lawrence," she whispered, her eyes fixed upon the spot where the detective had been sitting.

Constance bit her lip as something occurred to her: clearly the detective had put the pieces of the puzzle together, at least enough to realize what she'd done, but would he tell anyone else? Or, in the process of interviewing people, had he already asked one too many leading questions, and inadvertently led someone else to the same conclusions?

Constance felt her heart rate accelerate and heard blood pounding loudly in her ears: *thud, thud, THUD.*

* * *

Shortly after arriving at work, Edwin received a phone call from chairman of the board, William Gaines, informing him that the board of directors had decided to promote him to managing director in Lawrence's place. Mr. Gaines had also told him that

he had to select an assistant whom he could begin training to take his place in the event that “something” should happen to him.

Edwin spent the next hour packing things from his office into boxes so that he could move into the managing director's office—Lawrence's office. Despite the good news of his promotion, he took no joy in what he was doing. He'd never imagined himself taking Lawrence's job, and certainly not under such horrible circumstances. He wished he could keep his old office, but that would send the wrong message to the other employees.

When he arrived at the mahogany wood door of Lawrence's office with the first box, Martha, Lawrence's secretary, made no move to either greet him, or open the door for him. Feeling the weight of the box, Edwin wasn't sure that he could spare a hand to open the door. He glanced expectantly at Martha. She didn't appear to notice. After a long moment spent waiting, he frowned and decided to try opening the door for himself. Struggling awkwardly with the heavy box, Edwin shifted its weight to one arm so he could spare his other to open the door. He just managed to click the door open as his arm was threatening to buckle beneath the weight of the box. Reaching quickly around to support the box before he dropped it, he pushed his way inside the office.

The office was larger than he remembered it, with the walls stripped bare of Lawrence's collection of photos, paintings, awards, and qualifications. The large, wooden, executive desk where Lawrence used to sit was cleared on top. There was no sign that Lawrence had ever been there.

Edwin set his box down on top of the desk and sighed. His eyes were drawn inexorably to the black leather chair sitting empty behind the desk. For just a moment, Edwin imagined Lawrence sitting there, relaxed, smiling, reclining in that chair, as he'd once done, a long, long time ago.

* * *

After packing his things away, Edwin took a seat behind Lawrence's desk, in Lawrence's chair, but try as he might, he couldn't get comfortable. It wasn't the fault of the chair, which under any other circumstances would have been comfortable enough to sleep in. Rather, it was because he felt like he'd broken into someone else's home and was now sitting in their

living room trying to make himself comfortable.

Edwin frowned and ran a hand along the smooth, lacquered top of the desk. It felt cold to the touch, and he had to suppress a shiver. He let his eyes travel to the picture of his family which now stood on the desk. Even it looked out of place. Edwin shook his head, unable to stand it any longer. Maybe he could find some pretense to wander around the tannery for a while. Anything would be better than staying here. . . .

Just as Edwin was getting up from the desk, the door opened, and Martha came in. Edwin frowned at the breach of etiquette. She was supposed to knock first, or better yet, call him on the telephone. He was just about to remind her of that when he noticed that her face was pinched with concern. Edwin's frown turned to a sympathetic smile as understanding dawned. *Of course, a new boss means a new secretary; she's probably come to offer her resignation.*

"I'm sorry, Mister Smythe, I should have knocked first—"

He held up a hand to forestall the rest of her apology, then caught her eye and said, "Don't give it another thought. And you needn't worry, I won't be hiring a new secretary."

She flashed him a grateful smile. "Thank you, but that's not why I'm here."

Edwin's head cocked to one side. "Then why *are* you here?"

Her smile faded and she took a deep breath before whispering: "That detective is back again."

"Oh. And? What does he want?"

"I haven't a clue. He just said that he wanted to speak with you."

Edwin pursed his lips in annoyance. That detective was the last person he wanted to see right now, but he couldn't refuse without making his wife look guiltier.

"Tell him—"

The phone on the desk began ringing, and Edwin held up a hand to Martha. "Hello?"

"Edwin?" It was Constance. "Where have you been? I've been trying to get a hold of you for half an hour!"

"I've been moving from my old office, so my phone was disconnected. Speaking of which, I have a new number now. How did you manage to get a hold of me at all?"

"I assumed you'd be taking over Lawrence's office, so I called

his old number, but never mind that.” Edwin frowned. *No congratulations?* Not that he felt he deserved any, but ordinarily, he knew his wife would have said *something* about his promotion. . . .

“The detective just visited me here. He told me that suicide notes have been found, thus exonerating me.”

Edwin’s brow lifted. “That’s wonderful news, Constance!” Despite the morbid nature of the conversation, it really was good news. Now maybe they could begin to put all of this behind them.

“Yes, yes, wonderful. I just wanted to let you know, so you wouldn’t feel the need to speak with the detective again.”

“Actually, he’s here right now—I assume to tell me exactly—”

“You mustn’t see him! I forbid it.”

Edwin frowned. “May I ask why?”

“Because he’s a horrible, loathsome man, and if you ever talk to him again, it will be the last you ever hear from me!”

“Okay, okay, calm down, Constance. I’ll send him away. After all, he has nothing to say which I don’t already know.”

“Good.”

Edwin sighed. “Goodbye, dear.”

“Goodbye.”

Click.

Edwin set the phone down gently, and turned back to Martha. She was watching him bemusedly, a wrinkle of confusion showing on her forehead. “Tell the detective that I have no wish to see him, and moreover, that my wife has already told me everything, so there is no need for me to see him.”

Martha nodded, then turned and left, closing the door quietly behind her.

Edwin shook his head slowly, wondering at his wife’s hysterics. She hadn’t made a lot of sense on the phone, but she was clearly upset by the detective’s visit—*probably reliving things all over again*. Edwin wasn’t as ignorant of his wife’s nightmares and panic attacks as he pretended to be. He just knew that she was the type of person who preferred to deal with personal weaknesses in private. Any attempt to comfort her would only be scorned and resented.

Sighing again, Edwin leaned back in Lawrence’s chair and stared up at the ceiling, not for the first time wishing that his

wife were a little more even-tempered.

* * *

Edwin looked up at the sky and silently cursed its brilliance. It was an endless blue topped by puffs of creamy white clouds, which were sailing along at an alarming rate. It didn't seem right to Edwin. Only the driving wind set an appropriate tone for the day.

To Edwin's left stood his wife, all dressed in black. Gathered around them were a multitude of others: some Edwin recognized as colleagues from work—including the entire board of directors from Western Leathers International, who had come all the way from Cape Town to attend the funeral—and others that Edwin recognized as family. Lawrence's cousin, who also worked at Western Tanning, and his sister, a doctor who had come all the way from Port Elizabeth to attend her brother's funeral, were both there. Standing in front of their aunt, beside their maid, were Lawrence's two daughters, Lydia and Julia. Edwin noted Lydia's tear-stained cheeks and Julia's vacant stare, thinking that both of them looked somehow older than he remembered. Rebecca was conspicuously absent from the gathering, though she certainly knew about the funeral.

Feeling his chest grow tight, Edwin let out a long sigh and forced himself to look away. He had to grit his teeth to keep the tears from coming. He knew his wife would disapprove if he cried in public. Instead, he tried to focus on the ceremony, watching as the Anglican priest picked up the urn and spoke stridently into the wind.

"In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother, Lawrence Benjamin Stevens, and we commit his mortal remains to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The priest opened the urn, and in accord with Lawrence's final wishes, sprinkled his remains into the now-open grave of his late son, Benjamin. Most of the ashes fell straight down, landing with an inaudible pitter patter atop of Benjamin's small coffin, but a fair portion of the ashes were scattered to the wind. Edwin smiled sadly, watching them take flight, and hoped that it was somehow emblematic—that some small part of Lawrence had managed to escape the sorrow he'd been held captive by in life.

Unable to hold back any longer, tears began spilling in

rivulets down Edwin's cheeks, making it only halfway down his cheeks before they dried in the wind. Edwin closed his eyes, shutting out the blurry scene, and followed the rest of the priest's prayer in his head.

"The Lord bless him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him and be gracious unto him and give him peace. Amen."

Edwin whispered his own amen, and opened his eyes to watch as gravediggers began shoveling dirt over top of what was now a combined grave for both father and son.

* * *

Constance was dimly aware of the priest speaking, but she wasn't listening. Her thoughts were elsewhere, contemplating recent developments. Edwin had left work early in order to attend Lawrence's funeral. He'd come home straight away (something she was growing accustomed to now that Lawrence was gone), but in this case, he'd come home to get dressed and to fetch her. Not that she had really wanted to attend the funeral, but she would have seemed guilty if she were absent.

As it was, Constance thought she could see a few accusing looks turned her way. If it hadn't been for the detective's visit yesterday, there would have been many more. After calling the editor of the local newspaper with the news about the suicide notes, and threatening him with a lawsuit for defamation of character if he didn't print a retraction, her name had been more or less cleared. Now, the newspaper was insinuating that Western Leathers International had killed Lawrence by firing him so soon after his wife had left him.

Constance came gradually back to the present as her eyes lit upon the urn which held Lawrence's remains. Curiously, she found herself unable to look away.

You killed him.

Constance recoiled at the thought, wondering where it had come from. *Nonsense.*

An unfamiliar sound to her right drew her attention away from the priest and her thoughts. It was Edwin. He was crying. Constance frowned and opened her mouth to say something, to remind him not to make a spectacle of himself, but she was interrupted before she could speak.

Where are your tears? Aren't you sorry for what you've done?

Constance's mouth clamped shut and she turned her

attention from Edwin back to the priest. Where were these traitorous thoughts coming from?

I wouldn't cry in public, not even if this were my husband's funeral! Constance's eyes settled on the urn again.

But you are sorry?

Constance's eyes narrowed and traveled away from the priest, searching for a more neutral place to look. Her gaze slowed to a stop upon seeing Lawrence's two children and their maid, Mary. All three were crying, just like Edwin. Constance frowned, wondering where their mother was.

Are you sorry, now?

Sorry for what I did? No. Sorry for what happened? How can I not be?

Then, you would do it again?

Constance pressed her lips into a thin line. *For the greater good.*

For your own good.

Constance's mind whirled. *Shut up! He had to die. It was God's will, not mine. If God had wanted things to turn out differently, then he could have done something to prevent it.*

Silence. Constance let out a quiet sigh.

Then you're not sorry.

It wasn't a question, and the accusing tone in that thought was unmistakable. Constance felt her heart start hammering in her chest, and a familiar sheen of sweat broke out on her brow. She gritted her teeth to make the anxiety go away before it turned into another panic attack. *Sorry that God's will prevailed? No, I'm not. God is nothing if not just. Lawrence was killing Edwin, keeping him out late every night, golfing and drinking, golfing and drinking! It would only have been a matter of time before he dragged Edwin down with him. In His wisdom, God killed Lawrence before Lawrence could kill Edwin. It was justice.*

Silence.

Constance's eyes flicked from Lawrence's children to Edwin, and then back to the grave. She began nodding slowly, watching as the gravediggers shoveled dirt over top of Lawrence and his son. *It was either him or Edwin.*

* * *

As Constance and Edwin were walking back to the car, the funeral service now over, a large man with a full head of silver

hair came striding over to them and offered his hand to Edwin.

"I'm glad I caught you before you left," the man said. Constance noted that he didn't bother to introduce himself, though Edwin seemed to know him anyway. "It probably isn't the best time to tell you, but this—" He gestured to the graveyard around them. "—could be rather bad for business. Now that . . ." Constance watched the man send her a fleeting glance. "Now that some of the controversy surrounding Lawrence's death has been put to rest, the papers are blaming us for his death, painting us as monsters for firing him after everything he'd been through. Even as far as Cape Town, they're blaming us! Imagine that!"

"No mention of his cheating wife, who, I note, wasn't even at his funeral. Meanwhile, the whole board of directors drives all the way from Cape Town to pay our respects, and what do you want to bet the media makes no mention of it." The man snorted. "There's no justice."

Edwin shook his head, looking old and tired. "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not sure I understand where this is going."

The older man nodded. "The company is going to have a memorial dinner for Lawrence, and we want you to organize it. We'll have it right here in Wellington and invite friends, family—basically all of the same people that were here today. But we'll also invite key clients and business partners—anyone who might blame us for what happened. Since you were his best friend, and have been at the heart of the controversy surrounding his death, you'll be in a unique position to offer your own reasons for the tragedy—to subtly direct the blame away from the company. I don't care if you have to make it up, just make it good."

Edwin was stunned into silence. Despite the poor motivation, it was a nice gesture. *And*, Edwin thought, *it might even be an opportunity to repair some real damage*. An image of Lawrence's daughters' grief-stricken faces rose to mind. Edwin winced. He knew exactly what—or rather, *who*—he wanted the memorial dinner to be about. The only trick was selling the idea to the chairman.

"Well? What do you say?" the man with silver hair demanded, looking impatient.

Edwin nodded. "Of course, I'll do it, and I think it's a good idea, but I believe I know a way that we can get even better

publicity.”

The older man raised his eyebrows. “Let’s hear it.”

“Well, sir, it occurs to me that Lawrence’s daughters are the real losers in this tragedy. First their mother left them, and now their father is gone. For all intents and purposes they’ve been orphaned, and whether or not the company is to blame, that is going to be the ugliest part of all this in people’s eyes.”

“Yes, I can see how that might be the case.”

“Well, we could make the memorial dinner a charity event for the two girls, and say that Western Leathers International will double whatever money is raised.”

The man was frowning. “That could be very expensive.”

Edwin shook his head. “Not as expensive as you might think. We’re holding the event in Wellington, a small town if ever there was one, and apart from myself and a few others, there’s no one here who could make a truly sizable donation. We’re probably looking at the company spending a maximum of fifty thousand *rand*.”

“What about all of our wealthy clients and business partners? Won’t they be tempted to make large, expensive donations?”

Edwin shrugged. “Even if they are, the more money we raise, the better the publicity will be for us, and—the farther afield it will go. If we do it right, the company’s donations will be reciprocated with free advertising in newspapers around the country. Instead of looking like a monster, Western Leathers International will be heralded as a company with a heart and soul like no other.”

The man hesitated, then nodded once. “I like it. Make it happen, Edwin. I’ll have a list of the guests I want invited forwarded to your secretary by tomorrow morning.” The man’s gaze flicked over to Constance, and lingered there, as if noticing her for the first time. “Is this your wife?”

“Yes,” Edwin nodded, “this is Constance.” Turning to his wife he said, “Constance, this is William Gaines, chairman of the board at Western Leathers International in Cape Town.”

Constance’s face flashed with shock and recognition, and she felt a cold sweat prickling her skin. *If he hears my voice, he might realize I was the one who called him!*

The chairman extended a hand to her and she took it, even though hers was unaccountably cold and clammy. She

concealed her fear and shock with a smile. *Maybe I won't have to say anything; I'll just smile and nod. . . .*

"Nice to meet you, Constance," the chairman said, and then there was an awkward silence as he waited for her to reciprocate the sentiment.

When she hesitated longer than was acceptable, Edwin gave her a strange look. Thinking quickly, Constance gestured to her throat and then spoke in a thin whisper that she hoped would sound grief-stricken: "I'm sorry; it's been a very emotional day."

William Gaines let go of her hand and gave her an understanding nod. Turning back to Edwin, he said, "Don't take too long putting this thing together. We need to act before people forget and stop caring about what happened."

"I'll make it my highest priority."

The chairman nodded again and then turned and started across the dry, ill-kept grass of the graveyard to his silver, convertible Mercedes. Edwin watched him go, the tightness in his chest now finally easing. He cast his eyes skyward. *You see, Lawrence, I really am your friend. I always was.*

Chapter 3

Edwin paused near the end of his speech and surveyed the crowd before him. There were well over three hundred people seated around the room at tables with elegant place settings—real silverware, sparkling crystal wine and champagne glasses, and the flickering glow of candles emanating from the center of each table. In spite of the intimate atmosphere created by the candles, there were eight chairs around every table, allowing for some unofficial competition at each table to see who would make the most extravagant donations.

Despite the low lighting in the room, the stage was brightly lit. Edwin struggled not to blink against the glare from the spotlights, and from the near constant flashing of the cameras. He spotted his wife sitting at one of the tables closest to the stage. She caught his eye and gave him an encouraging nod. He returned her nod with a small smile, thinking how beautiful she looked, dressed in her finest evening gown—a pale, sleeveless blue dress that shimmered in the candlelight and brought out the color of her eyes.

Edwin belatedly tore his gaze away from his wife, only to have his eyes alight upon Rebecca Stevens and her two daughters. She was also seated near the stage, in a position of prominence, which he felt was ill-deserved. Apparently she was home now. Not even her malfunctioning conscience would allow her to completely abandon her responsibilities—now seated to either side of her. It was almost regrettable, though, Edwin thought. The mother who had abandoned her family only months prior, probably causing her husband's death in the process, was now sitting at his memorial dinner, getting ready to claim the funds raised on behalf of her children. *At least she didn't have the gall to bring her boyfriend along. . . .*

Edwin took a deep breath and allowed his eyes to address the audience. “Just remember when you look at those prices on your menu, that every *rand* you spend tonight will be matched by Western Leathers International, so be generous.

“As for myself, I know I’ll be ordering the lobster thermidor, along with a glass of South Africa’s finest.” There was a round of applause to accompany that statement—and well-deserved, Edwin thought. The lobster thermidor was the most expensive item on the menu, at just over one hundred *rand*, and if one chose to interpret “a glass of the South Africa’s finest” as the most expensive wine they were serving tonight, then that would cost him another fifty.

He waited for the applause to die away. “Apart from the meal itself, any of the waiters can take an additional donation by cash, check, or credit card and have it added to your bill.” Edwin paused to let that sink in.

“Later this evening we’ll be reading eulogies from family and friends, and at the end, we’ll make a tally of all the money that was raised and report it to you.

“Well, I won’t keep you any longer. On behalf of Western Leathers International, I hope you enjoy the evening and meal in fond memory of Lawrence Benjamin Stevens.” More applause accompanied Edwin down from the stage, and then quickly tapered off as a pianist sat down at a lustrous, black grand piano on one corner of the stage.

A soft, poignant melody began whispering through the dining hall as Edwin took his place beside his wife. He took the napkin off the plate in front of him and spread it across his lap. A few moments later, two of the waiters came to their table, and started passing out menus, filling glasses with water, and taking orders for drinks. When the waiter came to Edwin and asked him what he and his wife would like to drink, Edwin asked for the wine list and briefly scanned through it. He hesitated over his choice. He was debating whether to get the most expensive wine—a red Cabernet Sauvignon from the nearby city of Paarl, at fifty *rand* per glass—or its cheaper cousin, a white Chardonnay that was only forty *rand* per glass. After a moment’s deliberation and quiet discussion with Constance, he asked for two glasses of the Cabernet Sauvignon and handed the wine list back to the waiter. The man sitting to his left—a large, barrel-shaped man of maybe fifty, whom he

recognized as Lucas Atherton—raised his eyebrows and gave a short nod.

“You made an excellent choice,” Lucas said, breaking the silence that had enveloped their side of the table. “In my spare time, I’m something of a wine connoisseur.”

“Really?” Edwin asked, turning slightly toward Lucas Atherton. Then he smiled, remembering that George Colton, the egotistical business tycoon he’d met in Canada, had also had an affinity for fine wine. He began to wonder if he was the only one in his circles who wouldn’t be able to describe and differentiate the bouquet of one wine from another. “I can’t say that I’m truly a connoisseur myself, but I can certainly appreciate the difference between good wine and bad.”

“Well, take it from someone who knows, you’re in for a treat. I’m actually good friends with the vintners, so I’ve had ample occasion to sample their wines.”

Now it was Edwin’s turn to raise his eyebrows, but it was his wife who replied. “Is that so?” Constance asked. “Well, you’ll have to give them our compliments, then.” Edwin cast a sideways glance to his wife. He hadn’t realized that she was listening in.

Lucas chuckled softly. “You haven’t even tasted the wine yet. How can I possibly give them your compliments?”

Edwin caught a hint of an indulgent smile on his wife’s face. “I’m prepared to take you at your word, Mister Atherton. After all, a gentleman would never lie to a lady, would he, Mrs. Atherton?”

Lucas’s wife spared a glance from the pianist on the stage, and gave her husband a mock-serious look. “He’d better not. If he knows what’s good for him.”

Constance and Mrs. Atherton traded amused looks as Lucas shifted nervously in his chair and cleared his throat. “Well, it is fortunate, then, that I’m such a compulsively honest fellow.” He sent his wife a winning smile, and she gave his arm an affectionate pat.

“Tell me, Mister Atherton—” Constance began.

“Please, call me Lucas.”

“Of course, and you may call me Constance.” She spared a moment to smile pleasantly at him before continuing. “I was wondering when we might have the pleasure of seeing your charming son again?”

Lucas's expression flickered briefly, and he looked away. As if to give reason for his reaction, he grabbed the napkin from his plate and began spreading it across his lap. His wife, Loretta, looked back to the pianist on the stage.

Constance went on to fill the awkward silence, pretending not to notice the Athertons' discomfort. "Elizabeth is quite keen to see Charles again."

Lucas's eyes elevated from his lap, but not to meet her gaze. "That's not what I heard," he said, watching the pianist with his wife.

The waiter chose that moment to return with the wine. He began at their side of the table, starting with Edwin and then pouring a glass for Constance and Lucas Atherton as well.

Constance worked hard to conceal a grimace as the waiter did his job with infuriating care. *Foolish girl!* she thought, an image of Elizabeth flashing through her mind as she watched the wine glasses being filled one after another with a disturbingly red wine. For some reason the color bothered her, but at the moment she was too angry with her daughter to wonder why. Not even a month ago, Elizabeth had all but rejected Charles in favor of Pieter. *And now just look at the mess your actions have wrought!* Constance thought, still fuming.

Once the waiter had left, Edwin eased his discomfort by reaching for his wine glass and swishing the wine around, pretending to sample the bouquet.

"I'm afraid you'll have to make some allowances for my daughter," Constance began. "Whatever you may have heard from your son, Elizabeth is hardly as indifferent as she pretends. Unfortunately, your son visited at a time when she hadn't quite decided what to do about her old boyfriend yet. Now that they've broken up—"

"They're no longer seeing one another?" Lucas asked, meeting Constance's gaze over the rim of his wine glass as he took a sip.

Constance shook her head. "They broke up shortly after your son left."

"Indeed?" Lucas was smiling as he set his wine glass down. "I hope that wasn't on account of Charles."

"I think it was simply a matter of her eyes being opened to the possibilities. . . . in general, of course."

"Of course."

"After all, why settle?" Constance raised her wine glass for a sip. She smiled luxuriantly as it swept down her throat in a warm, tingling rush. "You're right about this wine, Lucas. Without question, it is the best I've ever tasted."

Lucas inclined his head and raised his glass. "Why settle for anything less?"

Constance raised her glass higher and held it out toward Lucas. "To not settling."

Lucas echoed her sentiment, and their glasses clinked softly over Edwin's place setting. Feeling left out, Edwin leaned back in his chair and reached into his coat for the eulogy he'd written. He pretended to study it on his lap.

The waiters returned to take their orders, and true to his word, Edwin ordered the lobster thermidor. Constance did likewise—she didn't want Lucas Atherton to think that they couldn't afford it. The event wasn't actually *à la carte*, but there were three possible entrées—the lobster, another meat dish, and a vegetarian one.

After a moment spent studying the menu with his wife, Lucas placed two more orders of lobster, and then turned back to Constance, curiosity painted plainly on his face.

"I hope you won't think me prying to ask, and if it's too personal, please don't be afraid to decline an answer."

Constance's eyebrows drew together and she nodded carefully, watching Lucas raise his wine glass for another sip. The wine was sparkling like liquefied rubies in the candlelight. Again, Constance felt a vague sense of unease as she looked at the wine. Lucas set his glass down and fixed her with a look of genuine concern.

"How have you been holding up?" At this, Lucas's wife gave her attention to the conversation now, too, adding her eyes to those looking Constance's way.

"It must have been terribly traumatic," Lucas's wife added.

Constance's eyes were still glued to the wine in Lucas's glass. Now that she thought about it, the color of the wine wasn't like rubies at all. It was more like . . .

"Constance?" The voice was Edwin's, but she gave no sign that she'd heard him.

Realizing that her fixation was unnerving them, Constance jerked her eyes away from the wine and flashed Lucas and his

wife a quick smile. She reached with a shaking hand for her own glass, intending to take an indecorous gulp—

But she reached too eagerly and knocked the glass over, spilling a crimson wave toward herself. Constance let out a startled scream, and suddenly she was standing, her chair lying overturned on the floor behind her. The wine hadn't had a chance to reach her, but now it was pooled and sinking into the white tablecloth in front of her, looking more than ever like . . .

Blood.

Constance shook her head wildly, her eyes fixed upon the stain. Feeling her mind slipping into panic, she drew upon her rapidly failing composure and turned to the Athertons with another smile. "Please excuse me, I . . ." Her breath hitched irregularly in her throat, and a wave of dizziness drained the color from her face. "I need to attend to my dress before the stain sets in."

Lucas nodded slowly, his face grave, pretending not to notice that her dress was spotless. "Of course."

The gaping mouths around the table were mute testimony to her overreaction, but Constance strode from the table as if nobody had noticed. Eyes followed her all around the room as she wove an unsteady path around the scattered tables, finding the shortest possible route to the ladies room. Edwin stared after her, wondering if he should accompany his wife. Lucas's wife, Loretta, got up from the table, saying, "I'll go with her."

Lucas shook his head and whispered: "Poor woman."

* * *

By the time Edwin had to deliver his eulogy, he was regrettably sober. He'd planned to be blissfully numb by the time he'd have to make his speech, but even after spending 150 *rand* on three glasses of wine, he hadn't quite been able to manage it. So it was that when Edwin again found himself blinking against the glare of the spotlights and the cameras—he was blinking tears. *Come on, you can do this, Edwin. Stiff upper lip. You're almost done.*

Edwin took a deep breath and continued. "It's a cruel world that conspired against Lawrence Stevens, that drove him to the edge and then pushed him over. But I know that his soul has found its rest in heaven, and that he has finally been reunited

with his beloved son.”

Edwin raised his champagne glass, and the rest of the room followed suit. “To Lawrence Benjamin Stevens—my best friend.” Then, as one, the room drank a toast. Edwin drained his glass.

He lowered the empty glass from his lips, the warmth of the champagne still trickling down his throat, and watched as William Gaines started up to the stage. Edwin was supposed to formally hand off to the chairman, introducing him as he did so, but by the time William reached the lectern, Edwin’s voice had failed him and all he could do was stand aside.

The chairman stepped up to the microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, as chairman of Western Leathers International, I’m happy to announce that thanks to your generosity we have raised over forty thousand *rand* tonight.” The room erupted in thunderous applause, and Edwin, smiling from beside the chairman, enthusiastically joined in.

The chairman went on, almost having to shout to be heard above the applause: “To be matched, as promised, by Western Leathers International, bringing the total to—” The chairman half turned from the audience as two board members came onto the stage carrying between them an oversized check. “Eighty-three thousand four hundred and sixty *rand!*” the chairman finished, gesturing to the check. The room thundered with applause again. This time William Gaines waited for it to die down as he waited for his fellow members of the board to finish carrying the check onto the stage.

“On behalf of her daughters, their mother, Rebecca Stevens, will be accepting this check tonight. Rebecca, would you come up here, please?”

* * *

Edwin beat a hasty retreat from the stage, making a beeline for the bar, which stood to one side of the room. The official agenda had been exhausted, but the night still being young, William Gaines had declared an open bar, courtesy of the company. Edwin doubted that the fine wines which had been served during dinner would be included in that offer, but no doubt cocktails and most other drinks would be.

Constance caught his eye on the way to the bar, and she sent him a warning look, but he eluded her gaze, pretending not to have seen it. She was entrenched in conversation with

Lucas Atherton at the moment, so she was in no position to stop him from taking full advantage of the open bar. He'd deal with her disapproval later. But for now, all he could think about was getting rid of the awful, hollow ache in his chest. He doubted that alcohol would provide a lasting remedy, but it might just be enough to get him through the rest of the night.

Edwin reached the bar and sat down—as far from any of the other people as he could. He didn't want to talk to anyone. As he waited to get the bartender's attention, he began to pick familiar voices out of a conversation that was coming from somewhere behind him. . . .

"You're not fooling anyone, Rebecca. I know what happened between you and Lawrence." Edwin recognized the voice as belonging to Lawrence's cousin, Neil. "Everyone thinks that losing his job was what killed him, but you and I both know that's not true. I'm not sure what's worse—"

* * *

"—knowing that my cousin is dead because of you, or knowing that you're going to be rich because of it."

Rebecca's voice came back softly. "The money is going to be put into a trust for the children. . . ." She didn't protest to being blamed for her husband's death. She knew it was her fault.

"You're the trustee! Listen, I don't want to hear your excuses. I just came over here to let you know that we don't ever want to see you again. As far as the family is concerned, you're as dead as Lawrence is."

Rebecca just stood there, frozen in place, watching as Neil turned and stalked back to the table where he was sitting with Lawrence's sister. She couldn't pretend the words didn't hurt, but she didn't intend to stay in Wellington anyway, so the chances of seeing Neil again were slim. There was nothing left for her here. When she'd received the news of Lawrence's death, she'd felt so guilty that she'd immediately broken off her relationship with Mike. She would put the home up for sale and leave it in the care of a capable estate agent.

For just a second, Rebecca met her sister-in-law's accusing stare. Unable to stand it, she looked away and returned to the table where her children were seated. She took each of them by the hand, urging them out of their seats, and began to leave. Seeing the mixture of sympathy and suspicion on people's

faces as they watched her leave, she tried desperately not to meet any of their stares. Head held high, her bottom lip quivering despite her attempts to still it, Rebecca strode down the aisle between the tables, up to doors, and out into the chill of the night. She bit her lip, pretending not to hear Lydia's crying as they walked across the parking lot to their car. How was she ever going to take care of two children by herself? If things had been hard before, how much harder would they be now?

Now, it was just the three of them. No husband, no maid—no one to blame for why she couldn't seem to cope with life anymore. She was going to have to change. Lydia and Julia needed her to change. She was all they had left now.

And now they were all that she had, too.

* * *

Edwin watched Rebecca leave, her children walking to either side of her, their hands held tightly in a united front against judgment and sympathy alike. He shook his head. The Stevens family had lost so much. How would they ever recover? He couldn't imagine.

He turned back to the bar and drained his Campari, then signaled to the bartender for a refill.

* * *

His eyes opening lazily, Edwin scanned the room to see where he was. Everything was blurry, but he had no trouble recognizing his surroundings. The only thing was—

He wasn't exactly sure how he had come to be at home, in his bedroom, lying down on his bed. His last truly lucid memories were of ordering cocktail after cocktail from an elderly bartender with a round face and a sad excuse for a toupee. He remembered the uneasy way it had sat on top of the man's head, looking like a bird perched for flight, and he almost laughed, but his stomach lurched uneasily with the effort and his laughter came out as a groan instead.

Edwin remembered having been disappointed to find that beer was not among the drinks being served at the bar. Instead, he had settled for ordering one of each and every kind of cocktail he could name—and some he couldn't. In the process he'd found one that he really liked, but now, for the life of him, he couldn't remember what it had been. . . .

Somewhere in the process of ordering all those cocktails,

he'd lost track of events; he wasn't even sure how he'd managed to get back to his car. Had Constance driven him home? Edwin noticed that though the light was not on in the bedroom, there was light spilling from beneath the door of the adjoining bathroom. The carpets had been replaced, so he was back in his bedroom now.

Edwin tried to sit up, and just as he did so, the door to the bathroom opened, revealing his wife. She was looking tired and irritable. Edwin was about to comment that she looked like one of the less photogenic sides of a horse, and the thought of her reaction brought a silly grin to his face and drew another laugh-turned-groan from his lips. Feeling a not-so-subtle warning from his stomach, he lay back down.

"You just had to do it, didn't you?" Constance said. "You couldn't *resist* making a fool of yourself in front of all those people! Of course, it never occurred to you that you'd be making a fool of *me* as well!"

Edwin wanted to protest, he hadn't made a fool of himself, had he? But would he even remember if he had?

"We had to help you out to the car! Imagine: a grown man, and the managing director of Western Tanning, no less, being helped to his car like some sort of invalid!"

So that's how he'd reached the car. *No, definitely wasn't me driving, then. Well, Edwin reflected, it could have been worse. . . .*

He tried to sit up again and opened his mouth in a second attempt to defend himself. That turned out to be a very bad idea. His stomach gave a sudden lurch and he scrambled unsteadily to his feet, stumbling for the bathroom with all possible speed. Somehow, he managed to trip on the foot of the bed, causing himself to tumble to the floor. The sudden movement only hastened the inevitable.

Unable to hold back any longer, he retched all over the thick, shaggy white carpet. *Oh no, that's a pity.* Edwin thought. *And right after the carpets were replaced, too. . . .*

"Edwin! You better not have . . ." His wife's warning cut off with a scream as she rounded the foot of the bed and saw what had happened. Suddenly Edwin remembered which cocktail he'd been so fond of—

Campari. And it looked even redder against the white of the carpet than it had in his glass.

Chapter 4

Constance lay awake in her bed, unable to sleep. Edwin lay beside her snoring loudly. But it wasn't his snoring that was keeping her awake. She took barely any notice of it. No, it was knowing that that bright red Campari stain was still there, on the carpet at the foot of the bed. *The brand-new carpet!* Its pristine white again marred by . . .

Constance swallowed past a painfully dry throat and gritted her teeth against the memory. *No, this time it's different.* It was just a stain, a mundane, ordinary, everyday stain. It was silly to be sleepless because of it. She'd already spent an hour trying to get it out. There was little more that she could do.

But knowing that it was silly, and being able to ignore it were two different things. Constance bit her lip, warring with herself a moment longer, then she eased out of bed and crossed over to the bathroom. She retrieved the carpet cleaner and the rag she'd been using earlier from next to the sink. With a vindictive flick of her finger, she turned on the lights in the bedroom, and spent a moment blinking against the glare, her eyes riveted on the stain. In his state, Edwin wouldn't wake up—not that she cared if he did. This was all his fault. He deserved to lose some sleep over it.

Constance went down on her haunches next to the stain and began scrubbing the carpet vigorously. Nothing appeared to happen. The long threads of the carpet stayed the same washed-out red no matter how hard she scrubbed. *Déjà vu.* The carpet had looked exactly the same way after the police had finished. Some stains simply wouldn't come out. Constance gritted her teeth and scrubbed harder.

Constance . . . what are you doing?

Constance ignored the voice in her head, and allowed a smile

at her own expense. *Since when did I start referring to myself in the third person?* Constance laughed quietly, but her laughter had a disquieting edge to it. She knew very well when she'd begun hearing that voice. And ever since the funeral, it had been incessant. Her strategy since then had been either to ignore it, or to belittle her own silliness. After all, she had been under a lot of stress; it was only natural to experience some side effects. . . .

Like panic attacks, and annoying voices in your head.

Constance set her jaw and ground her teeth. *It's perfectly normal to disassociate one's thoughts in order to gain a different perspective on them.*

Who are you trying to convince?

Not wanting to further encourage an argument with herself, Constance refocused her attention on getting the Campari stain out. Her arm was beginning to tire, and there was still no visible difference, no lightening of the carpet's long, red, supposed-to-be-white threads.

It's just a stain, the voice reminded her, as if confused by her obsessive need to get it out.

It mars the entire room! I have to get it out! Constance thought back angrily, forgetting for a moment that she had decided to ignore the voice.

But it's still just a stain. Not worth losing any sleep over . . . unless . . .

Unless what? Constance shot back.

Unless it's more than just a stain.

Ridiculous.

You know what it looks like, don't you?

Constance just went on scrubbing, tuning the voice out again. She knew what the stain looked like.

You can't get it out. No matter what you do, it will always be there.

Constance scrubbed harder, not even noticing that she was chafing her knuckles raw on the carpet. It made no difference. The stain hadn't even paled. Constance straightened, feeling the ache in her back as she did so. She was panting hard, and sweat was trickling down from her hairline. She frowned down at the red splotch in front of her, her forehead pinched in frustration.

You see? There's nothing you can do to erase it.

I'll cover it up. No one will ever see it if I cover it up.

But it will still be there, lurking beneath the surface, just waiting to be discovered. . . .

Shut up! Constance leaned forward and began scrubbing with renewed vigor. She continued scouring the carpet well into the night, until her hands and arms ached inconsolably from the effort. Finally, exhausted, now only a few hours before sunrise, she crawled back into bed and slept fitfully. Seemingly only a few minutes later, the alarm went off.

Edwin's snoring interrupted with a groan and he reached over to turn off the alarm. It was time to go to church.

* * *

Elizabeth was sitting beside her mother in the pew, her sister to the other side of her. Throughout the service, she couldn't help stealing sideways glances at her parents. She imagined that they must've arrived home very late last night, as both of them looked exhausted. In fact, Elizabeth couldn't remember ever having seen her parents look so haggard: her father with his heavy, half-wincing frown that deepened with every hymn they sang, and her mother with half-lidded eyes, shadowed by only partially concealed dark circles. They looked awful.

As soon as the service was over, they hurried down the aisle, trying not to meet anyone's gaze, weaving around anyone who might conceivably want to start a conversation. Elizabeth and Hattie mutely followed their parents out the doors of the church, sensing the unspoken hurry to get home.

It wasn't a long ride home, but felt longer to Elizabeth for its piercing silence. Were her parents fighting? Or just tired? She wasn't sure. As her father pulled into the driveway, Elizabeth noted that the mail was creeping out of their mailbox. Apparently no one had bothered to check it for some time. Well, at least that was one concern she could handle. Getting out of the car, she strode over to the mailbox, while the others went on to the house. A moment later, she appeared at the front door, carrying an armful of letters, flyers, bills, and magazines. Her father was waiting for her with the door held open. He sent her a grateful smile as she walked through.

"You may put the mail on the kitchen counter, Elizabeth. I'll sort through it later."

"Okay," she replied, angling for the kitchen.

* * *

As Edwin was sorting through the mail, separating bills from letters from magazines, he came across an envelope with no stamp or address, but on the front, scrawled in sloppy, but vaguely familiar handwriting, were the words: *A reminder*.

Edwin frowned, staring at the envelope for a long moment. For it to have reached them, the sender had to have dropped the letter off personally. That meant that it was probably from one of his neighbors, or at the very least, someone from Wellington. But who? And why not simply address it and wait for it to be delivered?

A reminder . . . a reminder of what? Edwin's frown deepened, and he started to open the envelope.

"Edwin!" Constance's voice interrupted him, causing him to wince as a stab of pain shot through his head. Apparently, he was still hung over from last night. He looked up. He couldn't see his wife, but it sounded like she was in the living room.

"Yes, dear?" Edwin called back, as quietly as he could.

"Come here, please."

He sighed and set the envelope down. He would have to open it later. Upon entering the living room, he found his wife staring at the rug beneath the coffee table.

He crossed the room to his wife's side, and matched her stare. "Well? What is it?"

She pointed to the rug. "I want to put that in our bedroom to cover up the stain."

Edwin raised his eyebrows. "Can't we just buy a new rug?"

She shook her head. "No, that will take too long. I don't want to have to look at that stain anymore."

"We can get one tomorrow. . . ." Edwin suggested, unable to understand the urgency, and reluctant to move the coffee table.

Constance turned to look at him, arms crossed over her chest. "I said *no*."

Edwin heaved another sigh. "All right, dear, help me move the coffee table, then."

When they were done, Edwin's head was pounding worse than before, and every step seemed to take an enormous effort, as though his blood had turned to lead. He wanted to crawl into bed and smother himself with a pillow. On the way back to the kitchen and the mail waiting there, a less dramatic alternative presented itself—in the form of the living room

couch. He stretched languorously from one end to the other, and tried to ignore the marching band in his head. Even in spite of it, his eyes immediately began to drift closed, and it wasn't 10 minutes before he was snoring softly.

Constance walked by him on her way to the kitchen to make lunch. She shook her head in annoyance, and muttered to herself about her slovenly husband. Secretly, she wished she could follow his example. But in spite of the pathetic amount of sleep she'd had last night, she wasn't the least bit sleepy—tired, yes, but not sleepy. It didn't help that her heart felt like it was beating itself to death—the sole remaining symptom of the panic attack she'd had upon coming back from church to see the Campari stain at the foot of the bed, glaring at her in all its gory reminiscence.

She was getting worse at dealing with the panic attacks. They made her so angry that it took longer than it should have to calm down afterward. This time had been particularly bad; not only did she blame Lawrence for the affliction, but now she had reason to blame Edwin as well. It was hard not to remember who was responsible for the stain at the foot of the bed. Edwin! Edwin! *Edwin!* To make matters worse, the carpets had just been replaced. *How could he?!*

Constance stopped beside the kitchen sink, her chest rising and falling in time to her racing pulse. She closed her eyes and massaged her forehead where a vein had just begun jumping. *Calm down*, she told herself. As her breathing quieted and her heart rate returned to normal, she opened her eyes—

And found herself staring at a mountain of mail, strewn all over the island counter where she needed to prepare lunch.

The vein began jumping again.

Thoughtless, sloppy, miserable excuse of a man! Constance thought as she gathered the mail into her arms.

* * *

Edwin searched through yet another kitchen drawer, rummaging around in vain. He recalled having left the mail on the kitchen counter a week ago, but he'd become distracted and had forgotten about it. From past experience he'd assumed that Constance would have put it in the drawer rather than let it take up counter space. *But it's not here*, he thought, gazing down into the drawer.

"Constance!" he called, wondering where his wife was and if

she could hear him.

After a moment, she appeared from the living room. "Yes?"

Edwin gestured to the open drawer. "Where did you put the mail?"

"It wouldn't fit in the usual place, so I had to put it somewhere else."

"Where?"

Constance waved her hand dismissively at him. "Never mind, I'm going that way now; I'll get it for you."

"Thank you."

Constance left the kitchen, heading back through the living room and down the hallway to her bedroom. She stopped before reaching the bedroom and opened the hallway closet. Going down on her haunches, she opened one of the bottom drawers in the closet. It was piled to overflowing with mail. She began removing it from the drawer a handful at a time, piling it on the floor next to her. With one particularly large handful, a number of envelopes slid off the top and fell behind the drawer. Constance scowled at that, but saw that the envelopes were still within reach, peeking out above the lip of the drawer. She reached her arm in up to the shoulder, and found that it was almost too short. Struggling for a moment, she felt around blindly until she found the envelopes with her fingertips and withdrew them.

Having removed the mail from the drawer, Constance closed it again. Then, standing up, she looked down at the mountain of mail on the floor and shook her head. *Too much to carry. Well, he'll just have to carry it himself.*

"Edwin!" Constance called.

* * *

It took him two trips to get all of the mail to the kitchen, where he indiscriminately piled it on the island counter. As he was sitting down on one of the bar stools to sort through the mail once more, he realized that that wasn't all of it—there was still the past week's worth in the mailbox outside. Edwin started to get up, but then Elizabeth came breezing into the kitchen, and he sat down again.

"Elizabeth, dear, would you mind going to fetch the mail for me?"

She turned from filling a glass with water at the sink. Her eyes goggled as they took in the pile of mail already on the

counter. "Sure, Dad," she said between mouthfuls of water.

A few minutes later, she returned with the rest of the mail and placed it beside him on the edge of the counter.

"Thank you, Lizzie."

"My pleasure," she said, and then left again.

Edwin sighed. He really should have finished sorting the mail last week. If he'd thought it was bad then, now it was ridiculous! With a grimace, he grabbed the nearest pile of envelopes and set to work. At some point he became aware of his wife entering the kitchen and busying herself around the refrigerator.

Edwin finished sorting through another handful of envelopes, and then reached for the most recent ones, those Elizabeth had just fetched from the mailbox.

As he was reading through his bank statement, he noticed out of the corner of his eye, his wife holding a large, glass salad bowl and glaring meaningfully at him. *What's her problem?* he wondered. Then he heard a heavy *thunk*, and looked up to see the salad bowl sitting on top of the remainder of the mail like a hen guarding its eggs. He frowned and picked up the bowl with one hand, saying to Constance as he did so, "I don't suppose you could have found a better spot to put this?"

Constance, now dicing vegetables with a wicked-looking butcher knife, turned to face him with eyebrows carefully raised.

"I don't suppose you could have found a better spot to sort the mail?" she replied.

Edwin frowned. "Never mind, dear. I'll be done in just a moment."

Setting his bank statement to one side, and the salad bowl to the other, Edwin continued sorting through the mail. He found a letter there, addressed to Elizabeth, from Paarl, and smiled, knowing already what it would say. It was an invitation. His wife had arranged it all with Lucas Atherton at Lawrence's memorial dinner last week. It would be a nice surprise for Elizabeth after the messy breakup she'd had with Pieter. She was still heartbroken over what had happened. *It'll be good for her to have someone to take her mind off him.*

Elizabeth came back into the kitchen just as Edwin was about to call for her. "What's for lunch?" she asked her mother.

"You'll just have to wait and see."

Edwin held the letter out to his daughter. "Elizabeth." She turned to him. "There's a letter here for you."

"Oh? Who's it from?" Elizabeth asked as she took the letter from him.

Constance turned from dicing vegetables, a hint of a smile on her face.

"It's from Paarl. . . ." Elizabeth said, trailing off uncertainly, her brow pinched in thought as she began opening the envelope. She didn't know anyone in Paarl except Charles Atherton, and the first and last time she'd seen him, she had put him off by telling him she already had a boyfriend. Not to mention that every time he'd called after that (and he had called twice), she'd made an excuse to avoid going out with him again.

As she read through his letter to her now, her eyes widened.

"What does it say?" Constance asked, sounding smug.

Elizabeth looked up. "It's an invitation from Charles. . . . He's having a birthday party on April 7th, and he wants me to be there. But that doesn't make any sense. After the way I treated him. . . ." Elizabeth broke off, shaking her head. "I was sure I'd never hear from him again."

Constance's smugness blossomed into a smile. "I took the liberty explaining the circumstances to his father. Clearly, were it not for Pieter, you would have been more receptive. I also explained to him that you and Pieter recently broke up." She pointed to the letter. "When one door closes, another one opens, my girl."

Elizabeth frowned. "But I thought he was in England. How did he send this letter?"

Constance shrugged. "It's probably a standard invitation that he wrote before he left. He must have instructed one of the household servants or his father to mail out the invitations to a list of his friends while he was away. You mightn't have got that invitation at all if I hadn't explained your behavior to his father."

"And if you hadn't made a point of telling him our address so that the invitation would get here," Elizabeth added.

"As I said, some things are best not left to chance."

"You got me this invitation! Does Charles even know that I'm coming?"

Her mother shrugged again. "If he doesn't, he'll be pleasantly

surprised.”

Elizabeth looked skeptical. “He must know that I was brushing him off the last time he was here.”

“Probably, but he wouldn’t have been there to brush off if he wasn’t interested. You going to his birthday party will show him that the interest is mutual.”

“But going without his knowledge will appear overeager—even strange. He’ll wonder how I managed to get invited, or if I received an invitation at all.”

Constance sighed. “Then blame me—and his father—paint yourself as the unwitting pawn. Why not? It’s true. But for goodness sake don’t appear indifferent. He’ll be looking for some sign that you have feelings for him. Make sure that he gets it.”

Elizabeth nodded, and her eyes returned to the letter in her hands. “It says ‘formal attire.’ What does that mean?”

“It means we’re going to have to find something really special for you to wear. Perhaps we’ll need to do some shopping. . . .”

Edwin tuned out the rest of the conversation and returned to sorting through the mail. Picking up the scattered piles that were the remainder of the mail, he shuffled them into one larger pile, and began dividing it among the smaller piles of sorted mail: bills, letters, advertisements and other junk mail. The last item of unsorted mail was an envelope without an address. All that was written on it were the words: *For Elizabeth.*

He felt a strange sense of déjà vu tickle through his brain, stirring vague memories that seemed more dreamlike than real. This wasn’t the first envelope he’d found without an address. Was it? He was *sure* there had been another one. Or was this the same one? Edwin’s brow furrowed in thought.

When had he found it? Last week . . . he’d begun sorting through the mail, only to be interrupted when Constance had asked him to help her move the rug from the living room to cover up the stain in the master bedroom. Edwin felt a guilty twinge at the memory. Even he was sickened to recall having ruined the brand-new carpets, scarcely a day after they had been replaced. . . .

Edwin shook himself out of the unpleasant memory. *I guess this must be the envelope I found last week. After all, how many unaddressed envelopes could there be in one mailbox?* He called

absently for Elizabeth's attention. Both Elizabeth and Constance turned to him, their eyes questioning.

"I've got another letter for you," he said to Elizabeth.

"Oh?"

He handed her the envelope.

Elizabeth turned it over, scrutinizing first one side, and then the other. Her brow grew furrowed and her face settled into a frown.

"Who's it from?" Constance asked, noticing her daughter's expression.

"I'm not sure. . . ." Elizabeth trailed off as she began opening the envelope. "It's unaddressed."

"Unaddressed?" Constance echoed.

Elizabeth finished opening the envelope, withdrew the letter, and began reading it. Edwin watched as her expression went from confused, to hurt, to angry. Scarcely a minute later, she looked up from reading the letter and turned fiercely burning eyes upon her mother. Her head gave an incredulous shake, and when she opened her mouth to speak, her words came out in a trembling rush.

"You had no right to do that."

Constance raised her eyebrows. "Excuse me? No right to do what?"

"Read it for yourself." With that, Elizabeth threw the letter at her mother's feet—it fluttered gracefully to the ground—and then she stormed from the kitchen.

As Elizabeth left, Edwin heard her all but spit: "Traveling salesman my eye!"

Upon hearing that, Edwin saw his wife freeze like a statue, and her face went pale and slack. Both of them stared wordlessly after Elizabeth. Edwin felt like he should have said something to correct his daughter for being so disrespectful, but he'd been too shocked to speak. He still was. It wasn't like Elizabeth to speak to her parents that way. His eyes fell upon the letter, where it now lay on the ground at his wife's feet. Whatever had upset her was in that letter.

He watched as Constance slowly tore her eyes away from Elizabeth—who could now be seen entering the hallway beyond the living room—and joined him in staring at the letter.

Constance bent to pick up the letter, and for a long, silent moment, she read. The silence was punctuated by the sound of

Elizabeth's door slamming, but Constance acted as though she hadn't heard. Her face remained slack, the only hint to her thoughts being the way the paper shivered and shook in her hands. Whatever was written there was upsetting his wife as well.

Edwin felt as though he was missing something important. He blinked a few times, and his brow furrowed as he tried to make sense of the situation. Growing impatient, he asked, "Well? Who's it from?"

His wife gave no indication that she'd heard him. But just as he was about to repeat the question, she looked up—her blue eyes glittering like two shards of polished ice, and her face as blank and cold as the glacier which might have frozen them.

"Pieter."

Chapter 5

“Pieter?” Edwin asked with a puzzled frown. “I thought Elizabeth broke up with him.”

Constance was back to being unresponsive again. Edwin waited a full minute for his wife to reply, but his patience was wasted. She was rereading the letter:

Elizabeth:

When you broke up with me, you broke my heart. I couldn't understand why you would break up with me over something so trivial . . . something so stupid, and then give me the weak excuse that we're just not “right for each other.”

After a few days, I couldn't take it anymore. I had to see you. As your mother probably told you, I ran to your house in the pouring rain, desperate to make you understand just how right for each other we really were, and to tell you how very sorry I was for being so jealous.

I was disappointed when your mother answered the door instead of you. Worse, she informed me that you weren't even home. I started to leave, but she stopped me, feeling sorry for me, perhaps.

Then she told me about Nicholas, about how you've been dating him for two summers now, behind my back. How could you, Elizabeth? You didn't even tell me about him. Instead, you let me make an idiot of myself, thinking that we were more serious than we really were. Maybe you thought I wouldn't have understood. That might be true, but don't you think you owed me, at the very least, a little honesty?

No, I suppose it didn't even bother you that I was hopelessly in love with you while you were just using me for a good time. I was sorry for being so jealous, but I'm not anymore. I was

right. You were just waiting for something better to come along.

I wonder how I ever fell in love with you. I wonder if I ever really knew you. Now I see you for who you really are: a shallow, selfish, spoiled little girl. I once told you that I fell in love with you because I saw how upset you were about the death of a boy you barely knew. I'm not sure I ever told you why. It was because I saw how sensitive, compassionate, and caring you were. So unlike other girls your age . . . hell, any age!

You see, Elizabeth, unlike you, I wasn't just looking for a good time, or a pretty face. I was looking for substance and character. And, the idiot that I was, I thought I'd found it in you.

I guess I was wrong. I suppose I should thank you for showing me that. Well, I am thankful. Now I have closure. Now I see that you were right: we're not right for each other. We never were. Goodbye, Elizabeth.

Constance let out a long, shuddering sigh. She had never meant for Elizabeth to find out what she'd said to Pieter, or to find out that he'd come to the house at all. So she'd lied—first to Pieter, telling him that Elizabeth wasn't home, and then to Elizabeth, telling her that it had just been a traveling salesman at the door.

Now, Elizabeth obviously knew about both of those lies. . . . Or did she? Looking up from the letter, Constance allowed a thin smile to play across her lips.

Seeing her smile, Edwin gave his wife a strange look. "What's so amusing?"

Constance heard him as if from a distance. Her head panned slowly around to meet his query with eyebrows raised.

"Why nothing, dear. I was just thinking how strange it is that misunderstandings can develop so easily."

"Misunderstandings? You mean Elizabeth's little tantrum?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"Ah, I'm glad to hear it was just a misunderstanding." Edwin smiled and returned his attention to the mail. Despite his curiosity, he didn't bother to ask any further questions. If he didn't need to know, then it was better that he didn't. He'd learned a long time ago that it was better not to borrow

trouble.

* * *

Elizabeth was lying on her bed—on her side, her back turned to the door—when she heard someone knock. She made no attempt to answer. She knew who it was. Besides, the door was unlocked. If she had locked it, her mother would have just used the key.

She heard the door creak open, and her eyes hardened as she considered that she was probably in trouble for the way she'd acted. She didn't care. Her mother had stepped over the line, badly overstepped it, and Elizabeth wasn't about to pretend like that was okay. Her anger was justified. But she was shocked, too. Her mother had *lied*. Wasn't lying supposed to be wrong?

Had her mother done something *wrong*?

Noticing the silence, Elizabeth began to wonder if her mother had left. Maybe it hadn't been her mother at all. Maybe it had been her sister, peeking in to see what the commotion was about and then retreating just as swiftly when she noticed the brooding atmosphere in the room. . . .

A quick look over her shoulder confirmed the worst and brought a fresh scowl to Elizabeth's face. She quickly turned away again, but soon felt the mattress slope beneath her as her mother sat down on the other side of the bed. There was a long silence that made Elizabeth want to scream. *Come on, Mom, let's hear it. . . . whatever it is.*

She heard her mother sigh. "You know, Elizabeth, when Pieter came to the door, asking for you, that was a separate occasion from the one you're obviously thinking of. It really was a traveling salesman who came to the door that night. When Pieter came to the door a few days later, you really weren't there, and I told him as much."

Elizabeth's brow furrowed in thought. That 'traveling salesman' had looked so much like Pieter. It had to have been him! Then again, earlier that same day, she had even mistaken her science teacher for Pieter. If she could make a mistake like that once, couldn't she make it again? Elizabeth thought back to the afternoon in question, trying desperately to remember what the man trudging through the rain on the other side of the street had looked like. Something about her mother's explanation didn't ring true. The day that the 'traveling

salesman' had come to the door had been the day before she'd gone on her school camping trip. . . . The day before Lawrence had . . . "*when Pieter came to the door a few days later, you really weren't there, and I told him as much.*"

Suddenly understanding what was wrong with her mother's explanation, Elizabeth sat up on the bed and turned accusing eyes on her mother. "How could Pieter have come *a few days later*, when the very next day Lawrence came to our home and shot himself in your bedroom! You weren't even there a few days later! You were at a hotel, while the police were in our home conducting an investigation."

Constance's expression went from sympathetic to blank and staring as soon as she heard Lawrence's name. Elizabeth noticed her mother's sudden change of demeanor, but she was too angry to feel guilty about it. Her mother was trying to cover up one lie with another!

After a long minute, Constance appeared to shake herself and her brow dropped an angry shadow over her eyes. "How dare you bring that up, you ungrateful wretch! Pieter came over the next day, *before* all that terrible unpleasantness! And of course, you weren't there, because you were on a school camping trip! What does it matter if it was a few days, or just one?"

Elizabeth cringed back from her mother's outburst. "But Pieter even mentioned coming over in the rain, just like the traveling salesman did. . . ." she replied in a small voice.

"It can't rain two days in a row?" Constance gave a derisive snort and shook her head angrily. "Really, Elizabeth! You think so little of me, do you? You have an incredibly vivid imagination. Maybe we should continue this discussion later when you're ready to think more rationally." Constance stood up from the bed, but Elizabeth reached out a hand to stop her.

"Wait, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to jump to conclusions. It's just that . . . it doesn't make sense. Are you sure it's just a coincidence?"

Constance rounded on Elizabeth, her nostrils flaring with barely contained indignation. "Elizabeth, would I lie?"

Elizabeth frowned. "Well, if you weren't lying, why didn't you tell me that Pieter came looking for me?"

"Because with everything else that was going on, I completely forgot about it! Can you blame me?"

Elizabeth dropped her gaze to the floor and slowly shook her head. "No . . ." she sniffled.

She felt the mattress slope again as her mother reseated herself. "It's a pity you had to jump to such ridiculous conclusions, but I forgive you."

Elizabeth nodded. She felt herself bristling at the rebuke, but she knew she deserved it. Even so, her mother hadn't answered for all of her actions yet. "Why did you tell Pieter about Nicholas?"

"I didn't. He asked about the date you had with Charles, and I told him that it hadn't really been a date. He seemed unconvinced, and more than a little upset. I was confused by his reaction, after all, you were going out with Nicholas in Siesta, how should this have been any different? I thought you had already told him about Nicholas, and so I expressed my confusion to him, briefly mentioning Nicholas in the process.

"You made me tell him about Nicholas by not being more forthright with me. If you wish to keep secrets, you must ensure that others keep quiet as well."

Elizabeth frowned. "I—"

Constance sighed. "Once he heard about Nicholas, he became very angry and stormed away without so much as another word."

Elizabeth didn't have anything to say to that. Constance inferred guilt into that silence. *Good! She deserves to feel guilty. How dare she remind me of Lawrence!*

Elizabeth sniffled. "If you hadn't told Pieter about Nicholas, we might still have had a chance to get back together. It might not have been over. He came over to apologize."

Constance shook her head and resisted the urge to sigh again. *She forgets so quickly!* Being careful not to let her irritation bleed into her voice, Constance adopted a reasonable tone.

"We've been over this, Elizabeth. You didn't just break up with Pieter because of the fight you had . . . remember? You broke up with him because of your British heritage, because you would have lost it if you'd stayed with him, and because you two lacked the fundamental understanding of one another that a common heritage would provide."

Elizabeth felt her hold on her anger slipping. Her mother's logic was hard to argue with. A long silence ensued, only

interrupted by the occasional snuffle from Elizabeth's side of the bed.

"Well, if that satisfies all of your concerns, I think I'll get back to making lunch."

Elizabeth felt the mattress level out as her mother got off the other side of the bed. Suddenly, she was anxious that her mother should stay. After hearing all of her mother's explanations, Elizabeth's focus had shifted from anger to guilt.

Elizabeth looked up and said, "Wait." Constance turned, her eyebrows raised in question. "Stay."

"Stay?"

"Please."

Constance returned to the bed and sat down again. She waited for her daughter to elaborate.

Elizabeth found that it wasn't so easy to put her feelings into words. She was feeling guilty—horribly, gut-wrenchingly guilty, but about what? For not giving her mother the benefit of the doubt?

She frowned. *Yes, a little*, she admitted. But there was something else, something that was eating her alive. She thought about it for a moment. It was a familiar feeling; she'd felt it before in . . .

Siesta. With Nicholas.

"Well?" her mother prompted.

"Do you think Pieter is right?"

Constance allowed a small smile to play across her lips. She had been prepared for another question about her behavior. Apparently Elizabeth's confidence in her had been restored.

"About what, dear?"

"About me being selfish for not telling him about Nicholas."

"Define selfish. You were sparing his feelings by not telling him. And, clearly, he *wanted* to believe that you were more serious about him than you really were, otherwise, he would have picked up on the signs to the contrary. So, no, you were just giving him what he wanted, to the best of your ability. That is the very opposite of selfish, my girl. It's *self-less*."

Elizabeth's eyebrows drew together in thought. What her mother was saying made a certain amount of sense, but sparing his feelings hadn't been her only motive for not telling him . . .

"I also didn't want him to break up with me. Or to make me

choose between him and Nicholas.”

“Every rose has its thorns.”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed in thought and silence reigned for a moment. Then she shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“A good deed may have bad consequences, and an evil deed may have good consequences. Even the best intentions are flawed. The good and the bad go together, and are even subject to one’s own point of view. A rose may have thorns, but take away those thorns, and it would get eaten and trampled by animals. Its beauty would quickly be destroyed. You need to learn to take the good and the bad together, because they’re impossible to separate without destroying them both.”

Elizabeth’s eyes were still narrowed, as though she were working out the answer to a difficult math problem in her head. *Poor girl*, Constance thought, *she really doesn’t understand.*

Elizabeth frowned. “So you’re saying that a little selfishness can be a good thing, if it has a good result?”

Constance’s eyebrows shot up, pleasantly surprised by her daughter’s answer. “I was speaking more broadly than that, but yes.”

“So then how do we know what’s right?”

“We don’t, because we can never fully predict the consequences of our actions. Only God can do that, and if he doesn’t see the need to intervene, then why should we? It’s better just to do what comes naturally and let the consequences take care of themselves. Right and wrong are just labels we apply to outcomes we do and do not like.”

“But if you don’t worry about the consequences, won’t you end up getting hurt, or hurting others?”

Constance smiled. “I think you misunderstood me. Look out for yourself, Lizzie, by all means. And if others are doing the same, then no one will get hurt.”

Elizabeth shook her head again. “I’m confused.”

Constance laughed. “Don’t worry. It’s part of growing up. One day you’ll understand.” Sensing that the conversation had reached its end, Constance got up from the bed again. This time Elizabeth didn’t try to stop her from leaving. She heard the door click shut, and then she was alone, now feeling not only guilty, but confused as well. She was still trying to understand everything her mother had said, but the more she

thought about it, the less sense it seemed to make.

"So then how do we know what's right?"

"We don't, because we can never fully predict the consequences of our actions. Only God can do that, and if he doesn't see the need to intervene, then why should we?"

As the words echoed through her head, Elizabeth slowly shook her head. Her mother must be right. It had to be part of growing up. With a sigh, she flopped over on her side and pulled the bedcovers over her head, hoping her mother would take some time to prepare lunch. She wasn't the least bit hungry.

Chapter 6

As the car proceeded down the long, circular driveway in front of Charles's house, Elizabeth stared out the passenger's side window. It was dark outside, but in the middle of the circular driveway—beautifully lit amidst the darkness—was a cascading fountain. One level ran to the next in thin curtains of water, backlit to a shimmering gold. Similarly lit were the twin cherubs which stood crowning the fountain, their wings extended for flight.

The car came to a stop. Noticing his daughter's preoccupation, Edwin prompted, "We're here."

Elizabeth responded as if in a trance, turning slowly blinking eyes upon her father.

He smiled. "You want me to walk you to the door?"

She blinked a few more times, then replied, "No, that's okay."

"Don't want to be seen hanging on your father's arm like a little girl?"

Elizabeth answered his half-joking question with one of her own. "If I said yes, would you be offended?"

He gave her a hurt look, and for a moment she was afraid that he'd taken her answer to heart, but then his expression melted into an easy grin.

"Feeling nervous?" he asked.

"A little," she admitted. "I'm not even sure if Charles knows I'm coming."

Edwin shrugged. "You'll find out soon enough."

"And . . . I don't know anyone else who's going to be at the party—at least, I don't think I do. What if he brushes me off, the way I was brushing him off the last time he was here? Then I'll *really* be alone."

Edwin dipped his head and raised his eyebrows. He sat there

looking at her like that for a long time, expecting her to realize the ridiculousness of what she'd just said.

She didn't.

"What?" she asked.

"Elizabeth. Have you seen yourself?" She had. Of course she had, but she hadn't been particularly impressed. Especially after her mother had seen the dress she'd picked to wear. "*You're going to wear that?*" Constance had asked, frowning. It was the shimmering, sapphire-blue dance dress that her father had given her for Christmas. She'd barely had a chance to wear it, and this had seemed like the perfect occasion to do so.

"*What's wrong with it?*" Elizabeth had asked.

"*Oh . . . nothing.*"

In other words everything, Elizabeth thought.

"You think I look okay?" Elizabeth asked her father.

"Okay? You look stunning, and if Charles disagrees, I'd be concerned for the boy's intelligence."

Elizabeth sent her father a grateful smile. "Thanks, Dad." She reached for the door handle, opened the car door, and stepped out.

"I'll be back at midnight to pick you up," he said, leaning over the passenger's seat to keep eye contact with his daughter.

She nodded, "Bye, Dad." With that, she closed the door, and they traded waves as he drove off.

Elizabeth stood there for a moment, looking up at the home in front of her. If it could even be called a home. It was enormous. *More like a hotel*, she thought. It stood fully three stories high—as Elizabeth could see from the triple row of windows. Spotlights hidden behind a line of bushes and flowers at the base of the home lit fan-shaped sections of its broad, white face.

But for all its stately size and symmetry, the home was marred by a lack of imagination. It was just a large rectangle with a peaked roof and a few miniature balconies scattered beneath its upper story windows. It was nearly featureless—except for the entrance. A sweeping, semicircular set of stairs was flanked by a double pair of soaring Grecian columns which rose almost to the roof of the home.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and started forward. She slowly climbed the staircase, aiming for the double doors at the top,

with their ornate, golden handles and blurry rectangles of frosted glass. As she drew nearer, Elizabeth heard music coming from inside.

Classical music.

Curious, she watched the sparkle and swirl of light and color through the frosted glass of the doors as she approached. She tried to make sense of the blurry images, to imagine the scene behind those doors. . . . But found her imagination lacking.

She rang the doorbell, and the doors were simultaneously opened by a pair of doormen in matching black suits with red bowties.

Elizabeth came to a slowing stop and just stood there in the entrance, her jaw hanging slightly lower than it should have been, her mind freezing in a panic.

The invitation had said *formal attire*, but Elizabeth had assumed that simply meant *not casual*. She hadn't been prepared to see tuxedos and flowing ball gowns gliding across a polished marble floor in time to a classical waltz. Suddenly, she felt absurdly out of place in her shimmering blue dance dress. Had her mother known? Perhaps that was why she had objected to the dress.

Elizabeth's gaze traveled up and she saw a large, crystal chandelier hanging high above the scene, raining golden drops of light on the floor below. To the right and left, stairwells with polished wooden banisters wound up to the second floor and stopped at an overlooking balcony. Still higher, a third staircase continued up and out of sight from the balcony to the third floor.

Elizabeth was still staring when the doorman to her left leaned close and asked, "Your name, miss?"

"Elizabeth," she replied, without looking away from the scene.

The doorman cleared his throat. "I need your full name, miss."

"What?" Elizabeth asked, this time turning her head to meet his question with large, blinking eyes.

"I need your full name."

"Oh, Elizabeth . . . Meriwether Smythe," she said, pausing on her regrettable middle name.

"Thank you," he replied, and Elizabeth watched with interest and mounting curiosity as he turned away from her to face the

room. *What is he doing?*

She didn't have long to wonder. Scarcely a moment later, he announced in a strong voice as clear as the crystal in the chandelier, "Elizabeth Meriwether Smythe!"

Elizabeth's heart threatened to drum out a more lively tune for the dancers to follow as, to her horror, heads all around the room turned and eyes settled upon her—some curious and friendly, others cold and calculating.

Elizabeth felt the heat rising in her face. She was blushing fiercely; she was sure of it. She shot an accusing glance at the doorman who had announced her, but he was grinning back at her like an idiot, his dark eyes dancing with amusement.

Feeling the weight of people's stares, Elizabeth proceeded from the open doorway, angling for a long, white-clothed table where a knot of people had gathered to talk within easy reach of the appetizers.

When she was only a few dozen paces from the anonymity of the crowd around the table, Elizabeth saw one of the couples on the dance floor abruptly stop and break up while the others continued dancing. She watched in her peripheral vision as the young woman—tall, blonde, dressed in a flowing green evening gown with slits down the side to reveal her long, silky legs—headed for the table and the appetizers. Her eyes lingered enviously for a moment. She had always wanted to have blonde hair, to be taller. This girl, with slight variations, had continually been her nemesis: first Sarah, who'd stolen her boyfriend, Thomas, two years ago, then Claire who had stolen Nicholas from her at the end of last year.

Still walking toward the table, Elizabeth tore her gaze away from the young woman . . . and noticed that the young man who had been dancing with that woman was headed straight for her! She spared him a nervous glance. Was it someone she knew? Someone from Wellington? From her school, perhaps? She shuddered at the thought that someone she'd have to see every day might have seen her make an embarrassing spectacle of herself as she'd stood gawking and blushing in the doorway. As he got closer, she saw that it wasn't someone from Wellington, nor from her school. Worse—

It was Charles. Having recognized him, Elizabeth was forced to stop within feet of the crowd and the anonymity she craved. Slowly, reluctantly, she turned and flashed him a sparkling

smile.

He looked even more handsome dressed in a tuxedo than he had that night when he'd come to her house to pick her up for a date. His dark hair—thick and long, styled up and away from his forehead to fall neatly at his temples—was waving in a cool breeze that was sweeping in from the open doors at the back of the entrance hall.

"Elizabeth! I wasn't sure if you would come," Charles said, his voice clear and cultured with a thick British accent.

"You were expecting me?" she asked.

"Of course, but you must know that. You received my invitation, did you not?"

Elizabeth nodded, swallowing a fresh surge of anxiety as she looked up into his vivid brown eyes. "I did, but I assumed that your father had sent it, since you had to have been in England at the time."

He grinned, his cheeks dimpling adorably as he did so. "Beautiful *and* smart. A rare combination. Yes, my father sent the invitation—" Elizabeth's face fell a few notches. "—but not before confirming it with me."

Elizabeth let out a sigh. "That's a relief. I didn't want to be a stranger to *everyone* here."

He grinned again. "Looking as you do, I doubt if you could manage that for very long. You look like a princess. Who wouldn't want to meet you?"

"Well, I . . ." Elizabeth struggled for words, taken off guard by Charles's easy compliments.

"And to prove it, I'm going to introduce you to some of my guests," Charles said, looping his arm through hers.

"Such as the girl you were dancing with a moment ago?" Elizabeth ventured.

Charles laughed—that same cascading melody that she remembered from the last time she'd seen him—he turned his head in her direction, his expression mildly amused. "Oh . . . you mean Loretta?"

"I suppose so," Elizabeth said, a frown creasing her brow.

"The leggy blonde in the green dress?" he pressed, leading her around the edges of the crowd.

"Sounds like her," Elizabeth replied, still frowning. They emerged on the other side of the crowd and came face to face with the girl in question.

Elizabeth let out a silent gasp. *What is this? Some kind of sick revenge for my brushing him off?* She sighed inwardly. *I suppose now is as good a time as any to meet his girlfriend.*

“Elizabeth—” Charles began in a voice which told her he was enjoying himself immensely. *Sweet revenge*, Elizabeth thought. “—I’d like you to meet my stepmother, Loretta.”

Chapter 7

That was your stepmother?" Elizabeth asked, as Charles led her out onto the terrace.

"You sound surprised."

"Well . . ." They stopped walking as they reached the back railing. Immediately below them, was a large pool, lit underwater by a ring of golden floodlights. Elizabeth's eyes widened as her gaze followed the near edge of the pool out into the night. It seemed to go on forever. She looked up, out over a rolling, seemingly endless expanse of dark, shadowy green. Tall, scraggly shadows were clawing for the stars and obscuring the horizon in places. To one side, out toward the horizon, the dark rolling green of the grass was broken by a flat patch of black, which she realized, with a shock, was an artificial lake.

She turned to Charles, a disbelieving look on her face. He raised his eyebrows. "Well, what?"

She blinked, uncomprehending. It took her a moment to realize that he was prompting her to finish her earlier sentence. "Oh, sorry, I got distracted. I was going to say that your stepmother looks young enough to be your sister."

Charles laughed. "Yes, I suppose she is—an older sister, mind you."

Elizabeth frowned. "You don't find that strange?"

He shrugged. "Not really. My dad is a lot older, yes, but women aren't always looking for the same things as men."

Elizabeth gave him a conspiratorial look. She cast her gaze back and up at the house, then swept it around to take in the sprawling grounds. "I can see that," she said.

Charles laughed again. "I have no doubt that my father's money played a role in her decision to marry him, but you

mustn't be so quick to judge. She's very good to him—to me as well. Whatever her reasons for marrying him, they weren't wholly superficial. Besides, one could criticize my father's decision to marry her on the same grounds. She's young and beautiful, while he's . . . old and . . . *distinguished*," he finished with a lopsided grin.

Elizabeth gave a nod, partly conceding his point, partly surprised. She hadn't thought of it that way. Perhaps her mother was right. *Maybe that's just how the world works. Looks and money . . .*

She frowned at that, and turned to look out over the grounds again. Charles joined her and they stood in silence for a while. Elizabeth marveled that she couldn't even see the end of the property.

"How big is it?" she asked after a while.

"About 50 acres," Charles answered.

She turned to him with eyebrows raised. "How much?"

His only answer was a knowing grin.

"That's the size of a golf course!" she said.

"Not quite."

"You're joking."

Charles shook his head, and Elizabeth's eyes widened still further. She returned to gawking at the property, and silence stretched between them for a handful of seconds.

Charles was first to break it this time. "My father told me you broke up with your boyfriend. Is that true?"

"Yes. . . ." she said, absently tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I broke up with him a few weeks ago."

"I'm sorry."

Elizabeth shook her head. "We turned out to be very different people in the end. I'm surprised we lasted as long as we did."

Charles nodded. "So it's a good thing that it's over?"

Elizabeth hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Yes." Her mother thought so, so it must be true. And her mother's arguments made sense, but she still found herself thinking about Pieter in idle moments throughout the day. She wished things had ended differently—that they had parted on better terms, at least. *Instead, he's left thinking I'm selfish and shallow, wishing he had never met me. . . .* Elizabeth frowned at her thoughts, knowing she couldn't change things by dwelling on them.

"And you?" she asked, turning toward Charles. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

His eyes swept to hers and settled there for a long moment, glinting darkly with flecks of gold that were reflected light from the party inside. "Not yet," he replied, his voice low.

Elizabeth held his gaze for a long, heart-stopping second, then grew uncomfortable and looked away. She felt his eyes still on her. Knowing what he meant, but unable to think of anything else to say, she parroted his words back to him: "Not yet?"

He left her words hanging in a long, uncomfortable silence, and then looked away as well. "I'm afraid I must apologize. I lied to you a moment ago," he said, his eyes fixed upon the rolling, black line of the horizon.

"Oh?" she asked, her brow furrowing.

"I'm not really sorry you broke up with your boyfriend." Elizabeth felt her pulse accelerate. "When I heard about it, I was more pleased than anything." He turned to her once more, and she felt his gaze lingering. She pretended not to notice, but in her peripheral vision, she saw him step closer. He crooked a finger beneath her chin, bringing her head up and around until she couldn't have avoided his gaze, even if she'd wanted to.

The moon was casting a silvery glow against the light spilling from the party inside, giving Elizabeth's hair soft, silver-golden highlights. Unable to help himself, Charles let go of her chin, and ran the back of his hand down the length of one long, silver-golden lock of hair. The sound of a classical masterpiece being played on the grand piano inside came drifting out onto the terrace, and Charles continued: "I thought to myself, this time she won't turn away if I try to kiss her." His hand continued down from her hair, along the bare skin of her shoulder, tracing a path down to her elbow, raising goosebumps as it went. She inhaled a short, trembling breath. Looking up into his dark brown eyes, she felt suddenly dizzy, as though the earth had just disappeared beneath her feet.

"What makes you so sure I won't turn away?" Elizabeth asked—*why am I resisting?*

He smiled—that beautiful, irresistible smile that made her feel like she was melting inside. "That look in your eyes, for one. It's the same look you had the last time I saw you . . . just before I kissed you goodnight."

"But last time I *did* turn away, and you kissed me on the cheek."

"Your head turned, but your eyes never did. Besides, that's only *one* reason. . . ." He ran his other hand through the feather-fine hairs at the back of her neck, sending tingling shivers all the way down to her knees. Her eyes closed involuntarily, and then she felt his breath, warm and hot upon her lips.

"What's the other reason?" she asked, her eyes still closed, her voice a whisper.

"This."

His lips met hers like a fire, quickly spreading to every inch of her being, overwhelming her. Her mind went blank, and the trickling melody of the piano was drowned out by the beating of drums in her head. All she could think about was the feel of his lips roving over hers, soft and warm—electrifying.

The kiss ended far too soon for Elizabeth, and she was left standing there, eyes still closed, committing the moment to memory. She'd never been with anyone who could kiss like that—it was obvious he had a lot of experience. Gradually, she opened her eyes and saw Charles standing in front of her, trying hard to conceal a smug grin.

"See?" he said. "I told you."

His words brought her out of her reverie and won him a defiant look that was more amused than annoyed.

He just kept on grinning. "We should probably get back to the party before my guests realize I'm missing." He started to head in that direction, perhaps hoping she would follow.

Instead, she reached out with a hand to stop him. She caught him by the arm—and was surprised by the hard knot of muscle that she felt lurking beneath his suit. He stopped and turned, his brow raised in question.

"Wait." Her hand fell from his arm, and she shook her head slowly. "I'm not sure what's happening here, but . . ." Her gaze dropped to the floor as she tried to organize her thoughts.

"What is it?"

She looked up and met his curiosity with an anxiously furrowed brow. "You're going back to England in less than a week, as soon as Easter break is over, aren't you?"

Charles nodded.

"So . . . how can this possibly work?"

“Elizabeth—” He took a step toward her. Cupping her face in one big hand, he tilted her head up, and she was transfixed again, unable to look away—barely able to breathe. “I’m matriculating in a few months, and after that I’m coming here for the rest of the year to see whether I’d prefer to further my education here in South Africa, or in England. I only have to make my decision by the beginning of next year.” He shrugged and let his hand fall from her face. “So, why don’t we give it a shot? If it works out, I suspect you will be the deciding factor. If not—” He shrugged again. “—well, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“If you can wait for me to come back, I promise it will be worth it, but if not, go ahead, date other guys, just be sure you warn them what they’re getting into—because they don’t stand a chance against me.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows shot up in amusement. “You’re pretty confident.”

Charles smiled. “I know what I’m worth, and if you’re as smart as I think you are, it won’t take you long to figure it out.”

“Hmmm . . . it’s a wonder you don’t float away with that blimp sitting on your shoulders.”

Charles laughed. “You’ll see. But for now let’s just take things one step at a time. I like you, and I know you like me, so let’s just take it from there and see what happens.” His hand found hers; then, he took a step back in the direction of the party, pulling her arm taut as he did so. He stood there for a second, holding her hand at arms length, waiting for her to follow.

“What makes you so sure that I like you?” she asked.

He sent her a lopsided grin. “Would you believe that I saw it in your eyes?”

She laughed. “Haven’t you used that line already?”

“Yes, but it worked so well the first time—” He winked at her. “—that I thought I’d try it again.”

She rolled her eyes. “I think you need some new material.”

“Perhaps.” He gave her arm a little tug and nodded his head sideways toward the party. “Come on, Princess. My party is sorely in need of your attention. When you stick too many boring people together and leave them alone with each other, you count yourself lucky if you find that half of them are still there when you get back.”

Elizabeth laughed and joined Charles at his side. As they walked through the open doors of the terrace, Elizabeth couldn't help asking: "Princess?"

He sent her a grin. "I think it suits you, don't you?"

She just shook her head. "You're really something else, you know that?"

Charles's grin turned smug as they glided through the doors. "I know."

Nicholas

Chapter 8

—SIX MONTHS LATER—

Thursday, September 6th, 1973: School field trips were the worst, Jamie Beckett reflected as he, his two brothers, Billie and Harry, and their friends, Nicholas and Grant Baker, ambled through the zoo. It was one thing to get off school grounds, quite another to be told where and how to do so—a tantalizing taste of freedom, without actually being free. It left him boiling with frustration, and the urge to do something. . . .

Mischievous.

The trouble was, under the beautiful, yet annoyingly vigilant, watch of their biology teacher, Gill Crawford, there wasn't much that he could do. It wasn't as though he and his brothers could disappear for a while, and then reappear later. Their absence would be noted and punished.

Jamie's musings were interrupted when he noticed that he was now ambling on alone. He stopped and turned, looking for the rest of his group.

They were just a few paces back, their attention fixed beyond a wire mesh fence that was some four and a half feet high. Jamie frowned, unable to imagine anything interesting in there. All of the *interesting* animals were caged on all sides, or at least, had higher fences.

"What're you guys looking at?" Jamie asked, coming up beside Nicholas and squinting up at him. Nicholas was tall, but his head wasn't quite blocking the afternoon sun—his wavy, light brown hair was silhouetted by a blinding golden halo of light.

Nicholas spared him a glance. "Rabbits."

Disbelieving, Jamie gazed through the fence. A pair of fluffy, brown rabbits were perched low on a carpet of grass, their cheeks bulging. They were very small, each barely larger than his fist. *Must be baby rabbits*, Jamie thought. He shook his

head. "Who'd keep rabbits in a zoo?"

Harry nodded. "Pretty ordinary."

"And they breed like mice," Nicholas said. "They'll soon outgrow that little pen."

Jamie laughed, then sobered, his brow furrowing. "Doesn't make sense. If I want to see rabbits, I can go to a pet store. I don't need to come to the zoo for that."

Nicholas nodded to a section of the fence that had a wooden sign posted on it. "What's the sign say?"

Billie crossed over to it. They watched him shake his head once, then return. "It's blank," he replied.

"Well, they look like regular rabbits to me," Harry said.

"Maybe they're here to feed the other animals. . . ." Grant suggested.

Jamie sent him a horrified look. "They wouldn't."

Grant affected a sinister grin. "Crocodiles, perhaps." He made exaggerated chomping motions with his jaw.

Jamie's eyes went wide and traveled back to the rabbits. "They're so small. . . . The crocodiles wouldn't even taste them."

Grant shrugged. "No one eats popcorn one at a time—you've got to take a whole handful."

Jamie's eyes were riveted on the rabbits. *So cute and cuddly.* He imagined them being dumped by the bagful into the hungry, gaping mouths of crocodiles. . . .

"I don't believe it," Jamie said after a while. "I can't see more than two rabbits in there, and they're not even fully grown. You could never feed a crocodile with just them."

Grant wasn't giving up on his theory. "Like Beaver said, they breed like mice."

"Poor things," Harry sighed.

Jamie turned to Nicholas. "What do you think, Beaver?"

"Well . . . it's a possibility, I guess. . . ."

"The crocodiles probably won't even chew," Grant remarked. He nodded to the rabbits in the pen. "They'll just swallow 'em whole."

"You know something, *Bakkies*?" Billie said, using Grant's nickname. Grant turned to him with eyebrows raised. His blond hair did nothing to hide his jutting ears, for which he'd been nicknamed. "You're damn near heartless."

Grant's face cracked into a broad smile. "Don't look at me.

I'm not feeding them to the crocodiles."

"But how you can stand there discussing their fates so graphically is beyond me."

"Well, it's the truth. No sense dressing it up. If you're so worried about them, you could always file a complaint."

"I've got better idea," Jamie said, studying the rabbits again. "One that's sure to save those little furballs."

Nicholas had a bad feeling. "Oh?" he asked, his green eyes narrowing to a frown as he studied Jamie's pudgy face.

"You know the Pets Club we started a while back?"

Nicholas knew all about it. It wasn't much of a Pets Club. They had a few hamsters and a field mouse, which had been creatively termed an "albino pygmy squirrel" in order to get it past the watchful eyes of their matron. Nicholas studied the rabbits now, two and two clicking together in his brain. His bad feeling grew worse. He knew what Jamie was planning.

"You can't," Nicholas protested.

"Cover me. I'm going in," Jamie replied, starting toward the fence. Billie caught on to his brother's plan and followed him to the fence.

Nicholas shot a quick look down the pathway. The rest of the class was up ahead, surprisingly, still in sight. Their teacher was currently pointing out the orangutan exhibit to the rest of the class. No one was looking their way.

But that didn't mean they wouldn't get caught. Nicholas returned his attention to the rabbit pen just in time to see Jamie and Billie scrambling back over the fence, each with a rabbit in hand. He watched with a frown as they tucked the rabbits between their shirts and blazers.

Grant smiled. "I like how you think, Shorty. Who's going to notice another bulge around your middle?"

Jamie glared at Grant.

"And what about Muffy's?" Nicholas asked, looking Billie up and down. "Compared to you, Shorty, he's a veritable beanpole. Someone's bound to notice."

"Walk in front of him, then, Beaver," Harry suggested, a grin splitting his freckled cheeks.

"And you don't suppose someone will notice that we're walking in lockstep?"

Jamie sighed. "Then he can walk hunched over, and if anyone asks, he'll say he's got a stomach ache."

Nicholas looked skeptical.

“Don’t give me that—*einä!* Keep still you ungrateful little—” Jamie looked down sharply at the round lump roving around beneath his blazer. Billie appeared to be having similar difficulties. Jamie looked up and said, “Some things are worth the risk of getting in trouble. Saving these little rabbits is one of them.”

Nicholas still looked ready to object, but Grant spoke first. “Hey, you *bliksems*,” he said, nodding toward the rest of the class. “If we don’t get back to the group soon, someone’s going to notice us loitering back here.”

There was a chorus of agreement, and everyone hurried to catch up, all except Nicholas. He stayed where he was, scowling at the empty rabbits’ pen. Something didn’t fit. After a moment, he caught up to the others and kept pace beside Jamie.

“You know, I’m not sure that those rabbits needed saving.”

Grant studied him sidelong, beneath carefully raised eyebrows, a hint of a smile on his face. Jamie, on the other hand, was eyeing him skeptically.

“Why put them on display if all they are is crocodile bait?”

Jamie shook his head. “I don’t have time to fathom the inner workings of a zookeeper’s twisted mind, Beaver. Besides, even if we are wrong, they can’t possibly miss a couple of rabbits. All they have to do is go to the pet store and get a couple more.”

Nicholas frowned. “Planning to save *them*, too?”

Jamie met his frown with a glance. “Maybe. One rabbit at a time, Beaver. One rabbit at a time.”

To Nicholas’s surprise, they didn’t get caught. He was sure that a few of their classmates had noticed the strange lump under Jamie’s blazer, the way it periodically shifted, provoking giggles from him, or the way that Billie was clutching his stomach, hunched over like Quasimodo, but none of them seemed willing to inquire within earshot of their teacher. Instead, they settled for sending Jamie curious looks—to which he either responded with a shushing finger or an eloquent zipping motion across his lips.

It was only when they got back to St. Andrew’s that people started to verbalize their questions. Jamie brushed them off impatiently and told them that they would get a chance to see later, after classes.

The five of them hurried up to their dormitory and Harry split off from the group to fetch an old cardboard box he remembered seeing in the boiler room. When Harry returned with the box, the rabbits were dumped unceremoniously inside.

Jamie grimaced and stared down at his finger, at a puncture hole crusted with blood. "I think it bit me."

"Let's see." Harry peered over his brother's shoulder, and Jamie held his finger up to the light.

"He's right!" Harry said.

"You think it might've had rabies?" Jamie asked, paling slightly.

Nicholas looked thoughtful. "A rabid rabbit . . ." He gave a short laugh, and wondered briefly why that sounded so strange. "Wouldn't that be something."

"I should've left it to be crocodile bait," Jamie moaned. "Now I'm going to have to go to the nurse, and she'll probably insist that I get a rabies shot."

"Have you seen the needle they use to administer it?" Nicholas asked.

Jamie's face paled still further. "No."

"It's a monstrous thing." Nicholas made a gap of two feet between his hands. Jamie's jaw dropped a few centimeters. "And they inject you in your stomach—" Nicholas poked Jamie's stomach to emphasize the point. "—in all the tender spots."

All three Becketts were staring at him now, wide-eyed and pale-faced. "I don't believe you," Jamie said in a quaking voice, his hands clasped protectively around his middle.

Nicholas shrugged.

"Well," Grant said, "he is a doctor's son. He should know."

Billie turned to Jamie and slapped him on the back. "You're just going to have to take it like a man."

"I hate needles. I think I'd prefer to have rabies."

Nicholas's expression turned serious. "No you wouldn't. Rabies drives you insane—"

"Not much danger there," Grant said, with an accompanying bubble of laughter from Billie and Harry.

"—and it's fatal."

"Oh," Jamie said, gulping.

There was a momentary pause in the conversation, and

Grant looked down into the box where the two rabbits were trying to scramble up the sides. "Seems a little small for them. . . ."

"Don't worry. It's only temporary," Billie replied. "We'll find them a better home after classes."

"Speaking of which," Nicholas said, looking down at his watch. "We're already late."

Jamie cleared his throat meaningfully. "Hey! What about me? I could be a walking dead man and here you lot are acting like it's no big deal."

"You need to go see the school nurse," Nicholas replied.

"But what am I going to tell her? I can't exactly say I got bitten by a wild rabbit at the zoo, now can I?"

"Hey . . . that's right," Harry said. "That would incriminate us."

"Tell her it was a squirrel," Nicholas suggested.

"She'll blame Alby," Billie said—Alby was their albino pygmy squirrel (a.k.a. common field mouse).

"Okay, then tell her you got bitten trying to feed one of the meerkats at the zoo—none of them are missing," Nicholas said.

Jamie looked skeptical.

Nicholas sighed. "Be creative. Whatever you say, just don't say it was a rabbit."

Nicholas left the Becketts arguing amongst themselves as to what animal had bitten Jamie, and hurried down the hallway to get to his next class. Grant caught up to him a second later.

"You think it'll be all right to just leave those rabbits there? Unattended?"

"That's Shorty's problem."

"Yeah, but we're accessories to his problem."

Nicholas grimaced. *Bloody Becketts.*

* * *

The following day was Saturday. Nicholas did his best to steer clear of the Beckett Brothers and their newly acquired rabbits. He'd heard from Grant that Jamie had received his first rabies shot. Jamie had been adamant that the needle really was two feet long, although Nicholas suspected that was only because there were rumors that he'd fainted.

Having seen his father administer the post-exposure treatment for rabies, Nicholas knew Jamie was in for another five shots over the next month. That brought a smile to

Nicholas's face as he crossed the schoolyard to the library.

The library was an echoing room with a high, vaulted ceiling, stone walls, and dark, wooden rafters. Row upon row of bookcases—equally dark and wooden—lined the walls and the empty spaces between the couches and coffee tables. Side tables held antique-looking, brass lamps, coasters for drinks, and scattered books.

There was ample room for reading a good book, or for enjoying the morning newspaper along with a cup of coffee and a pastry—both of which could be acquired for a few pieces of change at the in-library cafeteria. A number of students were scattered around the library doing just that, but none of them went by the name of Beckett. Nicholas smiled; the library was the last place he could expect to find one of the Beckett Brothers, which made it a good place to hide from their mischief-making.

Nicholas angled for the cafeteria. He briefly studied the glass display case full of pastries and sandwiches, and placed an order for a peach danish and a coffee. After paying for his order, he began crossing the room to an empty couch, snagged a copy of *The Friend*—Bloemfontein's English morning paper—from a stand along the way, and sat down facing a pair of tall, lattice windows. Nicholas spent a moment sipping his coffee and studying the view out those windows. Outside, the morning sun was sprinkling down through a dark green canopy of old oak trees, speckling the grass in varying shades of green.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" came a quiet, rasping voice from behind him—rasping as though the vocal cords had rusted from disuse. Nicholas recognized the voice.

He cast a look up and over his shoulder, confirming that it was the librarian, Miss Christoffel—or "Cruella de Vil" as she'd been nicknamed by some of the students. She had a pair of sharp, brown eyes which peered out from behind red, horn-rimmed glasses, and her pale white hair was done up in a bun with an orange pencil sticking out of it.

Nicholas smiled. "Hello, Miss Christoffel."

"Reading the paper, I see." She gave an abrupt nod to where his newspaper sat beside him on the couch. "Good. We could use more students like you," she said, and walked away before he could reply.

Nicholas shrugged and turned to pick up his newspaper. He spent a moment skimming the headlines. As his eyes neared the bottom of the page, they stopped, widened, and stared.

“Rare Miniature Argentinean Rabbits Disappear From Zoo”

“No . . .” Nicholas breathed. He skimmed the article, shaking his head. *I knew it! I just knew it. Crocodile bait . . . hah!*

Bloody Becketts. Nicholas gulped down the rest of his coffee and finished his danish in a few man-sized bites. Then, getting up from the couch, he returned the newspaper to the stand, and set a brisk pace from the library to begin his search for the rabbit-nappers.

* * *

Nicholas found the Beckett brothers in the Pets Club, discussing names for its newest members, and congratulating one another for their heroism. He called for their attention and three heads turned as one toward him.

“What is it, Beaver?” Jamie asked, frowning at the serious look on Nicholas’s face.

“I think it would be better if I showed you.”

Billie raised his eyebrows. “Well, aren’t we mysterious.”

“How about a hint?” Harry asked.

Nicholas shook his head. “You’ll see.”

“All right, lead on, then,” Jamie said.

Wordlessly, Nicholas led the trio—still discussing names for their rabbits—back to the library.

When Jamie realized where they were, he wrinkled his nose. “The library?”

“I’m surprised you recognize it,” Nicholas said.

“Oh, I recognize it. The de-Vil sitting in the corner, signing people up, the tortured souls begging for one last chance . . . only thing that’s missing is fire and brimstone.”

Jamie’s brothers snickered, and Nicholas led them to the newspaper stand. They had no idea what they’d done. Nicholas passed the day’s paper to Jamie.

Jamie’s face settled into a pudgy frown as he scanned the page. His brothers clustered around to read over his shoulders. “I don’t see anything. . . . Oh, uh . . . uh oh.”

Nicholas nodded. “Yeah, ‘uh oh’ is right.”

“What?” Harry asked.

Jamie pointed to the headline.

"Oh . . ."

"It's all Bakkies's fault!" Jamie complained, studying the newspaper intently.

Billie nodded his agreement. "If he hadn't gone into such detail about feeding those poor rabbits to the crocodiles, we never would've thought to steal—I mean save—them."

"But that's just it," Nicholas said, "*he* didn't steal those rabbits, *you two* did. And you can bet that's who's going to get in trouble for this."

"How were we supposed to know they were *Argentinean* rabbits?" Jamie asked. "Who's even heard of an Argentinean rabbit?"

"There was nothing on the sign. . . ." Billie added.

Nicholas shook his head. "You don't go stealing animals from the zoo. Even if they're plain, ordinary rabbits."

"What are we going to do?" Harry asked, licking his lips nervously.

"Turn yourselves in," Nicholas suggested, his expression smug.

Jamie looked up from the paper to gauge Nicholas's sincerity. Seeing that Nicholas was dead serious, Jamie did a double take. "Are you crazy, Beaver? You know how much trouble we'll get into for stealing those *rare* little furballs?"

Nicholas held up a finger. "Correction—" He leveled the finger and jabbed it in Jamie's stomach.

Jamie yelped. "Careful! Rabies shots, remember?"

"—how much trouble *you'll* get into," Nicholas finished.

Jamie shook his head sadly. "You knew all about it and you didn't report us; that makes you an accessory." He gave an openhanded shrug. "We get in trouble, you get in trouble."

Nicholas scowled and ground his teeth. "Well, what do you suggest? Someone's going to put two and two together. We go on a field trip to the zoo, and you come back with a bite on your finger, and get rabies shots from the school nurse. . . ."

"Hmmm . . ." Jamie scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Not like we can just return them," Harry said.

"Actually . . ." Billie began.

"No." Jamie's voice was implacable. "I'm not smuggling those ungrateful rodents back into the zoo."

Billie turned to him. "But—"

Jamie cut him off by thrusting a band-aided finger in his face. "Look what it did to me!"

Billie shook his head. "It's the only way. Besides, what's the worst that can happen? You're already getting the rabies shots."

"I don't know, but I don't want to find out either. If one bite equals six needles, maybe two bites equals twelve." He shook his head. "I don't care if it's the only way. I'll turn us in before I hide that little nipper under my blazer again."

Nicholas laughed in spite of himself. Jamie silenced him with a glare, but Nicholas was unable to stop grinning.

"Be reasonable, Shorty," Billie continued. "It has to be you. If someone else takes them back, they could be in for the same treatment you got."

"Them? Are you suggesting that I take *both* of those rabbits back? All by myself?"

Billie shrugged. "You're immune."

"And what if I get bitten again? Won't I need more shots?"

Billie turned to Nicholas, his eyebrows raised.

"You won't need to get extra shots," Nicholas answered, "but if you're worried, just use gloves."

Jamie frowned. "You'd better be right about that."

Nicholas shrugged. "I like the plan, but however you plan to get those rabbits back, you're on your own." Jamie opened his mouth to object, but Nicholas stopped him with a hand. "No buts, Shorty. I was an unwilling participant in this fiasco, and if it comes to it, that's exactly what I'll tell Mr. Crawford." With that, Nicholas turned—

And bumped right into Miss Christoffel, knocking a book out of her hand and sending it skittering across the floor.

"Watch where you're going!" she hissed.

Nicholas bent to pick up the book, and offered her an apologetic look as he held it out to her. "Sorry, Miss Cruellla—I mean, Christoffel," he finished quickly. Her eyes narrowed, and she straightened her glasses before taking the book from him.

Nicholas tried to calm his racing heart. He'd almost called her Cruella de Vil to her face!

The librarian's eyes traveled sideways and lit upon the Beckett brothers. Nicholas followed her gaze. Jamie and his brothers were grinning like idiots, having witnessed the whole

event. It took them a moment to realize that Miss Christoffel's horn-rimmed eyes were now measuring them—as if for fur coats, Nicholas thought.

"What are you three so twinkly about?" she demanded of Jamie, singling him out as the ringleader. "You think bumping into people is funny?"

Their grins faded.

Her nose scrunched with irritation, then returned to its usual position as her eyes widened. "My word, is that you, Jamie? Jamie Beckett? In the library?" Her eyes widened still further as they dipped to the newspaper Jamie was holding. "Reading a *newspaper*?"

Jamie's look became furtive. He hid the newspaper behind his back and carefully slid it onto the stand. "Ah . . . what?" he asked, as if there had never been a newspaper.

Miss Christoffel's gaze edged up to his face, then flicked left and right to Billie and Harry. "And your brothers, too! It's a wonder that I recognize you three at all. Why don't I see you in the library more often?"

"Ah . . ." Jamie grimaced. "We're not big fans of reading, Miss Christoffel."

"Hmmm. I have just the thing for you. Wait here."

Jamie sent Nicholas a horrified look. "Is she doing what I think she's doing?"

Nicholas grinned. "I think you're about to be signed up," he said, backing away.

"Where are you going?" Jamie asked. "You can't leave me here. . . ." His voice was pleading.

"She told *you* to wait here. *I'm* leaving."

"Good point," Billie said, and started after Nicholas.

"Muffy!" Jamie blinked, watching as his older brother hurried to catch up with Nicholas.

"Sorry, Shorty," Harry said, and joined the trio in leaving.

"Checkers!" Jamie called, using his younger brother's nickname.

A few seconds later the librarian returned with a fat book in her hands. Momentarily confused to see that Jamie was the only one who had listened to her by staying put, she cast a wistful look toward the library doors and just managed to see the rapidly retreating forms of Billie and Harry. She turned back to Jamie and gave him a smile that was full of teeth,

thinking that she had a willing pupil. She handed him the book, and he sagged beneath its weight.

"The *Joy of Reading*—unabridged," she declared. "I'll be very interested to hear what you think of it."

Jamie looked down at the book that had been summarily thrust into his hands, and grimaced as if the weight of it would drag him through the floor. It had already succeeded with the corners of his mouth.

* * *

The following day, after chapel, Nicholas was enjoying another coffee and danish in the library, again reading a copy of *The Friend*. He hadn't heard any more about the Becketts' plan to return the rabbits to the zoo, though Jamie Beckett had been sending him a nearly constant stream of dirty looks during chapel. He supposed that Jamie was mad at him for leaving him and his brothers to return the rabbits—*Rare Argentinian rabbits*. Nicholas gave a snort of laughter—

And then froze, his lips hovering over the rim of his coffee mug. He'd been reading the headlines again, looking for an interesting story. He'd found it:

"Rare Miniature Argentinean Rabbits Return to Zoo"

Returned? Already? Nicholas frowned and read the article through from beginning to end, looking for any hint that the zoo had found out who was responsible for the mysteriously disappearing and reappearing rabbits.

They hadn't. The article suggested that the rabbits had found a way out of their pen—stealing themselves—only to return later. Nicholas grinned, wondering how Jamie had managed to do it without getting caught. He'd have to ask him later.

Nicholas got his opportunity sooner than he'd thought. Scarcely minutes after he'd finished reading the article, Jamie Beckett came storming into the library, making a beeline for the couch where he, Nicholas, was sitting.

"Hello, Shorty," Nicholas said, doing his best to ignore the steamed look on Jamie's face. He pointed to the news article. "Good work. How did you manage it?"

Jamie snorted. "I lost a few hours of sleep, that's how."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows, and sent Jamie a crooked grin. "Risky. You know, that adds breaking and entering to your rap

sheet. . . .”

Jamie glared. “Shut up. I have a bone to pick with you.”

“Oh?” Nicholas asked.

Jamie held up his right hand, fingers splayed. Not only one, but three of Jamie’s fingers were now capped by Band-Aids. Nicholas started laughing. “I thought you were going to use gloves?”

Jamie’s glare turned to a scowl. “I did, but their teeth are long and sharp.”

Nicholas burst into laughter again. He couldn’t help himself, imagining Shorty sneaking over the fence in the dead of night, wincing as the Rabbits bit his fingers. . . .

“Stop laughing, Beaver. It’s not funny!”

Nicholas only laughed harder. “No, no, it really is. Here you were trying to rescue rabbits from being eaten by Crocodiles—” He shot Jamie a smug grin. “—instead they ate your fingers!”

“Yeah, yeah, ha ha. Keep your voice down. If I’d wanted someone to laugh at me, I didn’t have to come looking for you, all I had to do is hang around with Muffy and Checkers.”

“So why *did* you come looking for me?”

“You said I should say it was a meerkat that bit me, and not a rabbit.”

“And?”

“And . . . when I went back to the nurse this morning to get the next of the rabies shots, I asked what sorts of animals carry rabies—for future reference. The nurse went into great detail, listing all manner of creatures—including meerkats.”

“So?” Nicholas asked.

“So, she *didn’t* mention rabbits. And when I asked about them, she cheerfully told me that rabbits don’t carry rabies! If I’d said it was a rabbit that had bitten me, then I wouldn’t have needed these horrid shots!”

Nicholas started laughing again, and this time there was no recovering from it. Jamie stood there for a long moment, enduring the laughter with a frown and as much dignity as he could manage. Only when Nicholas’s stomach was aching and he was gasping for air did he stop laughing. Then he noticed that a number of people had turned to glare at him. He’d forgotten he was in a library. He answered those glares with an apologetic smile and mouthed *sorry* to them.

“Laugh while you can, Beaver.” There was a warning note in

Jamie's voice that brought Nicholas's head around. He knew what sort of revenge Jamie was implying. Pranks. A Beckett specialty. *Not good*, Nicholas thought. *I'd better try to repair the damage.*

"I'm sorry, Shorty." His apology was tarnished by an involuntary laugh that rippled through his gut. He tried to cover it with a cough. Jamie's eyes narrowed dangerously, so Nicholas hurried to explain, "But if you'd said it was a rabbit bite, people would have caught on. I guess I forgot that rabbits don't carry rabies."

"Wait . . . you *forgot* that rabbits don't carry rabies? You mean that you could have stopped me?"

"Well . . . I wasn't sure one way or the other."

"You weren't *sure*? And you didn't say something?" The color was rising in Jamie's cheeks.

"I guess I didn't give it too much thought. But, hey, now you're free to play with as many meerkats as you want." Nicholas realized belatedly that he was smiling, decided that it wasn't such a good idea, and blanked his expression.

"I think you're altogether too unfeeling about this for your own good."

"Now, Shorty—" Nicholas began.

"That's Jamie to you," he said, holding up a warning finger. It just so happened to be among the injured, and Nicholas had to stifle another laugh. Jamie sent a sidelong glance to his finger, realized his mistake, and tucked it into a fist. "Watch your back, Beaver!" With that, he turned and stalked away. He didn't get very far. Nicholas watched as he all but ran into the librarian.

"Doesn't anyone look where they're going?!" He heard her say. "Oh, it's you. Have you started reading that book yet? How do you like it so far?"

Nicholas looked on with a bemused frown, watching as Jamie shifted from one foot to the other, looking uncomfortable, but Jamie's reply was too soft to hear. Nicholas shrugged and turned away. He picked up his coffee and took an absent-minded sip—

And almost spat the coffee out. It was ice-cold! *What a waste of seventy five cents!* Nicholas thought, swallowing with a grimace. He shook his head and softly muttered: "Bloody Becketts."

Chapter 9

Jamie Beckett sat in Math class, doing his best to look like he was paying attention. Meanwhile, he was doing anything but. The math teacher had an annoying habit of asking people who weren't paying attention to his class to go up to the board and solve problems, so the ruse was unfortunately necessary. He watched absently as the teacher scribbled furiously on the already overcrowded blackboard, wearing his stubby piece of chalk down to an even more pathetic stump. Jamie's eyes followed the scrawl of numbers while his mind drifted elsewhere. He was trying desperately to think of a prank he could play on Nicholas, something that would be suitable revenge for the six rabies shots he'd received a few months ago. With only a week left before the end of classes—and graduation—he needed to think of something soon. He had played plenty of pranks in the meantime, but none of them had been good enough to constitute revenge.

Jamie's eyes drifted to where Nicholas sat taking notes at the front of the class. He eyed the back of Nicholas's head. *If I didn't know better, I'd suspect you let me get those rabies shots on purpose. . . .*

Either way, he was itching for revenge. The trouble was he was running out of time. A thought occurred to him then.

What if . . .

He smiled. It was pretty mean, but not nearly as mean as getting six needles jabbed into him—five of them in the stomach. *Besides*, he thought, grinning to himself, *Beaver will have a year to cool off before I see him again at class reunion.*

"Jamie Beckett . . ."

Jamie snapped out of his pleasantly vengeful thoughts, and realized with a sudden jolt that the teacher had just said his

name. *Uh-oh*, he thought as he met the teacher's eyes. There was no discernible smile on the teacher's face, but his eyes seemed to be dancing with sadistic glee.

"You look like you can tell us the answer to this problem," the teacher went on. "Why don't you come up to the board and solve it for us?"

Jamie gulped and hesitated for a moment before getting out of his chair and starting down the aisle to the blackboard. On his way there he absently rubbed the good luck charm dangling from a chain around his neck—a gnarled, black monkey claw that he'd bought from a witch doctor with the assurance that it would help him get better grades in math.

* * *

It took considerable patience and no small amount of risk to himself while carrying the contraband around with him, but two days later, after cricket practice, Jamie found the opportunity he had been waiting for. When they came off the field after practice, Nicholas stowed his things in his locker, as usual, and went to take a shower, as usual, but Jamie noticed that this time Nicholas had neglected to lock his locker. He smiled to himself and bought time by making a pretense of being extremely tired from the afternoon's practice. He sat down on a bench in the locker room with his head bowed between his knees, then endured the sympathetic pats on the back and jibes about how out of shape he was. Once everyone had gone to take a shower, he was left all alone in the locker room. All alone . . . with Nicholas's locker at his disposal.

Quickly, now dropping his pretense of fatigue, Jamie got up from the bench where he was sitting and crossed the room to his own locker. Finding his school uniform inside, he dug into the inside pocket of his blazer and withdrew a pack of cigarettes. Hiding the cigarettes in the palm of his hand, he went over to Nicholas's locker, opened the door, and left the pack of cigarettes in plain sight. Then, thinking it would add to the chances of Nicholas getting caught, he left the locker door wide open.

It was the perfect place to plant the contraband, because Nicholas's locker was right next to Carl Hodge's (a.k.a. Jumbo's), who was not only their prefect, but also head boy of the entire school. As such, he would have no choice but to report Nicholas. Jamie snickered and hurried away from the

crime scene. This was going to be good.

* * *

Nicholas turned off the shower, dried himself with his towel, wrapped the towel around his waist, and headed back to the locker room, whistling as he went. He entered the locker room—

And the whistling died abruptly on his lips. An ominous silence hung in the air, and nearly every pair of eyes in the room had settled uncomfortably on him. He slowed to a stop and scanned the wall of faces before him, arrayed with looks that ran the gamut from accusing, to shocked, to sympathetic. He caught Jamie shaking his head in disappointment, but the effect was spoiled by the hint of an impish grin on Jamie's face. What could it be about?

Then Nicholas saw it. There, standing by his open locker, was their prefect, Carl Hodges. He was tapping one palm with a pack of cigarettes and staring at him expectantly.

Nicholas frowned, and with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he asked, "What are you all looking at me for? They aren't mine."

"They were found in *your* locker," Carl replied.

Nicholas's brow shot up. "Well, I didn't put them there."

"Really?" Carl said, crossing the room to stand in front of Nicholas. "You're saying someone planted them? To get you in trouble?"

Nicholas nodded. "That's the only explanation I can think of."

Carl shook his head sadly. "I was hoping you'd admit to it so I could be more lenient on you, but now you're just going to have to go to the housemaster for the usual punishment."

Nicholas frowned. "Ask yourself, Jumbo, if I was smoking, would I be stupid enough to leave a pack of cigarettes in plain sight?"

Carl's eyes narrowed. "Tell you what, Beaver, since I'm such a nice guy, and this is the first time you've been caught smoking, I'm going to give you the option anyway: I send you to Mister Crawford for six of the best, or—" He held the pack of cigarettes out to Nicholas. "—you eat what's left of the pack."

Nicholas grimaced, wondering for a moment who could have planted the cigarettes in his locker. There was only one person who routinely had that kind contraband—not because he was a smoker, but because he was the unofficial black market for

St. Andrew's—and who might have had the motive. His eyes flicked to Jamie. The miscreant's pudgy cheeks were bulging like a chipmunk's, as though he were trying hard to swallow a mouthful of laughter. *Yeah, I know it was you, Shorty.*

Nicholas returned his attention to the pack of cigarettes in front of him and debated which would be worse: going to the housemaster for punishment, or eating however many cigarettes were in that pack. If he went to the housemaster, his parents would find out about it, whereas if he ate the cigarettes, he wouldn't have to explain anything to them.

"Well?" Carl prompted.

"How many cigarettes are there?"

Carl raised an eyebrow. "You're asking me? They're your cigarettes."

Nicholas gritted his teeth and snatched the pack from Carl. He opened the flap and found exactly six cigarettes inside. *Hmmm . . . six. Not seven or eight, but six cigarettes. Eat six cigarettes, or get six of the best from the housemaster? Numerical justice for getting six rabies shots?* Nicholas shook his head in irritation. *Blast you, Shorty! I told you that it only occurred to me after-wards that rabbits don't carry rabies!*

Nicholas considered the cigarettes. There were only six of them. How bad could it be?

He took the first cigarette out of the pack, popped it into his mouth, and started chewing. It wasn't as bad as he had imagined, but it went down like a wad of old newspaper, and by the time he had swallowed the fourth cigarette, his head was spinning and his stomach was churning. He eyed the last two cigarettes with revulsion, but it was too late to back out now; everyone was watching, and he was almost there. . . .

He popped the last two cigarettes in his mouth and gave a couple of vicious chews before swallowing. It felt like his stomach was doing figure eights. A wave of nausea passed over him, but he wasn't going to give Jamie the satisfaction of letting it show. A scattering of cheers went up through the locker room. Nicholas wasn't the first to choose to eat a pack of cigarettes rather than get sent to the headmaster for smoking, but he probably was the first not to throw up in the process.

"Well . . . I hope you learned your lesson," Carl said, a hint of respect showing through the reproach in his voice. He took the empty pack from Nicholas, crumpled it in his hand, and turned

away.

Nicholas caught Jamie's eye, sent him a triumphant grin, and gave a mocking salute.

It didn't even faze him! Jamie thought.

* * *

The following day, the mail arrived and was handed out, as usual, just before lunch. For Nicholas, it was an unpleasant reminder of the fact that he wouldn't be getting any letters from Elizabeth. He'd given up on that hope a few months into the year, after sending Elizabeth two letters across two months and receiving no reply to either of them. Even assuming the best case—her address had changed—what was stopping her from writing to him? *His* address hadn't changed. But he hadn't heard from her since this time last year, and he was forced to conclude that that was because she no longer wanted to hear from him. Clearly, whatever had been bothering her in Siesta had been more serious than he'd thought.

Nicholas accepted his bundle of envelopes from Grant Baker as the mail was passed around the table. He flipped through the bundle, checking the return address on each envelope. While Nicholas wasn't expecting a letter from Elizabeth, he *was* expecting a letter. Finding what he was looking for, he withdrew one envelope from the bundle and began opening it.

"Looks like we've got our draft notices," Nicholas commented, while opening the envelope. He heard a flurry of activity as others dug through their mail to find their own draft notices. Feeling his pulse accelerate with anticipation, Nicholas opened the envelope, withdrew the piece of paper, and began reading it.

A moment later, a triumphant noise escaped his lips. "I got accepted to the Air Force! Valhalla here I come!" Valhalla was the air force academy in Pretoria—the only air force academy in the country. Nicholas let out a quiet sigh of relief. He had no desire to become a grunt in the Army, where death and injury were a much higher probability, and he wasn't particularly fond of the idea of being stuck at sea for months at a time, either.

"Hey, me too!"

Nicholas looked up and across the table to see Jamie Beckett staring wide-eyed at his own draft notice.

"You're joking," Nicholas said, incredulous. Usually, the air

force only accepted the more academically oriented candidates, since positions in the Air Force tended to be more cerebral than those offered by the Army.

"Nope, and Billie did, too," Jamie said, looking up from his draft notice and sending Nicholas a smug grin.

Nicholas grew even more dubious, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. It was shocking enough that Jamie had been accepted, but Billie? He had even been held back a year.

"What did you two do, cheat on your aptitude tests?"

Jamie just went on grinning and shook his head. "Looks like you won't be getting rid of us after all, hey Beaver?"

Nicholas looked thoughtful. "Yes . . . good point, Shorty. I just hope nothing . . . *unfortunate* happens while we're going through basic training together." The memory of eating six cigarettes yesterday morning was still fresh in his mind—and stomach. His appetite still hadn't fully returned, but like yesterday, he would eat anyway just to deprive Jamie of a reaction.

Jamie frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

Nicholas just smiled. He nodded to Harry Beckett. "Well, at least there'll only be the two of you there to terrorize me." Harry, the youngest of the three brothers, had another year to go before he would graduate and be called upon to serve in the armed forces.

Harry didn't comment on that. He just sat there, quietly going through his mail. No doubt he was feeling left out by the conversation. *But he doesn't know how lucky he is*, Nicholas thought. Others around the table were reporting with mixtures of glee and dismay that they were being ordered to report to various divisions of the *army*. And there was no guarantee that when Harry was drafted, he wouldn't also be called upon to join that branch of the military. In fact, it was exceedingly likely. South Africa didn't have a very large navy or air force, with just one academy allocated for each, but it had dozens of such training facilities for the army.

From Nicholas's right, Grant let out a whoop as he reported that he would also be joining Nicholas, Jamie, and Billie at Valhalla.

"The more the merrier!" Jamie cried, his expression turning jubilant, but some of his enthusiasm died as he remembered something. "Hey, when do you *blokes* have to report to the

academy?"

Nicholas's expression soured as he scanned his draft notice. "July third—my birthday. Of all the days they could have picked . . ."

In his peripheral vision Nicholas saw Grant nodding. "Same here."

Jamie's face lit up again as he leaned sideways and read from Billie's draft notice. "Then we're all going on the same day! We'll all be going through boot camp together. I can see it now: the Three Musketeers, and their venerable fourth, d'Artagnan, A.K.A. Jamie Beckett!"

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. "Hmmm . . . well, you *do* look like one of the musketeers, Shorty, but not d'Artagnan."

"Really?" Jamie sat up straighter. "Who, then?"

Nicholas went on, "You're the spitting image of Porthos . . . in all but one dimension—"

Jamie's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "And what might that be?"

"Stature."

Grant and Billie burst into laughter.

"And I supposed you'd be d'Artagnan, then," Jamie said.

Nicholas shrugged. "If the uniform fits . . ." Then he broke into a grin. "But one thing's for sure—it definitely wouldn't fit you!"

"Hey, guys," Carl said, interrupting them from the head of the table. "Put your letters away. You can read them later. We're just about to say grace."

Nicholas did as he was told, wondering as he did so at the lighthearted way in which most of the students—those at his table, anyway—had received their draft notices. Did any of them actually realize the seriousness of the situation? South Africa was at war on multiple fronts: with itself—via the ANC (African National Congress), which had started out as a peaceful movement to overthrow apartheid in South Africa, but which had grown increasingly violent over time until eventually resorting to terrorism to achieve its goals—with rebel armies fighting for independence in South African-occupied Namibia; with multiple rebel groups fighting for independence from Portugal in Angola and Mozambique; and even in Rhodesia, where South Africa was supporting the break-away government of the British-branded "Rebel," Rhodesian Ian

Smith, where two communist-led guerrilla forces were trying to seize power.

In eight months they would all be joining one or more of those myriad conflicts, and it was likely that some of them would not return from the fighting. Nicholas scanned the faces around the table as he stood up for grace, wondering what the future held for each of them. Who would be counted among the dead or injured?

* * *

Clank clank, clank clank, clank clank—

The sound grew louder as it pulled Nicholas from his dream. He sat up and covered a yawn with his hand. Then, suddenly remembering what day it was, he looked around quickly, felt his hair, checked his pillow, his bed . . . and frowned in confusion. It was the last day of school, and no one had thought to play a prank on him.

Then again, he thought, Shorty already got his revenge by planting those cigarettes in my locker. Maybe he felt bad about it and decided to give me a break on the last day of school. Nicholas shrugged as he got out of bed and crossed the cubicle to his locker. He retrieved his towel, soap, and shampoo from the locker, and listened with mounting curiosity as in the distance, above the clamor of the rest of the dormitory waking up, Nicholas heard Bakkies Baker cursing vilely in Afrikaans. Nicholas turned from his locker, his things in hand, and hurried from his cubicle to see what the prefect was on about.

By the time Nicholas got to Grant's cubicle at the other end of the dormitory, a number of others had congregated, snickering and laughing, in the entrance. Predictably, the Beckett brothers were at the front of the crowd, stifling their laughter as they stood just inside the cubicle, blocking the entrance. Nicholas elbowed by them to see what the commotion was about—

And saw Grant, still in his bed, but struggling viciously to get out of it . . . and taking all of his bed sheets with him in the process. It was only after Grant flopped to the floor in a ball of bedding and Nicholas heard him mutter "bloody staples!" that he realized what had happened. Someone had stapled Grant's pajamas to his sheets while he slept. He was renowned for being a deep sleeper.

Nicholas's laughter joined the others now as he watched

Grant struggling on the floor, making loud flapping noises with his sheets, and railing muffled curses and proclamations of revenge at whoever had done this to him.

"Shorty!" Grant roared.

Jamie's only reply was to laugh harder.

"I know you're there, Shorty! You're going to pay for this, you *Bliksem*, I swear you will!"

Nicholas noticed out of the corner of his eye that Jamie appeared to draw himself up at that, managing to look indignant in spite of his mirth.

"Now what would make you think that I'm responsible for your current predicament, Bakkies? Why must *I* always be the one to blame? Did it ever occur to you that I might be as much the innocent victim of all these pranks as yourself?"

The muffled cursing and desperate flapping of sheets had continued all through Jamie's indignant reply, but now the ball of bedding on the floor grew still and quiet.

"Honestly?" Grant paused. "No, it never occurred to me. You being the innocent victim of a prank rather than its perpetrator is like . . . like saying that Einstein was secretly a halfwit! You're an evil genius, Shorty, and one day you're going to pay for it." The ball of bedding began roiling and cursing again, and Jamie just grinned.

* * *

As it turned out, Nicholas hadn't escaped the rash of pranks being pulled on the last day of school. When he was in the shower, he'd begun shampooing his hair only to discover that someone had replaced his shampoo with cooking oil. Assuming the identity of the prankster, Nicholas had marched over to Jamie and promptly commandeered *his* shampoo.

Now, as Nicholas was toweling off, he spotted Grant coming up to him. He stopped drying himself to see what Grant wanted.

Grant stopped uncomfortably close and whispered: "Listen, Beaver, I've got a plan for how to get Shorty back. I know you have a score to settle with him, too, so here's what we're gonna do. I'm going to steal his lucky monkey claw. I just need you to delay him and his brothers here for a few minutes."

"But how will that—"

Grant grinned. "You'll see at breakfast."

Nicholas frowned. "Okay . . ."

* * *

As they were all sitting down for breakfast, Nicholas noticed that Grant took his seat beside Jamie. A few minutes later, large, steaming pots of oatmeal were delivered to each of the tables in the dining hall, and everyone stood up to say grace.

The housemaster of Story house began to say grace and everyone closed their eyes, silently repeating the words. Knowing instinctively that if Grant was going to make a move, now would be the best time to do it, Nicholas opened one eye—

And saw Grant drop Jamie's lucky monkey claw into the pot of oatmeal in the center of the table. Seeing him watching, Grant grinned and put a finger to his lips. Nicholas's other eye opened, and he looked around discreetly to make sure nobody else at their table was watching. They weren't; all of their eyes were still closed. Nicholas's gaze returned to the pot of oatmeal, and he leaned forward to watch as Grant gave the monkey claw a quick poke with his finger to make sure that both the claw and its accompanying chain sunk beneath the surface.

Nicholas heard that the housemaster was coming to the end of grace, and he straightened, bowed his head, closed his eyes, and stood with his hands clasped innocently in front of him. He joined the others with an audible "amen" and then sat down for breakfast.

Nicholas had to work hard to keep from grinning. Since the monkey claw was close to the surface, and their prefect, Carl Hodges, would be the first to help himself out of the pot of oatmeal, there was a fair chance that . . .

Nicholas watched in anticipation as Carl reached for the pot and began ladling oatmeal into his bowl. After pouring the second ladle full of oatmeal into his bowl, Carl abruptly froze, gazing down into his bowl, the empty ladle held quivering halfway back to the pot, dripping oatmeal onto the table.

"What?" Jamie asked.

Wordlessly, Carl used the ladle to dig around in his bowl for a moment, then lifted it high to reveal a long loop of oatmeal hanging over the side of the ladle. Nicholas smiled, realizing that it was the now-oatmeal-covered chain of Jamie's lucky monkey claw.

Slowly, Carl reached out and grasped the chain between his thumb and forefinger, hoisting the monkey claw from the ladle and holding it dangling and dripping above his bowl for

everyone to see. Carl stared, frowning at the foreign object for a long moment until enough oatmeal had dripped from it to reveal what it was. His eyes narrowed and swept to Jamie, fixing him with an unblinking stare.

"Would you care to explain this, Shorty?" Jumbo asked. All eyes turned to Jamie, waiting for his reply.

Jamie squirmed in his chair. "Ah . . ." He affected an ignorant look. "What is it?"

"You know bloody well what it is."

Jamie's look of ignorance didn't waver. "I do?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

Carl scowled. "It's your blasted monkey claw! And frankly, after this morning, I think we're all a little tired of your pranks." Carl glanced pointedly at Grant, who'd had his pajamas stapled to his bed sheets. Carl's gaze returned to Jamie. "You need to be taught a lesson, Shorty, and this is probably our last opportunity to do it."

Nicholas grinned.

"Hear hear," Grant said.

"But this time I really didn't—" Carl stopped Jamie with a hand. "—do it," he finished in a small voice.

Carl lowered the monkey claw back into his bowl, then picked up the bowl and began pouring its contents back into the pot. "Since you've effectively ruined our oatmeal by adding essence of monkey claw to it . . ." Getting up from his chair, Carl carried the pot over to Jamie and placed it in front of him. "And since it would be a terrible waste to throw it all away . . . I think *you* should eat it. *All* of it."

Jamie gulped and stared down into the pot. "All of it?" He wasn't very fond of oatmeal, and the watery gruel that they served for breakfast at St. Andrew's could hardly even be called that. The thought of having to finish a whole, giant pot full of it made his stomach churn.

"That's right. Bon appétit, Shorty!" Carl said.

"But what will all of you eat?" Jamie asked, his voice turning hopeful. Surely the others wouldn't all sit and watch as he devoured their breakfast. He scanned the faces around the table with growing dismay.

"Well, I've never much liked oatmeal," Grant said, wrinkling his nose as he glanced at the pot.

"Me either," Nicholas said.

Others around the table added their agreement and Carl went on, "Besides, we still have bacon, eggs, and toast coming. With your share now added to ours, I doubt we'll even miss the oatmeal. Now, eat up." Carl took a scoop of oatmeal from the pot and placed the ladle in Jamie's hand. Jamie reluctantly accepted it, and after a moment's hesitation, lifted the ladle tentatively to his lips, eyeballing it all the way there.

The first few ladles full weren't so bad—he was hungry, after all; in one of them he found his monkey claw again and removed it, placing it on the napkin beside him—but by the time he was about halfway through the pot of oatmeal, the rest of the food arrived. And even though he was already stuffed, Jamie watched enviously as the others passed their bacon, eggs, and toast around the table.

Nicholas caught him staring at the bacon as it passed. "How's your oatmeal?" he asked, grinning.

Jamie tore his eyes away from the bacon and met Nicholas's grin with a scowl.

By the time Jamie was three quarters done with the pot of oatmeal, his jaw was working exceedingly slowly, and perspiration was beading on his forehead. He swallowed another mouthful, then swiped a hand across his brow and shook his head.

"I can't eat anymore," he said, dropping the ladle back into the pot. The others were still enjoying their bacon and eggs on toast, but now watching them eat just made him feel sick rather than envious.

Carl spared a moment from his breakfast to study Jamie. "Are you finished?"

"No . . . almost," Jamie replied, grimacing as he stared back into the pot. He never wanted to see oatmeal again.

Carl nodded. "Good, keep eating."

Jamie looked horrified. "But . . ." Carl raised an eyebrow. "Supposing I refuse?"

Carl dabbed bacon grease from his mouth with his napkin, then cracked his meaty knuckles and sent Jamie a meaningful grin. By virtue of his size, both height and breadth, Carl was an intimidating figure, and he had a surprising amount of muscle lurking beneath his layers. "Then you can wear the remainder."

Jamie gulped. His brothers looked torn between offering

Jamie their support and leaving him to fend for himself. Both Nicholas and Grant, with their own scores to settle with Jamie, wore grins matching Carl's, as if to say that it would be their *pleasure* to help make Jamie wear an oatmeal sweater.

Jamie's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and then he said, "You're bluffing. You're the head boy. You can't do that. You'll get into trouble."

Carl's grin faded and he grew thoughtful, tilting his head up and to the side, staring off into a distant corner of the dining hall. "Yes, I suppose you have a point. Makes you sort of wish it was the last day of school. . . ." His gaze swept slowly back to Jamie, and his grin returned.

Jamie's nose twitched, and his eyes flicked around the table, making him look like a cornered mouse. He made a quick assessment of how much support he had among his fellow students and whether he could get away with leaving the rest of the oatmeal. But everyone was staring expectantly at him, eager to see him finish it. Everyone, except his brothers, who were working hard to appear neutral by focusing on their food rather than the developing confrontation, lest the others remember Jamie's accomplices and decide to get even with them as well. He had no support; everyone had a score to settle with him.

Jamie's eyes dropped and he gazed down into the pot with growing dismay. Then, slowly, he scraped another ladle full of oatmeal out of the pot. As he brought the ladle to his mouth, he squinted, then closed his eyes, unable to bear the sight of it anymore. It was barely warm, and much thicker at the bottom of the pot.

By the time breakfast was finally over and Jamie had forced the last of the oatmeal past quivering lips, he received a round of applause for his efforts. Congratulations reached him from even the most embittered corners of the table, but now it was his turn to be bitter—if only he had the energy left for it. He was sitting slumped in his chair, hands clutching his stomach, motionless except for his eyelids, which were blinking lazily. His ample stomach was distended to the point that he could feel every square centimeter of skin. Now he knew what a balloon felt like just before it popped.

He was dimly aware of the others getting up from the table. Someone—Billie?—patted him on the shoulder, the movement

shook him just enough to make him fear losing his breakfast. *Maybe that wouldn't be so bad.* . . . he thought, his eyelids fluttering shut.

A moment later, his eyes still closed, he heard a familiar voice say, "Well, I hope you've learned your lesson." Jamie opened one eye to see Grant, the one who had spoken, and Nicholas, both of them grinning smugly down at him. Outrage gave Jamie the strength for a reply.

"I'm going to get you *bliksems*," he groaned.

"Pity it's the last day of school," Grant said.

"I have a long memory. . . ." Jamie trailed off between groans. ". . . like . . . an elephant."

Nicholas began nodding. "And a stomach like one, too."

Grant burst into laughter, and Jamie's other eye opened to glare at them. "Just wait . . . Valhalla . . . I'll get you. . . . Both of you."

"Now, Shorty, don't be like that," Nicholas said. "There's no need to continue these childish pranks in the air force. I think we're all even now, don't you? I ate the cigarettes, Bakkies got stapled to his bed sheets, and you ate the oatmeal. . . ."

A weak, scoffing laugh escaped Jamie's lips, but was quickly cut off and replaced by a groan. "Ooooooh . . ."

Nicholas's grin returned. "Well, we'd better get to chapel. See you there, Shorty."

Jamie made no move to follow as Nicholas and Grant left. As they went, Nicholas considered how well the simple act of placing the monkey claw in the oatmeal had turned out, and congratulated Grant for his prank.

Grant just burst into laughter again.

Poor Shorty . . . Nicholas thought, grinning all the way to the chapel.

* * *

Nicholas saw his parent's car pull into the parking lot below and promptly turned away from the dormitory window. He picked up his black leather suitcase from the bed and left his cubicle. It was time to say goodbye. He'd already said goodbye to a number of his friends, pledging to see them again in a year's time—at their annual old boys' reunion. Now he went to say goodbye to the rest of them. He found Grant first.

"I guess this is it, huh?" Grant said as they shook hands.

Nicholas shrugged. "We'll see each other again in basic

training.” With a nod and a backslapping hug for goodbye, Nicholas released Grant’s hand. As he turned to leave, he noticed Grant’s skivvy, Chris Thomas, standing to one side, looking lost. It was goodbye for him, too, in a way, but no one had taken the time to notice that. He was several years younger than Nicholas and his friends, but they all knew him well from his time spent serving Grant (Bakkies) Baker. On his way to say goodbye to the Becketts, Nicholas laid a hand on Thomas’s shoulder. The boy looked up, startled, and Nicholas said: “See you around, Chris.”

The boy smiled faintly, and nodded.

As Nicholas approached the Becketts, he noticed that the youngest and oldest brothers were clustered around Shorty’s bunk, and Shorty himself was lying splayed out on his bunk like a wounded soldier, his stomach looming over him like a mountain.

Nicholas’s mouth crooked into a grin. As he drew near the trio of trouble-makers, he began to hear Jamie’s groans. Nicholas stopped beside Billie and stood gazing down upon Shorty. Jamie’s eyes were closed, his hands clutched to his belly, and he was breathing in short, shallow gasps.

“Look what you did to him, Beaver!” Billie exclaimed.

“Well, you know, it wasn’t exactly my idea to stick his monkey claw in the oatmeal. . . .”

Jamie’s eyes fluttered open, found Nicholas, narrowed, and then abruptly closed as another groan escaped his lips.

“Do you suppose you can die from eating too much?” Harry asked.

Nicholas’s eyes flicked to Billie, then to Harry, noting the serious expressions on each of their faces. He considered the matter briefly: *Death by oatmeal—what a headline that would make!*

In other news, Jamie Beckett of Saint Andrew’s School died earlier today after eating a whole pot of oatmeal.

Nicholas almost laughed. *No, not particularly likely. . .*

Another groan from Jamie punctuated Nicholas’s thoughts, and he adjusted his expression until he was sure it would strike a chord with the already panicky Becketts. “Hmmm . . . that depends, Checkers. I’ve heard of it in cows. They call it the Blighted Bloat. When a cow eats too much of a certain food, digestion causes the stomach to bloat until it presses against

the diaphragm and prevents the lungs from expanding, which unfortunately results in rapid suffocation. . . .”

“I’ve heard of that,” Billie said, his eyes wide.

Jamie’s eyes shot open. “Rapid suffocation?” he gasped.

“Yeah, but you don’t need to worry. It’s not like you’re having trouble breathing.” Jamie’s eyes widened further and he looked like he was about to say something to that, but Nicholas held up a hand. “Besides, unlike cows, people eat a varied diet, so it’s difficult to accomplish the same thing. It’s not like we go around munching grains and grasses all day long. . . .” Nicholas trailed off, frowning. “Hmmm . . .”

“What?” Jamie asked.

“Well, I was just thinking . . . oatmeal is sort of a grain . . .” Nicholas allowed his own eyes to widen alarmingly.

“Maybe we’d better call the nurse,” Billie said, sending a hasty glance over his shoulder to the door, as if preparing to run for it.

“No time!” Nicholas said, and dropped his suitcase (for effect) as he went down on his haunches beside Jamie’s bed.

“No time?!” Jamie asked, his eyes wild. “What do you mean no time?”

“There’s only one way to cure the Blighted Bloat, and once it sets in, you’ll be a goner in minutes.”

“Goner?” Jamie’s voice went suddenly soft.

“Shorty, you’ve got to try burping.”

His face scrunched up and his breathing quieted. A second later, he let out his breath and shook his head.

“I can’t.”

“That’s not good. Are you sweating at all?”

“Yes! Like a pig!”

“Even worse.”

“Beaver! You did this to me! If I die, it’ll be on your conscience. Now quick, tell me what to do!”

“That was it.”

“What?!”

“You’ve got to keep trying. And if that doesn’t work . . . a bar of soap, perhaps.”

“A bar of soap?”

“Yes, you need to eat it. The soap allows the gas to form into bubbles and then you’ll burp it all out.”

Jamie’s eyes swept to Billie. “Quick, Muffy, get me a bar of

soap!"

Billie hurried over to his bed, the one adjacent to Jamie's, opened his suitcase, rifled around for a second, and then returned with a fresh bar of soap. Jamie hesitated half a second before taking it.

"Shorty, the Blighted Bloat is nothing to mess with. Take a few bites at least. That should be enough."

With a grimace, Jamie sat up, one hand still clasped to his stomach, the other taking the bar of soap from his brother. He began slowly unwrapping it.

"Hurry, Shorty!" Nicholas urged.

With a final grimace, Jamie took a few hesitant bites from the edge of the bar. He chewed with evident distaste and then finally swallowed. "Yeaaa-uck!" he exclaimed.

Nicholas got off his haunches, picked up his suitcase, and stood once more beside the bed, staring down at Jamie. He was having trouble keeping the grin from his face. "How do you feel?"

Jamie shook his head. "Not so g-ood—ooooo, my stomach," he replied, hiccupping on the last word and subsequently feeling the pressure that put on his over-full stomach.

Nicholas grinned. "That's a good sign—the hiccups that is."

"Really?"

"Yeah, you're on the mend." Nicholas let out a sigh of mock relief. "Well, guys, I'd better go. My parents are waiting for me."

Jamie nodded, his eyes still wide. "Okay, see you at Valhalla, Beaver." Nicholas returned the nod and began turning to leave. "And Beaver—" Nicholas turned back. "—thanks. I owe you one."

"No problem, Shorty, as you said, I wouldn't want your death on my conscience."

Billie and Harry said their own goodbyes, and then Nicholas left, waving a quick goodbye to Glen Agliotti and Grant Baker as he went.

Once Nicholas reached the safety of the doorway, he turned around and caught Jamie's eye. "And Shorty—"

"Ye-ah?" Jamie's hiccup was audible even from the door.

"Now we're *really* even."

Nicholas lingered in the doorway for Jamie's reaction. Jamie's brow pinched in confusion for half a second, and then his mouth dropped open. "Why you bloody—"

That was all Nicholas heard before hurrying from the doorway and down the hall, laughing as he went. Not that there was much chance of Jamie running after him—rolling, perhaps, but not running.

Now he was really going to have to watch his back in the air force. *But maybe the extra discipline there will make it hard for Shorty to get even with me. . . .*

He could only hope.

Chapter 10

“Have you decided what you’re going to do until you have to go to the air force next year?” Denise’s mother, Loraine, asked Nicholas from across the long, folding picnic table, one of many which had been set up end-to-end on the grass outside the clubhouse. It was Saturday afternoon, and as usual, the whole town had congregated there for a *braai** and later on a movie. Nicholas had opted to sit with Denise and her family, while his family sat further down the line of tables.

Nicholas shook his head in answer to Loraine’s question. “I don’t know. Look for a job, I suppose.”

“Well . . . we could always use help around the trading store. If you’d like, you could come work for us.” She turned to her husband, Malcolm, who was absorbed in conversation with the mayor, Jim Michener. “Isn’t that right, honey?”

“Hmmm? Isn’t what right?” Malcolm asked, turning from the Mayor.

“I was just telling Nicholas that we might be able to give him a job at the trading store, so that he can earn some money before he leaves for the air force.”

Malcolm gave Nicholas a measuring look. “I don’t see why not. How about it, Nick?”

Nicholas had his mouth full of steak, so he took a moment to reply. As he chewed, he noticed that beside him Denise was watching him expectantly, waiting for his reply. And she wasn’t the only one. Across the table, five-year-old Rosemary, the youngest of the four Hepburn sisters, was also waiting in anticipation for his answer. Nicholas swallowed. “Well, thank you for the offer, but your store is quite a long way from my

* *Braai*: short for *Braaivleis* (barbecue)

home, and I don't have a car to get there."

Loraine smiled. "That's not a problem. You can live with us! That way you won't need a car."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows and glanced over to Malcolm to see his reaction to his wife's suggestion. He gave a slow nod, and Nicholas returned his attention to Denise's mother. "I don't know what to say. . . . That's a very generous offer." *Room and board as well as a job!* he thought to himself. It was better than he'd get from anyone else.

"Say yes," Loraine said, still smiling.

Nicholas was very tempted to do just that, but he knew that he should discuss it with his parents, so he returned her smile and said, "I can't imagine saying anything else, but I should really think about it first. Would it be okay if I let you know when I get back from Siesta?"

"Of course," Loraine said and Malcolm nodded again before returning to his conversation with the Mayor. "Let us know what you decide," she finished.

"I will. Thank you again for the offer."

"You're very welcome."

He felt Denise give his knee an affectionate squeeze beneath the table, subtly reminding him of another reason why he should accept her mother's offer—because it would give them more time to be together. Like him (before he'd graduated), Denise went to a boarding school, but unlike him, she went to a school close to Sterkspruit, and she'd been able to come home on weekends.

Denise's reason for wanting him to say yes to the offer was probably not so different from her mother's. Loraine had always liked him, and had always hoped that he would end up marrying one of her daughters. Once, she'd even gone so far as to tell his mother exactly that. His mother had then, glowingly, passed the information on to him. For her part, Nicholas's mother was just as eager for that outcome, and both mothers had watched Nicholas and Denise over the years with encouraging smiles, knowing looks, and conspiratorial glee—it would have all been very amusing if it weren't so discomfiting. Sometimes it felt inevitable that he and Denise would end up together, like they had already pledged their vows and the rest was just a formality. Nicholas frowned, wondering for a moment if that was so bad. After a brief moment, he decided

that it really wasn't bad, just . . . *familiar*—comfortable, easy, predictable . . . like he could imagine exactly what the next 20 years of his life would look like.

Nicholas caught Rosemary staring across the table at him, her arms crossed and a pouting look on her face. A hint of amusement flickered through his frown. "What's wrong, Rose?" Nicholas asked.

"You don't want to stay with us."

"I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did. You said you'd think about it. That means no."

Nicholas grinned.

"What he meant," Denise began, "was that he needs some time to make his decision."

Rosemary studied her sister with eyebrows doubtfully scrunched together. After a moment, her gaze returned to Nicholas. "You'll stay with us, then?"

Nicholas laughed. "Very likely. Your parents made an offer that's hard to refuse."

"Yay!" Rosemary said, uncrossing her arms and smiling happily.

Denise leaned close to Nicholas and whispered into his ear: "I think she likes you."

"Really? I hadn't noticed," Nicholas whispered back.

"That's because you're such a *domkop*."*

Grinning, Nicholas carved off another piece of his steak and speared it with his fork.

* * *

Tick-tick-tick-tick-ti—

The familiar whirring sound of the projector rolled to a stop just as the distantly grinding noise of the clubhouse generator went suddenly silent. Clint Eastwood's rugged face faded to black, plunging the room into darkness. The grumbling started almost immediately, followed by the mayor's reassurances that they would be back up and running again in no time. Nicholas frowned as he peered over his shoulder and saw a dozen shadowy figures getting up to go help Uncle Jimmy fix the generator. Nicholas turned to face forward again, wondering how, in all these years, the town budget couldn't afford to buy a more reliable generator.

* *Domkop*: Afrikaans and German for *idiot*

"I'm going to go to the *loo*.^{*} I'll be right back," Denise whispered, giving his hand a quick squeeze.

"Okay. I'm going to go see what I can do to help them get the generator running again," Nicholas said.

"Good idea. Seems like they could use the help."

Nicholas delayed for a while, watching Denise leave. Then, getting up from his place along the row of seats, he made his way to one corner of the room and groped along a dark corridor until he reached the door to the generator room. It was closed, but a pale orange line of light shone out from beneath the door. Just beyond it he could hear men's voices and laughter—*laughter?* Nicholas wondered. He tried the doorknob. The door was locked. Frowning, he knocked a few times. Through the door he heard:

"Shhhhhh!" And the ruckus beyond the door went suddenly quiet. The voice returned, whispering now, "Did you hear that? Someone's at the door. . . ."

"*Ja, bly stil, man!*"[†] came another voice, which Nicholas recognized as belonging to his father.

A moment later, "Who is it?" It was the first voice again, coming from directly behind the door. Nicholas's eyebrows drew together. It sounded like the mayor, Uncle Jimmy.

"It's me, Nicholas."

A few seconds later, the door cracked open to form a gap of a couple of inches and admit a pale slice of yellow light into the corridor. An eye appeared in the gap and gleamed suspiciously out from behind one half of a pair of glasses. It *was* Uncle Jimmy. The eye flicked left, then right as if checking to see that Nicholas was alone.

"I thought I'd see if I could help you fix the generator," Nicholas explained.

The eye blinked a few times as the mayor processed that. The length of the silence which followed told Nicholas that Uncle Jimmy was having trouble deciding whether or not to let him in.

"Well . . . in that case, you should know that the generator has . . . errr . . . certain idiosyncrasies which require a degree of delicacy. . . ."

^{*} *Loo*: restroom

[†] *Ja, bly stil, man*: Yeah, be quiet, man

"Don't worry, I won't break anything," Nicholas promised with a bemused frown.

The corners of the mayor's mouth quirked down, as though he were unsatisfied by Nicholas's answer. "No, well, that's good, but what I mean to say is . . ."

"Who is it?" came an impatient voice from inside the room.

Uncle Jimmy frowned. "Perhaps it would be easier if I let you see for yourself." With that, the door swung open and the mayor gestured hurriedly to usher Nicholas inside. Once inside the room, Nicholas heard the door quickly close and lock behind him, but he didn't turn to look. His gaze was riveted to the scene before him. There—standing clustered around an old kerosene refrigerator with an even older kerosene lamp flickering in shades of red and gold atop the refrigerator—was Oom Van Heerdan, the bartender; Dallas Muir, the magistrate; Sergeant Wepner, the chief of police; his father, the doctor; his brother; Harold, the tow truck driver; and even Denise's dad, Malcolm. Each of them was holding a drink in his hand while the generator sat silent and neglected to one side. Nicholas shook his head in astonishment.

"Hello there, son - care for a drink?" Johann asked.

"Aren't we supposed to be fixing the generator?" Nicholas replied.

Johann hesitated while glances bounced around the room, from one man to another. A slow grin spread across Johann's face and in a very quiet voice he said, "We are."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows, then pointed to the generator. "The generator is over there."

Johann nodded, and a few scattered laughs broke the silence. Nicholas felt Uncle Jimmy place a hand on his shoulder.

"It just needs some fuel," Jimmy said, then walked by him to the refrigerator. Opening it, he withdrew a smallish bottle and then held it out to Nicholas. "But first, we need to refuel *ourselves*."

Nicholas accepted the proffered bottle, looked down at it to discover that it was a beer, and then looked up to find Uncle Jimmy holding a bottle opener out to him. Blinking in astonishment, Nicholas mechanically took the bottle opener and opened the beer. His mind was still puzzling through what he was seeing and hearing, trying to reach a conclusion.

"Now that you're eighteen, we may as well let you in on the town's best-kept secret. But, for obvious reasons, you're sworn to silence. . . ." Johann said.

Nicholas frowned and took a sip of his beer. "What secret?" Nicholas asked, even as his mind began to assemble the pieces of the puzzle. The others just grinned at him in amusement, waiting for him to figure it out. Nicholas frowned and his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "There's *never* been anything wrong with the generator, has there?"

Still grinning, his father shook his head again.

Dallas Muir laughed. "Smart boy you have there, Doc."

The mayor smiled, and pushed his chronically ill-fitting glasses higher up on his nose. "The generator is really quite reliable—so long as it has fuel enough to last through the movie. A shame I've never thought to provide it with that sort of excess. Nowadays I know how to provide almost exactly forty-five minutes of power," he said, pointing to a large, antique-looking brown glass beer bottle standing next to the diesel drum. "Just one of those usually does the trick."

More laughter. Nicholas stood there, looking dumb with shock. His brother came up to him and slapped him on the back. "Really, Nick, you mean you never suspected it?" Philip asked.

"Why should he?" Sergeant Wepner asked, grinning. "No one else has."

Nicholas felt a smile forming on his lips, and took another sip of his beer. His eyes scanned the room, wonderingly. All this time, and the generator had been "breaking down" for lack of fuel! Just an ingenious way to force an intermission in which the men could sneak another drink past their wives. . . .

Suddenly remembering something, Nicholas's eyes swept to Denise's dad, Malcolm. He, too, was drinking—his glass filled with a dark amber liquid. Nicholas frowned again. Denise and her family were Seventh-day Adventists, and among other things, that meant they didn't drink.

Noticing his scrutiny, Malcolm met Nicholas's gaze with a guilty grin. He tapped his glass. "Coca-Cola."

"Ah," Nicholas nodded.

When they all returned to the hall fifteen minutes later, it was amid the usual cheers, clapping, and even grumbling which had always accompanied the men's return from

successfully fixing the generator. Now that he was among those returning, and knew the secret of their success, Nicholas couldn't help feeling guilty. It had taken them all of a minute to refuel and thereby "fix" the generator; the other twenty minutes had been spent refueling themselves from the ample stockpiles of an old refrigerator. Little did anyone know—anyone outside the circle of trusted co-conspirators—the generator room was really an auxiliary bar for the patrons of the hilltop hotel.

As Nicholas sat down beside Denise again, she turned to him and asked, "So, what was wrong with it?"

Wracking his brains for an answer, and coming up with none, Nicholas realized with a grin that he could tell the truth without actually revealing anything. "The fuel injector wasn't doing its job properly."

"Oh, I see," Denise replied, sounding as though she really didn't. And then, with a whirring, tick-tick-ticking sound and a collective cheer from the audience, Clint Eastwood was back, promising mayhem and flourishing a pair of gleaming six-shooters as he barged into a bar. . . .

* * *

The following day, a Sunday, Nicholas and Denise played tennis and then went down to the river to cool off. As it hadn't rained for a few weeks, the river was flowing slowly, and the water was green and clear straight through to the silt-covered bottom. Now, they lay drying on their favorite rock beneath the rustling fronds and flickering shade of the willow tree which grew over that rock.

Denise spoke into the silence: "Have you given any more thought to my mother's offer?"

Nicholas lay beside Denise, looking up at a kaleidoscope of hanging willow leaves. The sun was weaving glowing golden threads through the curtains of green.

Nicholas cast Denise a sideways glance. "I have."

"And?"

"I'm going to accept, but I still want to think about it some more."

"Okay."

A sudden gust of wind came rustling through the willow tree, further drying Nicholas's still-wet clothes, and sending a welcome chill coursing through him. He hadn't planned to go swimming, but it had been so hot on the tennis court, that he

hadn't even hesitated when he and Denise had reached the river. With only a little urging, she'd jumped in after him.

The sun found Nicholas's face through a gap in the leaves, and his eyes fluttered closed against the blinding warmth. . . .

And then a pair of willow fronds slapped him roughly across his face, and his eyes shot open. He heard Denise start laughing beside him.

"Yeah, ha ha," he said, brushing the fronds aside, and spitting out a leaf.

She just laughed harder.

Nicholas shook his head, his head rocking from side to side on the rock.

"So . . ." There was a note of seriousness in Denise's voice now. "Your mother told me about Elizabeth."

Nicholas frowned. "Did she?"

Denise propped herself up on her elbow to look down at him. Her green eyes were full of sympathy. "Do you think you'll see her again in Siesta?"

Nicholas shrugged, not meeting Denise's gaze. "I hope so. I have to find out what happened. And whether or not there's anything I can do to fix it."

Denise looked away. "You know . . . there might not be anything you can do."

"I still have to find out."

Denise nodded quietly, and sat up on the rock, her feet dangling in the water. After a long, uncomfortable moment of silence, she spoke again: "Well, whatever happens, I'll be here for you."

Nicholas sat up beside Denise and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "I know. And thank you. That means a lot."

Denise turned to him with a wan smile. "Let's go for another swim."

Nicholas nodded, watching as Denise jumped off the rock with a splash, and then dived under the water. He shook his head sadly, half-hoping that Elizabeth really had forgotten about him, so he could move on and give Denise more than just half of his heart.

As Denise emerged from her dive, Nicholas stood up and called: "Wait for me." With that, he dived off the rock.

"I always have," she replied, but her reply was swallowed by the subsequent splash.



Reconciliation

Chapter 11

The purple of twilight was gradually giving way to night as the sun met the distant, watery line of the horizon with a bright orange flare. Elizabeth and Charles were walking down the Sea Point Promenade in Cape Town. They were momentarily silent amidst the steady rushing of waves against the unyielding concrete of the promenade. In the distance ahead of them, they could see Sea Point's high-rises, their windows glinting with purple and orange reflections of clouds—like mirrors for the sky. Behind those towers, lay the mountains, turned hazy and blue from the dark and distance.

Elizabeth was quietly at odds with the tranquility of their surroundings. She was boiling with frustration and resentment. Tomorrow her family was leaving for Siesta, and she wanted nothing less than to accompany them. This time, unlike the years before, there was nothing and no one waiting for her there. All she had to look forward to were three acutely boring and lonely weeks. Whereas if she were to stay in Wellington for the summer, she could be with Charles on her holiday. Unfortunately, that was not an option her mother was willing to discuss.

It wasn't fair!

"Elizabeth?"

She sighed and sent Charles a fleeting glance. "Hmmm?"

"I've been thinking a lot about . . . us. More precisely, about where I'll be studying next year."

Elizabeth turned to him with eyebrows raised.

"I've come to a decision."

Elizabeth unconsciously held her breath. What had he decided? His whole reason for being here in South Africa was to decide where he was going to go to university—in South

Africa and stay with his father, or in England and stay with his mother.

Charles stopped walking and turned to her. She stopped beside him, and he reached out, gently turning her by her shoulders to face him.

"I'm going to the University of Cape Town."

"You got accepted?!"

Charles grinned wryly at her. "Elizabeth, I was accepted to Oxford as well."

Elizabeth's enthusiasm faded. "Oh—well, that's . . . an incredible honor. Why wouldn't you go there, then?"

Charles's grin faded, leaving nothing but seriousness in its wake. "Because you won't be there."

Elizabeth blinked, her face blank with shock. "I don't know what to say . . . you would turn down an opportunity like that for me?"

"And I'd do it over and over again."

Elizabeth bit her lip and shook her head. "Are you sure you don't want to give it some more thought first?"

Charles let go of Elizabeth's shoulders and cupped her cheek in one soft hand. He took a step toward her. She gazed up at him, her eyes searching his.

"Some people are too special to go without," Charles whispered, drifting closer. Their lips brushed, and Elizabeth's mind blanked. She smiled as he kissed her.

When they finally drew apart, his hands falling away from her face, Elizabeth was still smiling. "Do you ever run out of clever things to say?"

"No," he said, very seriously. Then his mouth cracked into a perfect smile, and he began slowly walking down the promenade once more. She kept pace beside him and reached for his hand. He laced his fingers through hers.

"I wish I didn't have to go to Siesta with my family."

"And I wish I could go with you. Unfortunately, I promised my father I would spend Christmas with him for a change."

"I understand."

Charles landed a quick kiss on top of her head. "Don't worry. It'll be over like *that*," he said, snapping his fingers.

* * *

Elizabeth watched with a growing smile as her father and three other men struggled to erect their new tent in front of their

shiny, new caravan. Both of which were much larger than their older counterparts and were among a plethora of recent purchases afforded by her father's promotion to managing director.

Due to the new tent's greater size, Edwin was having even less success erecting it than he'd had with the old one. He and the three men he'd hired to help him had been struggling for more than an hour already, and didn't appear to have made any inroads. Elizabeth watched as, for the umpteenth time, a skeleton of tent poles began to emerge beneath the blue and white fabric of the tent. She heard muffled voices from within and distinguished her father's from among them.

"There, I think we've got it this time. . . . Now I'll get the other side up while you hold it here," she heard her father say. Elizabeth watched a head (presumably her father's) roving beneath the fabric to the other side of the tent. After a few minutes of muffled grumbling, Elizabeth saw him turn and heard him say, "You, over there, give me a hand with this, will you?" Her father's head turned again, and he went back to assembling the tent.

A moment later, Elizabeth saw three heads roving in her father's general direction. She lifted a hand to cover a gasp as she saw that the assembled half of the tent was starting to quiver from the added force of people moving around beneath it.

The three men stopped behind her father. Sensing their presence, Edwin's head began to turn. "Ah, good, you're . . . What the Devil are all three of you doing over here?! You're supposed to be holding the other side of the tent!"

The three heads turned to one another, deferring the question and the blame. Then, as if on cue, the wind picked up, first lifting the long, trailing fronds of nearby willow trees, and then slamming into the face of the half-erected tent, buffeting it violently.

The unsupported frame gave way with a clank and clatter of metal rods, and the tent fabric, now freed, spread and billowed like a sail in the wind. It slapped into the four men, wrapping itself around them and making their outlines momentarily visible before the wind died away and the fabric pooled in a rumpled mess around their feet.

The clattering of metal rods stopped and there was a moment

of utter silence.

"Bloody hell!"

Elizabeth stifled a laugh and glanced at her mother to see her reaction. She was glaring darkly at the tent.

"Edwin, don't be so common. Such foul words have no place in your vocabulary."

One head swiveled beneath the mass of tent fabric, and Elizabeth had the distinct impression that her father was glaring back at her mother.

"Foul circumstances require foul means to describe them!" came his muffled reply.

Elizabeth watched a scowl cross her mother's face, then she shook her head, and in a voice loud enough for Edwin to hear, she said, "Well, seeing as your father has been stymied by the simple task of assembling our tent, there's no sense in us waiting around here, is there? Shall we go for a walk to pass the time?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "Sure. What about Hattie?" She cast a glance down toward the river where her sister was talking with a boy who appeared to be roughly her age.

Constance followed Elizabeth's gaze. "She seems to be otherwise engaged. Besides, I prefer your company."

Elizabeth hesitated, stifling a frown at her mother's blatant favoritism. "Well . . . okay."

Constance began walking, setting a leisurely pace down to the river. Elizabeth kept up alongside her mother. Once there, they began walking along the riverbank, passing beneath the lazily swaying branches of the willow trees. They spent the first few minutes in silence, Elizabeth studying the ground as she walked, Constance walking with head held high, meeting the horizon with her gaze. Noticing her mother's posture, Elizabeth wondered idly how she managed not to trip.

Before long, they came to a bench along the river, canopied in the shade of an old, gnarled tree. Constance took a seat there, and Elizabeth sat down next to her mother. The silence endured as they gazed out over the river, watching the surface stirring to ripples in the wind. Thousands of tiny, diamond pin pricks of sunlight sparkled and danced across surface. The tall rushes at the river's edge were swaying as if to music, and the sounds of children laughing and playing nearby came to their ears as a murmur upon the wind.

"It's funny," Constance began, still looking out over the river, "how one can take the little things for granted."

A frown creased Elizabeth's brow, and she turned to her mother in question. "What do you mean?"

"The trees, the river, the sun . . . the sights and smells . . ." Constance sighed. Further down the river, a child's laughter rang particularly loud as the rustling of the wind through the trees and rushes abruptly died away. "The laughter."

Elizabeth continued to frown, not understanding the longing in her mother's voice, or the tired, haunted look in her eyes.

"I used to be able to appreciate those things. Now it all seems so faded, like it's merely part of a dream . . . or a nightmare."

Elizabeth was starting to feel uncomfortable, and she shifted her position on the bench, crossing her legs. "You're just tired, Mom."

There was a long aching silence in which Constance neither replied nor moved, the only sign that she was still alive being the way her eyes occasionally blinked. "Yes. Yes . . . I believe I am," she finally said. After another moment of silence she shook her head and went on, "You have no idea, Elizabeth . . . the toll it takes on one. Life. So much pressure, not a moment's peace, so much that needs doing, and no matter how much you do, it's never enough. There's always something."

Elizabeth forced a smile, hoping it would prove contagious. "You just need to relax, Mom. This holiday will do you the world of good. . . ." Elizabeth trailed off, watching as her mother shook her head.

"Relax?" Constance gave a short laugh. "—I'm not sure I know how to anymore. You spend all your childhood wishing to be an adult, and when you finally get your wish, you spend all your adulthood wishing to be a child again . . . if only for a day. So carefree and . . . happy. No responsibilities, no choices to make, no plans to . . ." Constance trailed off and resumed her eerie silence, this time maintaining it for so long that Elizabeth had a sudden urge to make a lot of noise.

What was her mother on about, anyway? She wasn't making sense. The early hour at which they'd left Swellendam that morning must have deprived her of too much sleep. *And she hasn't been sleeping all that well as it is . . .* Elizabeth noted the pale blue crescents beneath her mother's eyes. She'd had them for months now, skillfully covered by makeup, but still visible if

you knew to look. When Elizabeth had finally noticed a few months ago and asked her father about it, he had just shaken his head and said, *"Your mother hasn't been sleeping well lately. She's been having a lot of nightmares."*

Elizabeth frowned again. She hadn't thought her mother was afraid of anything. What could her nightmares be about? But even as she wondered, Elizabeth felt that she knew the answer.

The wind abruptly gusted and blew viciously across the surface of the river, picking up droplets of water and throwing them in their faces. Elizabeth luxuriated in the feeling of the cool water sprinkling her face, but she heard her mother gasp. She glanced over to see her mother kneading her temples with fisted knuckles, her eyes tightly shut. She was muttering softly to herself, the words indistinct. Something about ashes and dust . . .

Elizabeth's brow was pinched in concern. "Are you feeling all right, Mom?" Upon hearing Elizabeth's voice, Constance suddenly stopped kneading her temples and her eyes cracked open. Her head turned to meet her daughter's gaze. "I'm fine, Elizabeth. It's just a headache. It will pass in time. . . ." she trailed off, staring over Elizabeth's shoulder, her eyebrows raised.

Elizabeth turned to look—

And froze. For a long moment, all she managed to do was sit there, blinking and staring.

"Am I interrupting something?"

The voice was very familiar to Elizabeth—and equally unwelcome. Elizabeth fixed Nicholas with an angry look.

"What are you doing here?"

Constance's expression settled into a narrow-eyed glare, and Nicholas spent a moment glancing between them, blinking in confusion.

* * *

"The same thing you are. . . . I'm on holiday," Nicholas said, a frown creasing his brow as he tried to find the cause of Elizabeth's anger. His gaze flicked to her mother, and widened at the sight of her. Constance looked ten years older than when he'd last seen her: her face was gaunt, her cheeks sunken, her eyes dull, with loose bags of skin hanging beneath them, and the gray was showing through the coloring in her hair.

The seconds passed. There was still no reply, with both

mother and daughter giving him discomfiting looks.

“Hattie said she saw you two walking down this way.”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed, but she said nothing. Sending her daughter a quick look, Constance rose from the bench and said, “I think I’ll go see if your father wants help assembling the tent. Goodness knows he needs it.”

With that, she brushed past Nicholas, whispering as she left: “Good luck.” The way she said it, Nicholas got the impression she was really wishing him the opposite. Nicholas’s frown deepened, and Elizabeth stood up from the bench. He took a few steps forward, but she kept the bench between them and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Since you haven’t answered my question yet, I’m going to repeat myself: what are you doing here?” Elizabeth said, placing careful emphasis on each word.

Chapter 12

Nicholas's mouth opened, but no sound came out. He'd never seen Elizabeth so angry.

"What are you so angry about? You're the one who stopped writing to me, without so much as an explanation. If anyone should be angry—"

Elizabeth laughed at that. "And why do you think I stopped writing, genius?"

Nicholas's eyes narrowed in thought. After a moment, he shook his head. "I don't know."

Elizabeth smirked. "I'll give you a hint: Claire."

Nicholas's eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"Figure it out." With a flash of long, chestnut hair, Elizabeth turned and stalked away.

Nicholas just stood there, gaping like an idiot, the seconds ticking by as he tried to make sense of what Elizabeth had said. Eventually he recovered from his shock, but by then Elizabeth had put a few dozen meters between them, and he had to run to catch up. He caught her by the arm and said, "Hold on a minute. What about Cl—"

Elizabeth whirled out of his grasp and shook an angry finger in his face. "Don't touch me!" she hissed.

"What's got into you? What *about* Claire?"

Elizabeth was already backing away. "You know very well what!"

Nicholas gave a helpless shrug, and his face twisted into an expression of exasperated misery. "No, I don't. What on *earth* are you talking about?!"

Seeing the look on Nicholas's face gave Elizabeth pause, but she still spoke through gritted teeth. "Right after we said goodbye last year, you were walking through Siesta with

Claire . . . !” Elizabeth looked like she wanted to say something more, but instead, she reached up and brushed the back of her hand across her cheek, to rid herself of a bothersome tear.

“You saw that?”

“Of course I did! Why did you think I stopped writing to you?” Elizabeth wiped another hand across her cheek, not able to stop her tears now. She still looked furious, but Nicholas took a few halting steps forward, driven by the compulsion to comfort her. It was exactly the wrong thing to do.

Elizabeth shook her head, turned, and started walking hurriedly away from him. Nicholas found himself mechanically following her, but after a few minutes, he stopped and let her go. There was obviously something more to this than what she’d told him, either that, or she’d gone crazy.

He sighed, realizing that he wasn’t going to get anywhere by trying to reason with her when she was so angry. Instead, Nicholas angled up from the riverbank to go looking for Claire. Whatever had happened to make Elizabeth so angry, it had something to do with her.

* * *

Elizabeth cast a quick glance over her shoulder to see if Nicholas was still following her. She was just in time to see him stop and start walking off in another direction.

She shook her head angrily. He had no shame. By now he knew that she’d seen him kissing Claire, but he hadn’t even reacted to the mention of her name! What did he think—that they could just go back to the way things had been?

What an idiot.

“Hey, Elizabeth!”

Elizabeth’s head turned, and this time her gaze found a sight even more loathsome than Nicholas. Walking toward her with a smile and a bouncing step, was a tall girl with long, blond hair, hanging on the arm of an even taller guy with short, brown hair—both of whom Elizabeth recognized from last year in Siesta. Apparently, Nicholas wasn’t the only one with no shame.

Seeing no way to avoid bumping into Claire and Samuel, Elizabeth angled closer to the water’s edge, so that she would walk by them without a chance for more than a passing comment.

“Hey, Elizabeth, slow down!”

She didn't. Nor did she trust her voice enough for a reply. They caught up to her and began walking alongside. Elizabeth crossed her arms over her chest.

"Did Nicholas tell you that Samuel is taking us waterskiing tomorrow?" Claire asked.

"No. He didn't."

"Oh. I thought he would have," Claire said, sounding crestfallen.

Elizabeth smiled wryly. "I'm sure you'll have lots of fun together. You and Nicholas."

"Probably," she shrugged. "But you're invited, too."

Elizabeth sent Claire an angry look. "No thanks."

Claire frowned, noticing Elizabeth's furious demeanor for the first time, but Samuel spoke before she could. "Are you sure?"

Elizabeth turned her ire on him. "Are you sure *you* want to go? Not afraid you're going to feel like a third wheel with Nicholas around?"

Now it was Samuel's turn to frown. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I suppose Claire didn't tell you. Well, I shouldn't be too surprised. Nicholas didn't tell *me*, either."

"Tell me? Tell me what?" Samuel asked, looking confused. His eyes darted between Elizabeth and Claire. For her part, Claire was slowly shaking her head, looking equally confused.

Elizabeth's teeth clicked together, and she decided to just blurt it out: "I saw her and Nicholas kissing here in Siesta at the end of last year."

Claire did a double take. "You saw what?"

"That's right."

Samuel let go of Claire's arm and stopped walking, his jaw slack with shock. Elizabeth didn't even slow down, and Claire cast Samuel a quick, pleading look over her shoulder before turning back to Elizabeth. Her brow was tightly knit with confusion. "Elizabeth, I don't know what you think you saw, but—"

"Save your excuses for Samuel, Claire. I think he's going to need them more than me."

Now Claire stopped walking, too. For a long moment, she just stood there, watching as Elizabeth angled up toward a large, blue and white tent along the riverbank, and then disappeared inside.

* * *

After 20 minutes of searching, Nicholas finally found Claire and Samuel, walking with their backs to him, heading for the *Duka*, Siesta's little convenience store. He ran up behind them and placed a hand on Claire's shoulder. He felt her jump with fright, then she turned to face him. Samuel stopped and turned a second later. They were wearing matching frowns, and neither one of them looked pleased to see him.

"Oh, it's you," Samuel said, his voice flat.

Claire sent her boyfriend a quick look and then forced a smile for Nicholas. She opened her mouth to say something, but Nicholas spoke first.

"Claire, do you know what's got into Elizabeth? She's furious with me, and I can't seem to get her to tell me why. She said she saw you and me walking through Siesta last year, but I couldn't understand why that would make her angry."

Another look passed between Claire and Samuel. Claire's had a definite air of: *See? I told you so*—while Samuel looked momentarily sheepish.

Claire replied, "She thinks she saw you and me kissing last year."

Nicholas's brow shot up. "You're joking! That's ridiculous!"

"Yes it is, and no, I'm not joking. She was just as angry with me, and it's taken me the better part of the last fifteen minutes to explain to Samuel that it never happened." She cast Samuel an admonishing look. "Hopefully he no longer has any doubts." Samuel put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

Nicholas shook his head incredulously. "How could this happen?"

Claire shrugged. "How does any misunderstanding happen?"

"I'm going to need your help explaining this to her. Somehow I don't think she's going to take my word for it."

"And you think she'll believe me?" Claire asked, her eyebrows skeptically raised.

"No, but maybe if Samuel comes with us..." Nicholas looked to him and he nodded. "With three people telling her, she'll have to at least consider the possibility that she's wrong."

Claire pursed her lips, considering. Then she gave a curt nod and said, "Okay, let's go."

* * *

Edwin opened the door to the camper, leaned inside, and

called: "Elizabeth, there are some people here to see you!" He withdrew from the camper and let the door slam shut. Then he walked back through the tent, snagging a beer from the cooler on his way out. He emerged from the tent looking as uncomfortable as he felt. He knew very well that Elizabeth didn't want to see Nicholas, and his wife was equally adamant that Nicholas not get another chance to repair whatever damage he'd done.

"Thank you, Mister Smythe," Nicholas said.

Edwin frowned and walked quietly to the folding table under the eaves of the tent where his last bottle of beer sat—empty—beside the bottle opener. He reached for the opener, taking an extra moment for his reply. "Well, you'd just better be right that this is a misunderstanding, young man."

"It is."

Elizabeth emerged from the tent a few seconds later. "Who is it, Dad . . . ?" she trailed off upon seeing Nicholas, Claire, and Samuel standing there to one side of the tent. Her expression immediately darkened. "What are you three doing here?"

"Just listen for a second, Elizabeth, please," Nicholas said. "You couldn't have seen Claire and me kissing, because it never happened."

Edwin's eyes widened in sudden comprehension as he raised the freshly-opened bottle of beer to his lips. *So that's what happened*, he thought.

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed and found Samuel. "You believe this?"

He shrugged and set a hand on Claire's shoulder. "I trust her."

Nicholas took a few steps forward. "You see?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I know what I saw, Nicholas."

Nicholas gave an exasperated shrug. "What can I say to make you believe me? Last year, after we said goodbye, Claire found me walking through Siesta, and offered to keep me company. I was feeling kind of depressed, so I didn't say no. We went for a walk, and ended up playing table tennis. That's it!"

Elizabeth gave him a dubious look.

"Haven't you ever been in a situation where someone had half of the facts, and ended up jumping to all the wrong conclusions?" Nicholas reached for Elizabeth's hand. She

didn't jerk away. "A situation where you were falsely accused of something, where all you had was your word to back you up?"

Elizabeth bit her bottom lip, remembering a situation exactly like that. Pieter had jumped to all the wrong conclusions about her and Charles. He hadn't even been willing to consider the truth—that she'd been unable to refuse going out with Charles, because his father was an important client of Western Tanning, and refusal would have caused problems for her father.

"He's telling the truth, Elizabeth," Claire said. "Nothing happened."

Elizabeth shook her head. "Then what did I see?"

Nicholas frowned. "Are you sure it was even us?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't know, but trust me, it wasn't what you thought."

Elizabeth let out a long breath. "Okay, but I'm going to be watching you. Both of you," she added, sending Claire a warning look.

Nicholas nodded. "Fair enough. There won't be anything for you to see."

"So," Samuel began, "have you changed your mind about waterskiing tomorrow?"

Elizabeth looked thoughtful. "I don't know.... Isn't it dangerous?"

Nicholas shook his head. "No, if you fall, you fall in the water. It makes for a pretty soft landing."

"I'll go slow until you get the hang of it," Samuel added.

"Well..." Elizabeth glanced at her father. "What do you think, Dad?"

Edwin met his daughter's gaze. Until now he'd been studiously pretending that he wasn't listening. "It's fine with me, but you'd better ask your mother."

"Okay." Elizabeth turned back to Samuel. "I'll come, if my mom doesn't mind."

Samuel nodded. "Just let us know. We'll probably be going sometime after lunch tomorrow."

"Sounds good."

Claire smiled. "Well, we'd better get going. We were just about to get some things at the *Duka* when Nicholas found us. Hope to see you tomorrow, Elizabeth."

Claire and Samuel waved goodbye, and Nicholas and Elizabeth waved back. Once they'd left, Nicholas turned to Elizabeth, and asked: "You want to go for a walk?"

"Sure, I guess."

Nicholas reached for Elizabeth's hand, taking it in his, and started walking. Elizabeth kept pace beside him. There was a long, awkward moment where neither one of them could think of anything to say. Elizabeth was thinking about Charles. She'd just realized that this summer was turning out exactly like the last one, with her boyfriend at home completely unaware of Nicholas's existence.

But things *were* slightly different this time. Before Charles had left for England to finish high school, he'd told her to go ahead and date other guys if she couldn't wait for him—he'd get rid of them when he got back. So in a way he had given his approval. . . . Of course since then, he'd returned and they'd begun dating.

Nicholas broke into her thoughts then: "After you stopped writing to me, I didn't think I was going to see you again."

Elizabeth shook her head. "You wouldn't have, either."

Hearing the vestiges of anger in Elizabeth's voice, Nicholas frowned. Letting go of her hand, he stepped in front of her, intent on addressing whatever was left of her suspicions.

Her eyes were on the ground, and she didn't see him until she bumped right into him. "Hey, watch where you're . . ." Elizabeth trailed off at the look of startled revelation on Nicholas's face. She frowned. "What is it?"

A grin spread across his lips, and he grabbed her by the shoulders, his eyes alight with amusement. "I think I know what you saw last year."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "What did I see?"

"While we were walking, Claire did exactly the same thing to me that I just did to you. She stepped in front of me without warning, and I ran into her. If you'd been watching at that exact moment . . ." Nicholas shrugged. "From a distance it probably would have looked like we were kissing."

"Oh . . ." Elizabeth suddenly found that she was unable to meet Nicholas's gaze, and she could feel the color rising in her cheeks.

"That's what happened, isn't it?"

Absently biting her bottom lip, Elizabeth said: "It *could* have

been.”

Nicholas laughed and let go of her shoulders. “Well, that’s probably the closest we’ll get to figuring it out. But do me a favor, Elizabeth—” She looked up. “—the next time you think you see something, at least give me the benefit of the doubt long enough for me to explain.”

“Okay,” Lizzie said sheepishly, all her ire now drained away.

Nicholas smiled and took Elizabeth’s hand again. “Thank you.” Then turning to face her, he continued “Lizzie, we’ve wasted far too much time this last year with jealousy and misunderstandings—both of us! I mean, I thought you’d told Pieter about us, as I suggested at the end of our last summer together, and that he’d given you an ultimatum to never contact me, ever again, but now that I know what happened, I’ve a suggestion to make. . . . Let’s see if we can start over from where we left off last year—how about we walk back down to the Siestuary now, and restart this year’s summer from just after we said goodbye last year. Let’s edit out everything in-between then and now.”

Elizabeth looked into his eyes, a new-found softness apparent on her face, then smiling she said, “Yes, I’d like that very much!”

It had been a long, jealous winter, and that jealousy had almost cost her the sweetest, most enduring love story she’d ever had. She would have to find a way to repair the damage—to make it up to Nicholas. Yes, that’s exactly what was required. She would find a special way to surprise him!

* * *

Elizabeth had just received a crash course in waterskiing from Samuel. Now she was bobbing gently in the river, her life jacket snugged tight around her chest, holding the rope handle between her knees as instructed, and concentrating on keeping the points of her skis poking above the surface and aimed toward the boat. Samuel had assured her that he’d go slow. And Nicholas, having already gone before her, had reassured her, saying, “It’s a piece of cake. Just don’t make any sudden movements, and don’t try to stand up until the boat pulls you out of the water.”

Easy for you to say, Elizabeth thought, peering between the points of her skis to gaze at the back of Nicholas’s head where he sat beside Samuel’s little brother, Roderick, on the backseat

of the boat. Nicholas had spent a lifetime playing sports in boarding school, and probably had the necessary coordination and balance to make learning another one easy. *Then again*, she thought, *I did take ballet. I've probably got better balance than he does.*

Elizabeth saw Samuel turn to look over his shoulder and heard him shout: "Ready?" Snapping out of her thoughts, Elizabeth let go of the rope handle with one hand and raised it above the water in a thumbs-up gesture that she hoped he could see. "Okay, I'm going to start real slow, so you can get a feel for it." Elizabeth nodded, but he had already turned around.

She braced herself, gripping the rope handle with whitened knuckles that only a fish could see. And then she felt a gentle tug on the rope handle and the idling hum of the engine built to a crescendo. Suddenly, the rope began trying desperately to tear free of her hands, and the scenery was rushing by in a blur. She felt herself being lifted steadily from the water, as if cupped in an invisible hand. Nicholas was right. It *was* easy. A smile began to form on her lips. . . .

And vanished just as quickly.

There was an unanticipated flaw. She felt something tugging around her waist, weighing her down. The faster the boat sped, the higher it lifted her from the water, the heavier the tugging sensation became. A sudden panic gripped her. She was wearing a bikini, and the bottom was fast taking on water, growing heavier by the second, threatening to come right off!

She hesitated for a second, wondering what to do, and then her bikini bottom gave a sudden downward tug as the boat lifted her clear of the water. She felt a draft behind her and her eyes flew wide with the realization of what that meant. Fear overcoming sense, she hastily let go of the rope handle with one hand and reached around to secure her swimsuit.

That proved just enough to disrupt her precarious balance. She felt herself leaning too heavily to one side, and then the handle abruptly tore free of her hand. She had the briefest sensation of flying as she skied along the water without any boat to guide her, and then she felt herself falling backwards.

She heard a deafening *clap!* And then heard nothing at all as her head dipped beneath the surface, simultaneously silencing the inevitable splash and the roar of the boat's engine, but—

strangely—not the ringing in her ears. Half a second later, her life jacket bobbed her back to the surface, and she came up coughing. She had just enough time to feel grateful that she hadn't been hurt before the shock wore off and every shred of exposed skin along the backs of her arms and legs came alive with violent stinging—like thousands of tiny ants dancing all over her and biting at random. She bit her lip against the pain, counting the seconds until it passed. It didn't pass, but by the time Samuel brought the boat around and let it drift alongside her, the stinging had abated to a full body ache.

"What happened?" Nicholas asked. "You were doing so well!"

Elizabeth saw Roderick holding his nose and making a thumbs down gesture. He broke into a grin and snickered. "I saw your swimsuit coming off just before you fell."

This time both Samuel and Nicholas cuffed Roderick across the back of his head. He issued a startled: "Ow! What was that for?"

"I didn't see anything," Nicholas said, but there was a disingenuous note in his voice.

Samuel and Claire shook their heads, adding that they hadn't seen anything either.

"I lost my balance," Elizabeth quickly explained, feeling the heat rising in her cheeks.

Samuel shook his head. "Well, that was some fall you took—"

Roderick snickered again. "You should have seen the splash!"

Samuel shot him a warning look, then continued: "I suppose I already know what your answer will be, but do you want to try again?"

"No," Elizabeth said, wincing at the thought. She shook her head and tried to force a smile. "I think I'd rather watch all of you from the comfort and safety of the boat."

"I don't blame you," Claire said, having already wisely declined Samuel's offer to tow her behind the boat on a pair of skis.

* * *

Nicholas watched Elizabeth sidelong as he walked her back to her campsite. He felt a pang of sympathy as he saw how awkwardly she was picking her way across the grass. People were watching her with rueful smiles—no doubt the same ones who'd been watching as she fell off the skis.

"So, what else would you like to do today?" Nicholas asked.

"Hmmm . . . is there anything that doesn't involve sitting down?"

Nicholas laughed. "That sore, huh?"

Elizabeth nodded and narrowed her eyes at him. "You said that the water would be soft."

"When did I say that?"

"Yesterday. I asked if it would be dangerous, and you said that even if I fell, the water would provide a soft landing. . . ."

Nicholas gave a short laugh. "Yeah, I guess I did say something like that, didn't I?"

"Yes, and you—"

"Hey! *Vas vat!*" Nicholas's and Elizabeth's heads turned in unison, knowing already who they'd see. Standing just a few feet away, along the shore of the river, tending to his boat, was Uncle Flippy. He was staring at them beneath the brim of his floppy fisherman's hat, a broad grin on his face. Uncle Flippy was the one who had incessantly teased them for the past two Christmases about always walking hand-in-hand, as if their hands were stuck together with *vas vat*—superglue.

They came to stop in front of him, and Flippy pointed to Elizabeth's legs. "What's the matter—had starch for breakfast?"

Elizabeth shook her head, and Nicholas replied: "We went waterskiing and she fell. . . ."

Flippy grinned. "I know. I was watching—and by the way, Elizabeth, though it would be a lot less amusing for us old folks, sitting here watching from the riverbank, it would be better for you to wear a one-piece swimming costume when you're learning to water ski." Elizabeth blushed and Flippy's grin widened. He nodded to Nicholas. "And what about you? What's your excuse for walking like a pirate?"

Nicholas shrugged. "*Vas vat*," he said, lifting Elizabeth's hand in his. "I've got no choice but to waddle along beside her."

Flippy chuckled.

Irritated by Nicholas's implication that he was stuck with her, Elizabeth used the arm he had raised to conk him on the head. Shocked more than hurt, Nicholas turned and stared gapingly at her. Flippy's chuckling burst into laughter. "I guess you'd better watch what you say, then."

"I guess so," Nicholas said, grinning wryly.

Flippy's expression sobered. "You kids going to the dance

tomorrow night?"

Nicholas nodded. "Although, maybe not if Elizabeth is still feeling this sore tomorrow. . . ." he trailed off, frowning in Elizabeth's direction.

"I'll be fine."

Flippy nodded, his smile returning briefly only to fade again moments later. "Reason I ask is that Frederik isn't with us this year. I'd offer to take you myself, except—" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder to his boat. "—the blasted motor is all bollixed up. Caught the propeller on a submerged log this morning," he said, grimacing.

Nicholas followed the gesture over Flippy's shoulder, noticing now that the boat's outboard motor was missing. He shook his head. "Don't worry about it, Uncle Flippy. We'll figure something out."

"You're sure? Because I could always drive you."

"That's okay, we'll probably get a ride from my dad or brother."

"All right, well, nice seeing you again," Flippy said. "Tell your parents I said hi."

"We will. Bye." Elizabeth waved. Once they had waddled out of Flippy's earshot, she said to Nicholas, "Some things never change, do they?"

"What? *Vas vat?*" He grinned, looking down at their still-clasped hands and gave Elizabeth's hand a quick squeeze. "No, I suppose they don't."

Chapter 13

Knock knock knock knock—

“Don’t open up!” Constance whispered fiercely to her husband from her place on the floor of the camper’s kitchenette. Elizabeth was sitting beside her, looking bewildered and chagrined. “We’re not here.”

Edwin stared down at his wife and daughter for a long moment, his gaze flicking between them as he tried to blink the sleep from his eyes. He’d just been woken from a pleasant afternoon nap by the sound of someone using a fist like a jackhammer on his door, and now he was having trouble imagining why he shouldn’t silence the ruckus.

Constance gestured frantically for him to take his place beside her on the floor. “Sit down, Edwin!” she hissed, still whispering. “They might see you through a window!”

Edwin frowned. Had she lost her mind? What on earth was she doing on the kitchen floor, hiding from whomever was at the door? When he didn’t move to join her on the floor and just stood there looking and feeling perplexed, he saw her jaw clench.

“It’s your sister, Marianne,” she whispered.

His eyebrows elevated fractionally. *All the more reason to answer*, he thought. The knocking continued, and his head turned toward it. Unable to comprehend his wife’s behavior, he started for the door—

And felt a tug on his leg. He turned to look and saw that Constance was holding fast to his pant leg. “They’re just here to borrow money!” she hissed.

He frowned. That hadn’t occurred to him. . . . But then he shook his head, dismissing the possibility. While his sister’s family wasn’t well-to-do, they’d never had to petition their

relatives for loans. He frowned, wondering how his wife could possibly jump to that conclusion.

Seeing his indecision, Constance gave a vicious tug on his pant leg, and her eyes flashed dangerously at him. He knew that look. She was serious. Feeling confused and resentful, but ultimately resigned, Edwin sat down on the floor beside his wife and daughter, hiding from his own sister. . . .

The knocking continued.

Edwin glanced sideways to his wife. She was hugging her knees to her chest and staring straight ahead, her mouth moving, but no words coming out. Seeing that gave him a sudden jolt.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

Sounding far away, she replied, "Everyone's going to try to take it from us, but we can't give in. We mustn't! They've no right to it. . . ."

What is she on about? Edwin frowned. "Take what from us?"

She turned and stared at him like he'd just asked a stupid question. "Money."

Edwin blinked. *Money? Why should they want to—*

The knocking at the door renewed its intensity, interrupting his thoughts and bringing his head around. Again, he was tempted to answer the door. The only thing that stopped him was knowing the emotional deep freeze his wife would treat him to if he defied her.

* * *

Nicholas came to a gradual, slowing stop as he walked inside the Smythe family's tent. There, standing at the front door of her caravan, were two adults and two children that he didn't recognize. The man was knocking furiously on the door.

Nicholas's eyebrows drew together in confusion, and he stood there for handful of seconds, unnoticed, expecting to see the caravan door swing open and one or both of Elizabeth's parents step out. Instead, he heard an irritated sigh from the man, and then watched him continue rapping his knuckles on the door. *Maybe they're not here?*

Earlier in the day Elizabeth had agreed to meet him here—at her camper, at this time—to go play table tennis. *Something must have come up.* Nicholas wondered if he should leave and come back later. . . . He shook his head, deciding to wait in case Elizabeth came back from wherever she'd gone. In the

meantime, he would introduce himself.

"Hello," Nicholas said, coming up behind the family clustered in front of Elizabeth's camper. The man stopped his knocking, and the whole family turned toward him. Nicholas held a hand out to the man. "I'm Nicholas, Elizabeth's boyfriend."

The man hesitated, blinking once before shaking hands with Nicholas. "Henry, Elizabeth's uncle." The man was short, shorter than Nicholas by at least four inches, and had thinning brown hair. From the age of his children, Nicholas estimated him to be forty-something. Henry pointed to his wife, a short woman with dark hair. "This is my wife, Marianne—" She shook hands briefly with Nicholas and smiled warmly at him. "—and my two children, Gerry and Lucy," Henry finished, pointing to each of them in turn. Gerry had bright blonde hair and appeared to be about 10 years old, while Lucy looked just like her mother and was maybe seven. Gerry shook Nicholas's hand when he was introduced, but Lucy just smiled and blushed.

"Well, it's nice to meet all of you," Nicholas said. "I take it you came to visit?" Nicholas said, nodding toward the camper.

An irritated frown crossed Henry's face. "Yes. We knew they'd be here, so we drove three and half hours from Port Elizabeth just to visit with them, but now—" He shook his head and sighed. "—now it seems like they aren't here. I don't suppose you know where they've gone?"

"You drove all the way from Port Elizabeth? Wow. Well, I was supposed to meet Elizabeth here, but as you said, it seems like no one's here." Nicholas shrugged. "Their cars are still here, though, so they can't have gone far."

Henry's gaze suddenly sharpened. "True. I hadn't thought of that."

"Maybe they just went for a walk," Nicholas suggested.

Henry nodded. "Could be. Well, we'll just wait here for them, then." He gestured to one of the lawn chairs inside the tent. "You are welcome to wait with us if you like."

"Thanks," Nicholas said, going to the nearest chair and taking a seat.

* * *

Constance strained to hear the conversation going on outside the door of the camper. She was growing more and more irritated by the second.

“ . . . their cars are still here, so they can’t have gone far . . . ”

“ . . . we’ll just wait here for them, then.”

Stupid, foolish boy! Constance thought. *If it weren’t for you, they would have given up and gone home. Now we’re trapped in here!* She bit her lower lip, thinking hard.

“We have no choice now, dear,” Edwin whispered. “We’re going to have to go outside.”

Constance shot him an icy look, but he was right. She looked away and nodded, unable to meet his gaze as she conceded the point.

* * *

It was scarcely a minute after they’d all taken their seats inside the tent that they heard the caravan door swing open, and saw Elizabeth’s father appear in the doorway. Nicholas watched Edwin abruptly freeze in the open doorway, his face going blank with shock as he took in the scene before him.

“Oh . . .” Edwin said. “Well, this is a surprise!”

One by one, they rose from their seats. Nicholas was frowning. Elizabeth’s aunt and uncle were wearing matching frowns. *They were inside the whole time?* Nicholas wondered. *Didn’t they hear the knocking?* Sensing that he was intruding on a family gathering, Nicholas stayed off to one side.

“Why didn’t you knock?” Edwin asked from the doorway.

“We *did*.” Henry said, stopping in front of Edwin, his voice sounding angry. “Repeatedly. You must’ve heard us.”

Edwin’s eyebrows slowly elevated, and then he began shaking his head. “We didn’t hear a thing. We were sleeping.” As if on cue, Elizabeth and Constance appeared in the doorway behind Edwin. Constance was covering a yawn with her hand.

The three of them stepped out of the caravan to greet their relatives. Henry just narrowed his eyes and went on frowning. Nicholas noted that he didn’t bother to offer his hand to Edwin. Marianne was quicker to forgive, however, and took a few quick steps forward to give her brother a hug, which he received awkwardly.

Nicholas stood there for a long moment, staring blankly at the scene as it unfolded before him. Something didn’t fit with Edwin’s explanation. Even if all three of them had actually been sleeping, surely one of them would have heard the knocking? *Or else they’re a family of unusually deep sleepers.* . . . he thought, a smile cutting through his frown.

He snapped out of his thoughts as he saw Elizabeth catch his eye and start walking toward him.

"Hey," Elizabeth said, her voice strangely quiet. She smiled faintly.

"Hey," Nicholas returned. "I came to see if you're ready for that game of table tennis. . . . But it looks like you have some company right now," he said, nodding to her relatives.

"Yeah—" She gave her relatives a quick glance. It seemed like a nervous gesture to Nicholas. "—my aunt and uncle."

"I know. We've already met. Are they planning to stay for the night?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't know. I don't think so. Just for a couple of hours, probably."

"Okay, well, I'll come back later, then . . . or better yet, when they're gone, you can come and find me. I'll be at my parents' campsite."

"Okay." Elizabeth nodded, still looking and sounding uneasy.

Nicholas smiled and brushed her arm with his hand. "Later, then." She smiled back, and then he turned and walked briskly from Elizabeth's tent.

Well, that was awkward! he thought as he strode out into the bright afternoon sun. A gust of wind blew down through the trees, mussing his chestnut brown hair. His thoughts turned back to the scene he had just witnessed. He didn't know what to make of it.

* * *

A few hours later, after her relatives had left, Elizabeth was sitting in one of the folding lawn chairs in front of her family's tent, staring out over the river, thinking.

Now that they were gone, she could go find Nicholas. But whether by laziness or fatigue, she couldn't quite coax herself out of her chair. That, and she was still wondering about what had happened earlier in the day, when her mother had realized that it was her aunt and uncle at the door. *She hid on the floor of the camper, and forced me and Dad to hide as well. And her reason was . . .* Elizabeth was at a loss to finish that thought.

She didn't know what the reason was. Her mother had said something about them wanting to borrow money. *But that turned out to be far from the case. They just came to visit—*

"Well," came a voice to Elizabeth's left. She turned to see her mother taking a seat in the chair beside her, "at least they

didn't want to stay for supper."

Elizabeth frowned. "Mom . . ." Her mother's head turned toward her. "Why were we hiding from Uncle Henry and Aunt Marianne?"

Constance stared at her daughter for a handful of long, awkward seconds, then looked away and said, "They were just here to borrow money."

Elizabeth blinked, trying hard to understand. Maybe she had missed the part where they'd asked her parents for money. "How much did they ask for?"

Constance gave no reply.

Elizabeth began to wonder if her mother had heard her, so she began to repeat the question. "How—"

"They never asked," her mother's voice came back, sounding soft and curious as she stared out over the river.

Elizabeth blinked again. "Then how do you know they wanted to borrow—"

"Because that's what they do! They live on debt, beg the banks for money, and then struggle to pay the interest on their loans. *Every* year we come to Siesta, but they never visit. Why come to visit us *now*, *this* year? I'll tell you why. They heard about your father's promotion and now they want to see what's in it for them. Well, they'll get nothing from us! What did they have to do for it?"

"I see . . ." Elizabeth said, feeling more confused than ever.

"Everyone wants something, Elizabeth. And if you try to please them all, you wind up with nothing. No, let *them* work for it."

Not understanding what her mother was on about, Elizabeth decided to leave it at that. She got up from her chair—carefully, since she was still sore from yesterday's failed attempt to water ski—and said: "I'm going to go find Nicholas."

Constance nodded absently. "Don't forget to be back in time for supper."

Chapter 14

Hattie stood in front of her mother's full-length mirror, studying her reflection from head to toe. She was inside the camper, in her parent's bedroom, wearing her mother's sleeveless, shimmering blue evening gown, trying it on for size. It wasn't that dissimilar from the dress Elizabeth had received from their father for Christmas—the dress that Hattie had coveted so ardently. Their mother's dress was even prettier still. Hattie smiled; her straight, dark brown hair lay on her bare shoulders, contrasting beautifully with the pale, shimmering blue of the dress. She fluttered her, long dark lashes and stared deeply, experimentally into her own chocolate-brown eyes, trying to imagine what Eric would see just before they kissed. Tonight, at the dance, *she* would be the pretty one for a change.

Hattie turned side on to see her profile in the mirror. *It's a perfect fit! And it makes me look years older. . . . Won't Eric be surprised!*

She bit her lip nervously. *That is, if Mom lets me wear it.* She shouldn't have even tried it on without asking first. But she had just *known* she would look good in it. And there it was: the mirror didn't lie.

Hattie elicited a small smile. Her parents had just gone shopping. They wouldn't be back for hours, so no one would have to know that she'd tried the dress on without permission. Hattie pirouetted in the small room, imagining that she was already at the dance—

"What on *earth* do you think you are you doing?"

Hattie froze, paling instantly at the sight of her mother standing in the open doorway of the tiny bedroom. "I—I thought you went shopping with Dad."

"I left my purse. You haven't answered my question. What are you doing wearing my dress?"

Hattie's face flushed and her gaze dropped to the floor. "I wanted to try it on for the dance tonight," she said in a small voice.

"Foolish girl! What ever made you think I would let you wear it to the dance tonight? Now, quickly, take it off before you ruin it."

Hattie bit her lip to keep the tears at bay. "But I can't think of anything else to wear! None of my clothes are as beautiful . . . I promise to be careful—"

"Out of the question. Besides which, you make the dress look positively frumpish. It looks ugly on you. But then I suppose that isn't terribly surprising." Hattie bit her lip harder. She would not cry. She poured all of her tears into rage and forced her feelings beneath the surface. Slowly, wordlessly, she began to undress.

* * *

Nicholas looked down at his plate and considered taking another bite of his hamburger. Having eaten a big breakfast, he wasn't very hungry, but when Elizabeth had invited him to join her family for lunch, he had accepted anyway so he could spend more time with her. Nicholas looked up from his plate. Everyone was eating in silence, their eyes on their food. Nicholas hated silence.

"So, Hattie, I hear you're going to the dance tonight?" he said, trying to break through the pensive look on her face. Hattie looked up from her plate and a half-eaten hamburger.

"Yes, but I still have to find something to wear."

Nicholas saw Hattie glance meaningfully at her mother. Constance, intent on her food, missed the look.

"Well, that can't be too hard . . ." Nicholas trailed off at the despondent frown that Hattie offered for a reply. He raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps your mother or Elizabeth could help you find something?" he said, nodding sideways to Elizabeth where she sat eating beside him.

Hattie shook her head, and her gaze returned to her mother. "My mother could help me, but she won't."

At that, Constance looked up from her plate, and her eyes narrowed. "You're not going to wear my dress tonight, and

that's the end of it."

Nicholas's eyebrows drew together in confusion now. Feeling like he was missing something, he watched as mother and daughter stared at one another across the grassy gap between their lawn chairs—Hattie looking furious, her eyes glistening with ill-concealed tears, and Constance staring blankly back. Nicholas turned to Elizabeth, hoping she would explain, but Elizabeth was looking just as confused as he was. Nicholas noted peripherally that Edwin was studiously ignoring the building confrontation, his gaze riveted to the plate of food on his lap.

"Why not?" Hattie challenged just as Constance was picking up her hamburger for another bite. The hamburger froze halfway to Constance's mouth, and she calmly met her daughter's blazing brown eyes.

"Because I said so." Constance replied, and then took a bite of her hamburger.

Hattie gave no reply, but she didn't look away from her mother. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly with barely-contained fury. Nicholas almost winced. Hattie looked like she was about to explode.

"I don't know why you won't let me borrow it," Hattie began, almost matter-of-factly. "It's not like it looks good on you anymore." Nicholas felt his jaw drop. Now the look on Constance's face was anything but calm. Even Edwin had stopped trying to feign indifference to what he was hearing. Everyone was staring at Hattie. She gave a small, bitter smile and then continued, "It makes you look *old*. But then I suppose that isn't terribly surprising—you *are* old."

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then Constance turned to her husband. "Did you hear what your daughter just said to me?" Edwin almost choked on his food, but Constance turned back to Hattie before he could reply. "You, my girl, have spared yourself the trouble of finding something to wear tonight." Hattie's eyebrows rose and pinched together, as if she were both surprised and confused by her mother's statement.

"You won't need to find something to wear, because you won't be going to the dance."

"But that's not fair!" Hattie exploded. "Elizabeth's going!"

"*Elizabeth* didn't have the gall to insult me like you just did."

Nicholas watched as Hattie sent Elizabeth a look full of

loathing and resentment, and he found himself wondering why Elizabeth should be the target of her sister's rage. What had she done? But Hattie didn't appear to be in a very reasonable mood. Her eyes were brimming with tears, her face was flushed, and her lower lip was visibly trembling.

Suddenly, Hattie sprang up from her chair, sending her plate and food flying into the grass at her feet, and then she ran with wild abandon for the tent. A moment later, Nicholas heard the camper door slam.

Silence.

Nicholas watched as slowly, wordlessly, everyone went back to eating. Nicholas blinked down at the hamburger on his plate. It was now more unappetizing than ever. And as much as Nicholas hated silence, this time he didn't dare break it. Silence would've been preferable to the drama he'd just unleashed.

* * *

"What got into your sister earlier?" Nicholas asked from his place beside Elizabeth on the old, gray bench in the Siestuary.

Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't know. She's just being difficult, like always."

"Like always?"

Elizabeth gave a helpless shrug. "She's always been like that . . . moody."

"Huh. Strange. If that's the case, I don't know how your mother puts up with it."

"A mother's love, I guess. She's always been long-suffering, even when Hattie was little."

"Hattie was moody as a baby, too?"

Elizabeth shot him a dry look. "No, silly . . . well, maybe she was, I don't know. But I was talking about something else. . . ."

"Oh?"

Elizabeth hesitated, then turned to face Nicholas. "I'll tell you, but you have to promise not to ever bring it up in front of my mother. She's very sensitive about it."

Nicholas nodded. "Of course."

Elizabeth took a deep breath before she began. "When Hattie was a baby, she was always getting sick, in and out of hospitals. We took her to dozens of doctors, but none of them could ever figure out what was wrong with her.

"No matter what the doctors tried, nothing seemed to work.

And through it all—the overnight hospital stays, the tests and procedures, the visits to the emergency room in the middle of the night—my mother never left her side. She was tireless, and even though the doctors had no clue what was wrong with Hattie, my mom always managed to nurse her back to health.”

“Wow,” Nicholas commented. “And after all that, Hattie still gives your mother so much uphill?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “She was too young to remember or appreciate what my mom did for her. I suppose my mom was used to it, though. She used to be a nurse, and a very good one—or so I hear.”

“It sounds like your mother was a saint,” Nicholas said. Elizabeth nodded, and Nicholas thought to ask, “Is Hattie still sickly?”

“No, she suddenly got better when she was about three years old. My mother said it was a miracle. The doctors said it was due to her expert care, praising her as a brilliant nurse. They even wanted to give her some kind of award I think.”

“Wow—that’s strangely ungrateful,” Nicholas remarked.

“That’s not all,” Lizzie added. “As she grew, her tantrums got so bad that my mother arranged to drop her off in a boarding-school for a week to teach her a lesson and make her behave.”

“I think you mentioned that last year,” Nicholas replied, still shocked even though it was the second time he’d heard about it. “But didn’t you say it was an orphanage?”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows drew together in confusion. “No, I don’t think so. . . . though it could have been I suppose. I don’t really know what that place was.”

“Well, I’ve been in boarding school since I was eight, and I can assure you they don’t take children for just a week. One year or one term maybe, but not one week. No, it must have been something else.”

Now it was Lizzie’s turn to look surprised. “Well, I thought it must have been a boarding school, but come to think of it, it seemed to just be a big house of sorts.”

“Sounds to me like it must have been an orphanage, Lizzie. That’s the only reasonable explanation, given your description. Orphanages are known to temporarily help families to cope in a crisis by taking care of children for parents who are in dire straights, or unable to properly care for their children—but of course, many times the parents never return to claim them.”

"Yes, I suppose that must have been what it was, then," Lizzie replied. "And I remember my mother lecturing Hattie, telling her that we would not return to get her and take her home again unless she stopped having tantrums."

"Huh." Shocked, Nicholas didn't know what else to say. Absently, he gazed out over the river, and then shaking his head, he let out a sigh. "Even if Hattie can't remember any of your mother's long-suffering care in her infancy, surely she remembers all of that?"

"Yes—a week later my mother contacted them and they said that she'd stopped her tantrums, so we went to get her, to take her back home."

"And?"

"As she grew old enough to think things through, whenever my mother was angry with her, she would just look at my mom and say: 'How could you have done that to me? How could you do that to a little girl? I will never forget it, not for as long as I live!' Then she'd just turn and walk away."

"Ouch . . . that's a terribly sad story, Lizzie! What was your mom's reaction—did your mom ever say sorry to Hattie?"

Lizzie hesitated for a while, then said: "No, she felt justified in having done that and would always express her annoyance to me that Hattie kept on throwing that incident in her face."

Nicholas shook his head. "I guess I understand your sister a bit better now, and I'd have to say I'm inclined to be much more leery of your mother—she sounds very cold!"

Lizzie, looking defensive, tried to explain, "My mother grew up in boarding school, just like you, Nicholas, but from age six. She always tells me that whilst her sister often did, she refused to cry—but on the rare occasions when she did cry, she would do so in the shower, so that nobody could see her weakness."

"That's so unnatural! When I was a little boy, every time my mom said goodbye to me and drove away, leaving me for another 12 weeks or so in boarding school, I'd just stand there, watching her leave, unable to move, and I'd cry until one of the other boys came over to me and asked if I wanted to play *football* with them."

Lizzie squeezed his hand. "I'm glad you have that soft side, Nicholas—that you're able to be honest about your feelings without feeling ashamed of them."

Nicholas just smiled and shrugged. "Even the boys that tried

to seem brave weren't really. That first night for us all back in boarding school, after lights out, I'd hear more than a few sniffles, and yes, some of them were my own. Imagine 50 or more of us little boys lying in the junior dormitory, row upon row in our hospital-style beds, trying to get comfortable on those lumpy old mattresses, all forced to accept the reality of where we were again—far from home and our families. Crying about that isn't weakness. It's just human." He smiled at her now. "Judging from your reactions each time we've said goodbye, I'd say you're not a lot different from me."

Looking up at Nicholas, Lizzie realized that unlike what had happened with her mother, his adversities had somehow made him able to feel the hurt of others, and that she'd never fooled him in trying to hide any of her feelings from him. He'd noticed and accurately gauged the depth of her emotions every time.

Feeling it necessary now to at least try to explain her mother's toughness, Lizzie replied, "But my mother's determination to never show any weakness must have made her strong in some ways—she became the head-girl of Queenstown Girl's High in the 1940's and—"

"But Lizzie, you do not have to be hard and heartless to be a good leader. I've known several head-boys at St. Andrews, and also many head-girls at our sister school, St. Michael's, and they were all very nice people who had earned the respect of their classmates. None of them tried to impress us by appearing superhuman and hard as nails."

Uncomfortable now, Lizzie cleared her throat. "Nicholas, can we rather talk about something else?"

Nicholas nodded. "Sure." He turned to watch as a speedboat raced up the river. He gave a short laugh, remembering Elizabeth's attempt to water ski yesterday.

"What?" Elizabeth asked.

"I was just remembering something." Nicholas noticed Elizabeth glaring at him, and he turned to her with a wry grin.

"It wasn't funny."

"Well, that all depends where you were standing—or falling—as the case may be."

She punched his arm.

"Hey! What was that for?"

She grinned. "To wipe that smug look off your face."

Chapter 15

Johann watched with an amused grin as Nicholas and Elizabeth crossed the parking lot of Fairy Knowe, walking hand-in-hand from his car to the dance. When he'd heard that Flippy couldn't take them to the dance this year, he'd offered to give them a ride even before Nicholas could ask him. Having gone through it all before, it was infinitely amusing for Johann to watch as, one by one, his children were turned into walking pin cushions by cupid's arrows. *Once upon a time, that was me*, he thought, watching Nicholas go.

As Nicholas and Elizabeth walked out of sight, Johann looked away and turned the key in the ignition. According to Constance's wishes, he would be back again just before midnight to pick them up.

Johann turned the knob on his car radio, simultaneously turning it on and turning up the volume. He tuned the radio with the other knob and found the news. He listened with half an ear as he drove back along the coast.

Alongside the road, a seemingly endless sandy beach glowed a faint yellow-orange in the light of the sinking sun. The ocean had darkened to a deep, angry blue that was growing ever closer to black, but the waves still sparkled white as they crashed and rolled in to shore.

Just before reaching the turnoff to Siesta, the radio announcer caught Johann's attention with what he was saying. Johann's face grew lined. The announcer was describing in grim tones how just a few hours ago a car bomb had exploded during rush-hour in the capital city of Pretoria, killing 19 and wounding more than 200. The bomb was suspected to have been planted by the military wing of the African National Congress, as among the dead were two

suspected ANC operatives—Freddie Shangwe and Ezekial Maseko. Apparently the bomb had gone off early, catching them in the blast.

The newscaster reported that the target was probably supposed to have been the headquarters of the South African Air Force, but since the bomb went off prematurely and during rush hour, more civilians than military personnel had been killed. More than 20 ambulances had been called to take the dead and wounded to the hospital.

Johann sighed and switched off the radio.

He didn't necessarily agree with apartheid*—after all, he spent his time treating Blacks in rural Africa, instead of Whites in a hospital in one of the cities. Black or White, people were *people* the world over, and he'd have been happy to see apartheid go . . . but not like this. Surely there were better, more peaceful ways of accomplishing that. He shook his head wearily as he took the turnoff to Siesta. What was happening to South Africa? *It used to be such a peaceful country.*

* * *

Elizabeth was having trouble keeping her laughter in check as she watched Nicholas dance. The band had decided to liven things up a bit, and they had succeeded beyond their wildest dreams with Nicholas. He was dancing like an oversized, over-caffeinated chipmunk. Of course, she'd seen him dance to fast songs before, but it never ceased to amuse her. He was either under a gross misapprehension about his skills on the dance floor, or else he was just patently lacking in self-consciousness. Elizabeth laughed. *Knowing him, probably a little of both.*

Nicholas grinned wryly at her. "What's so funny?" he asked above the din of the band.

She pointed at him. He made a show of turning to look behind him, still dancing as he did so. He turned back to her shaking his head. "I agree," he shouted, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "That guy over there is dancing like a peacock."

Elizabeth laughed again. "I was pointing at you."

"Me?" Nicholas said, putting a hand to his chest. "Are you trying to say I dance funny?"

* *Apartheid*: A legislated system of racial segregation which existed in South Africa from 1948 to 1994

"Never," Elizabeth said, but her grin suggested otherwise.

The song ended then, and Nicholas ceased making a spectacle of himself. Turning to Elizabeth, he said, "You want to get some fresh air?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Sure."

As they walked outside together, Elizabeth stifled a gasp. The damp, chilly air enveloped her like a wet blanket. Looking up she could see no stars, no moon, and looking straight ahead, down toward the river, she could barely see the outlines of the palm trees lining the riverbank. Everything was shrouded in a pearly mist. *In the middle of summer?* she wondered.

"Where did that come from?" Elizabeth asked. A slight breeze blew in, and she felt a chill course through her, which quickly progressed into a shiver.

Seeing that, Nicholas took hold of her hand, lacing his fingers through hers. In answer to her question, he shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe it blew in from the ocean. It's really something, huh?"

"I can hardly see!"

They reached the river and stood silently peering into the dark, misty night. Between the darkness and the mist it was impossible to see the opposite bank of the river, even though it was only fifty meters away.

Elizabeth turned to Nicholas and whispered, "It's otherworldly."

Nicholas nodded quietly, looking out over the river. After a long moment of watching the silvery mist drift and swirl across the water, he said, "Come on, let's go for a walk."

Elizabeth turned to him with eyebrows raised. "In this?"

"Why not? It's kind of magical, don't you think?"

She smiled. "I suppose. But where would we walk to?"

Nicholas gestured down the grassy riverbank. "Down that way."

Elizabeth nodded. "Okay."

They started walking, slowly, hand in hand, down along the riverbank. The thick mist made it seem as though they would either be able to go on walking forever or else for just a few more meters.

As they walked, they heard the boats tied up along the shore, bobbing gently in time to the steady sloshing of water against their sides.

“So—” Elizabeth began. Nicholas half-turned to give her his attention, keeping an eye on the ground to make sure that he didn’t trip over some unseen obstacle. “—how come your brother decided not to come to the dance tonight?”

Nicholas shrugged. “He’s going tomorrow night instead. My dad agreed to let him borrow the car, so I guess he’ll have more freedom if he’s by himself.”

“He’s going with Linda?”

Nicholas nodded.

“They seem pretty serious,” Elizabeth commented, having just last night accidentally caught the two of them kissing on one of the benches along the river.

Nicholas shrugged. “I guess.”

“What do you mean you guess? He’s your brother; don’t you two talk about that kind of stuff?”

“Not really. Because of boarding school and the age difference between us, we didn’t grow up together, so we’ve never been very close.”

“Oh.”

They continued walking, the conversation momentarily drying up as they admired their surroundings—surroundings which were anything but dry. It hadn’t rained, but moisture was clearly visible all around them. It felt as though the mist were clinging to them—cold and clammy. Elizabeth shivered again, and Nicholas let go of her hand to put his arm around her shoulders.

Coming up on their right was the Fairy Knowe’s swimming pool, surrounded by outdoor lights which lit up fuzzy, yellow globes of mist.

“Look, there’s a bench there.” Nicholas said, pointing to it.

Elizabeth followed his gesture. Sure enough, emerging a few dozen meters in front of them was a wooden bench overlooking the river. “Let’s sit for a while,” Elizabeth said, slowing to a stop as they came upon the bench.

“Sure.” Nicholas waited for Elizabeth to take a seat and then sat down beside her. He put his arm around her shoulders again to keep her warm, but a moment later a stiff breeze blew off the water, and he felt her shiver anyway. “You’re cold,” he said.

She shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. You’re shivering. Here—” Nicholas’s arm

disappeared from her shoulder, and he began removing his suit jacket.

"Won't you get cold if you give me your jacket?"

"I'm used to it. Where I live, in the Drakensberg Mountains, it's always chilly at night." He held his jacket out to her.

She gave him a dubious look. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay. . . ." She leaned forward, and he draped the jacket around her shoulders. Settling back against the bench, Elizabeth felt Nicholas drape his arm around her shoulders once more.

"Look at that!" Nicholas said, pointing up. Elizabeth followed his gesture, and saw that there, above them, appearing through a gap in the mist was a full moon, encircled by a thick, multicolored halo.

"Wow . . . it's beautiful. Like a rainbow."

"Looks like the mist is clearing."

Elizabeth looked around her. "I don't see that. It looks the same as before."

"Look closer." Elizabeth did, peering across the river. After a moment she shook her head.

He just smiled and nodded toward the opposite bank of the river. "Keep looking."

And a minute later, as if an invisible hand had parted the mist before her eyes, the opposite bank of the river emerged, lit in shades of pearl and silver by the now unfettered glow of the moon. She turned to Nicholas again. "How did you know?"

His smile spread. "Because, sooner or later, it had to clear."

Elizabeth gave him a dry look. "You mean you had me looking for something that might have taken hours?"

Nicholas laughed and kissed her on the top of her head. "Maybe," he said, his voice close beside her ear.

She turned her head, meeting his gaze with her own. Her eyes dipped to his mouth, only inches away. She felt his breath, playing warmly and steadily across her lips. Another shiver coursed through her, but this time it wasn't from the cold.

This time, there were no visions of Pieter surfacing from her memory. No visions of Charles, either. He didn't know about Nicholas, but strangely, she suspected he wouldn't much care if he did. He was so supremely confident that a little

competition would probably only encourage him. So, this time, as her lips drifted close to Nicholas's, there were no uncomfortable pangs of doubt or guilt twisting in her gut to accompany the spreading warmth she felt in her chest.

Her head went right, his went left, their eyes closed, and suddenly every vestige of the chill she'd felt earlier was gone. She was aware of his arm tightening around her shoulders, pressing her lips harder to his, and she felt his other hand soft and caressing on her cheek.

His lips moved over hers, like the whisper of a summer breeze blowing through the rushes along the riverbank. Elizabeth reached a hand up to his chest, grabbing a fist full of his shirt and pulling him closer.

Eventually, he pulled away, leaving her sitting there in a dreamy haze.

"We should be heading back. It's getting late," he whispered.

"What . . . ? Oh—yes . . . I suppose we should."

Nicholas rose from the bench and held his hand out to her. She took his outstretched hand and stood up from the bench, realizing as she did so that her legs were reluctant to hold her.

As they walked back along the river, through the fading tendrils of mist, Elizabeth quietly bit her lip. She wasn't feeling guilty, at least, she didn't think so. She'd tell Charles about Nicholas as soon as she could. Rather, she was feeling confused. She had left Charles in Wellington, feeling annoyed that she had to accompany her family to Siesta, knowing that she'd be counting the days until she'd be back with him. That was before she'd known that Nicholas was going to find a way back into her heart. And now that he had, it was difficult for her to decide who had a more rightful claim to it. . . .

With a quiet sigh, she decided that it was impossible to have one's heart torn in two directions at once and not feel confused. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that the moon was casting Nicholas's features in a silvery hue, making him seem, for a moment, years older than he really was. And for a fleeting second, she had a glimpse of her and Nicholas, old and gray, sitting together on a bench beneath a star-dappled sky. . . .

Elizabeth frowned, pushing the image away. It was too soon to be having thoughts like that!

Wasn't it?

Chapter 16

The view from the restaurant of the Holiday Inn was just as Elizabeth remembered it: a panoramic view of the deep, rippling blue ocean stretching infinitely out to the horizon. In the near distance, long bands of white froth rolled the last quarter mile to the shore. Despite the soft classical music in the background, Elizabeth could still hear the muted crashing of the waves on the sandy shore below.

She turned her head lazily from the view and met Nicholas's gaze with a smile. "It's amazing. It doesn't even feel like a year since the last time we were here; nothing's changed."

Nicholas began nodding slowly. "Not here, anyway."
"What do you mean?"

Nicholas's eyes hardened and he looked away. He was silent for a long moment before replying. "Did you hear what happened in Pretoria?" Elizabeth's frown told him that she had. He nodded once. "Then you know what I mean."

She shook her head. "I don't understand, though. Why did they do that? How does setting off a bomb on a busy street help them defeat apartheid?"

"Peaceful means of protest are too slow for some." Nicholas shook his head. "But you're right—it doesn't make sense, because now people can point at them and say, 'See, we were right to oppress them. They're just a bunch of savages.' But it gives them newspaper coverage and attention they might otherwise lack—even if it is negative attention." Nicholas laughed dryly. "What really gets me is that they blow up shopping malls and school buses, and shoot up churches and then claim that they're *freedom* fighters. Hah!"

The waiter chose that moment to arrive with their drinks—sparkling apple cider, *hard* apple cider, which this year even

Elizabeth was legally able to enjoy. Nicholas thanked him, and the waiter said, "*Gesondheid*." He was the same waiter they'd always had.

Nicholas raised his glass. "To the future, may it grow more certain in time."

Looking perplexed by his toast, Elizabeth raised her own glass. "Cheers."

"*Gesondheid*," he returned, "and now, Lizzie, you can drink apple cider without even me as your guardian," he said to her, with a wink. She smiled; then they clinked glasses and drank.

Elizabeth saw a shadow cross Nicholas's face as he set his glass down. She watched his head dip to study his hands where they were resting on the table, clasped around his glass. After a few seconds of pensive silence, she asked, "Penny for your thoughts?"

His mouth quirked into a small, lopsided smile, and he looked up. "Is that your best offer?"

"Two pennies, then?"

Nicholas laughed. "I suppose that will have to do. I was just thinking about us actually."

"Us?" Elizabeth echoed, wondering at his use of the word. Did they even qualify as an "us"?

"Yeah . . . you know I'm going to the air force next year, right?"

Elizabeth blinked. She hadn't really thought about it. It was just a fact of life that all the young men in South Africa had to do at least one-and-a-half years of military service when they finished high school, and some as much as two. Pieter had. Nicholas's brother had. And now Nicholas would have to as well.

"Next year?" she asked.

Nicholas nodded.

"So soon?"

"Well, not as soon as I'd like. They're drafting me in July, when I turn 18, which means I'm only going for one-and-a-half years, but I'm also going to have six months with nothing to do."

Elizabeth wasn't sure what to say. She watched as Nicholas took another sip of his cider, and she decided to fill the silence

* *Gesondheid*: Afrikaans for *cheers*, but meaning *health*.

by doing the same.

Nicholas set his glass down and spent a moment contemplating its golden depths. "I'll probably get a job working for Denise's family."

Denise. His girlfriend. Elizabeth felt a pang of . . . what? Jealousy? She frowned. "That sounds like a good idea. . . ." So why did it make her feel sick to her stomach?

Nicholas looked up from studying his drink, a wry grin spreading across his face. "The way you said that, it almost sounded like you meant the opposite."

Elizabeth felt a jolt go through her. Was she really that transparent? She forced a smile and shook her head. "No, it *does* sound like a good idea. After all, what else would you do? You'd get bored with nothing to do for six whole months."

"Yes, I would. . . ." Nicholas trailed off, his brow furrowing in thought. They were getting off topic. He'd had a reason for bringing up his impending military service. He wanted to tell Elizabeth that he probably wasn't going to be able to make it to Siesta next year. He wasn't sure, but he was fairly certain from what he remembered of his brother's time in the military that during the first six months—basic training—he wouldn't be allowed to go very far from base, and even if he was allowed to, he wouldn't get more than a couple days leave for Christmas. *Not nearly enough time to make a trip to Siesta.* And the following year . . . well, even if he could make it as far as Siesta, it was still going to be two years before they would see each other again. "Elizabeth . . ."

"Yes?" she replied, smiling sweetly at him.

Nicholas hesitated. She was oblivious, blissfully unaware of the bad news he was about to deliver. *Why tell her, then? Why ruin the rest of our time together?* No, the bad news could wait. He could tell her at the end of their holiday, when they were saying goodbye. *She'll be sad then, anyway.* Nicholas forcibly brightened his expression. "Do you know how beautiful you are?"

Her eyebrows elevated in surprise and amusement. "No, so why don't you tell me?"

"Well," he began, "you're as beautiful as—" Nicholas broke off as peripherally he saw the waiter returning to their table.

"Would you like anything else?" the waiter asked.

"Ah . . ." Nicholas turned to Elizabeth with eyebrows raised,

deferring the question. She shook her head, and Nicholas turned back to the waiter. "No, thanks."

"Okay, just let me know if you change your mind," the waiter replied. Almost as an afterthought he added, "You two going to the Christmas Eve ball on Monday night?"

"No," Nicholas replied, our parents are going to be there and we've decided that's not exactly going to be ideal for us, so we'll have to make other plans for Christmas Eve," he said.

Lizzie smiled and added, "Yes, I have other plans for the night before Christmas." A secretive look spread across her face, unnoticed by Nicholas.

The waiter nodded and began turning to walk away. As Nicholas watched him leave, he was struck by a sudden curiosity about the waiter who had served them for the past three years. They knew nothing about him—not even his name—and who knew if he would still be there when Nicholas returned to Siesta in two years' time.

"Actually—" He waited for the waiter to turn around. "—there is something we'd like." The waiter inclined his head, and withdrew a pen and pad from his apron. "Your name."

The waiter blinked, shock momentarily registering before his face broke into a grin. "Corey."

Nicholas held out his hand. "I'm Nicholas." The waiter pocketed his pen and paper, then took Nicholas's hand and shook it. "This is my girlfriend, Elizabeth," Nicholas said, gesturing to her. It was the first time he had introduced Elizabeth as his girlfriend, and he watched her face carefully for a reaction. There was a momentary flicker of surprise, and then she smiled and extended her hand to Corey.

"Hello, I'm Nicholas' girlfriend, Elizabeth," she said, feeling a strange new warmth spreading through her as the significance of his choice of words dawned on her. *I'm his girlfriend now. . . .*

Nicholas turned back to the waiter. "Do you live around here?"

Corey shook his head. "My family has a home on the beach, and I come here for Christmas break. I work here—" He spread his hands to indicate the restaurant. "—to earn some money while I'm on holiday."

"Oh. If this is just a part-time job, then what do you do for the rest of the year?"

"I'm studying medicine at the University of Cape Town."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. "Really? So is my brother. Maybe you know him. Philip Strauss?"

"Oh, I know him quite well. We've had a number of classes together."

"Huh. Go figure. Small world."

"Apparently. And what about you two? I see you here every year. What's your story?" Corey cast a glance over his shoulder to make sure his other customers weren't waiting for him. He wasn't supposed to be standing around in idle conversation, but the restaurant wasn't particularly busy.

"We also come here with our families during Christmas holidays, but when we do we stay in Siesta."

The waiter nodded. "I know it well. So, are you both still in school, or . . . ?"

Nicholas shook his head and pointed to Elizabeth. "She's going into *Matric** next year, and I've just *matriculated*."[†]

"Oh, well, then I guess you've received your call up papers already?"

Nicholas nodded and sighed. "I'll be going into the air force on my 18th birthday—the third of July—next year."

Corey grimaced. "That's poor timing, but at least you'll probably only have to do 18 months. Still, I don't envy you. I was so relieved when I finished my military service. . . ." He shook his head, remembering. "But you're lucky you know. Not many people get to go to the air force. Most go to the army." Nicholas nodded and the waiter went on, "Well, I guess I won't be seeing you here for—" Nicholas cut the waiter off with a hard look and a quick shake of his head. He didn't want Corey to tell Elizabeth that he wouldn't be able to come back to Siesta next year before he had a chance to break it to her himself. Corey recovered smoothly. "—another year, since Christmas break is almost over."

Elizabeth missed the byplay. "We'll probably come back at least once more before we go home, so we'll see you again before next year."

"Good." Corey winked at Elizabeth. "I could use the tips."

Elizabeth laughed.

The waiter nodded to her. "And you? What are you planning

* *Matric*: the final year of high school

† *Matriculated*: graduated

to do when you matriculate next year?"

She shrugged, as if the question were of no importance, or had been decided long ago. "I'm also going to study medicine at the University of Cape Town."

"Really?" Surprise was evident in Corey's voice. "Well, it really *is* a small world, then." He began nodding. "But you know . . . it's a very exclusive program. They only accept thirty new students a year. How do you know you'll be one of them?"

"Well, I don't, I guess, but my mother says my grades are more than good enough to get in, so long as I do well in my final year."

"Ah. Well, if you do get accepted, you're really going to enjoy it. The medical program at UCT is one of the best in the world. Did you know that the man who performed the world's first successful heart transplant did so there?"

Elizabeth smiled. "My mother won't let me forget it."

Corey turned back to Nicholas. "And you? You're going to join her at UCT, I suppose?"

"As soon as I get out of the military."

The waiter frowned, studying them carefully. "Hmmm . . . you two going steady yet?"

Nicholas shook his head. "No. We only get to see each other during Christmas break."

"Ah, well, I guess it won't be a problem, then."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. "What won't be a problem?"

Corey hesitated and sent Elizabeth a meaningful glance. "You're going to be in the military during her first year at university. . . ." Corey trailed off, expecting Nicholas to fill in the blanks. Nicholas had no trouble doing so, but Elizabeth's brow furrowed in confusion.

"So?" she asked.

Corey just stared at her, waiting for her to figure it out. When she didn't, he elaborated: "Well . . . look at you. There's going to be no shortage of guys wanting to go out with you."

Elizabeth blushed and smiled. She opened her mouth to say something, then abruptly hesitated and sent Nicholas a guilty look, as if she'd just realized he was there. She turned back to the waiter and said, "Thank you."

There was an awkward silence in which Nicholas tried to determine the meaning of the look Elizabeth had given him. Corey hadn't missed Elizabeth's hesitation either, but he

covered his curiosity by looking around the room to see if any of the other customers were trying to get his attention. Turning back to them, he pursed his lips and said, "Well, it was nice talking to you two, but I should probably see to my other customers now—make sure they all feel like leaving big tips. I'll be back later with your bill."

"Okay," Elizabeth said. "Bye."

Nicholas nodded absently. "*Tot siens, Corey.*" He was thinking about what Corey had said. "*You're going to be in the military during her first year at university. . . . Look at you.*" Nicholas was looking straight at her. "*There's going to be no shortage of guys wanting to go out with you.*"

"Are you okay?" Elizabeth frowned at him.

Nicholas snapped out of it and quickly covered his expression with a smile. "Of course."

She stared dubiously back at him, expecting him to elaborate, but Nicholas picked up his glass and took a long sip of his apple cider so that he wouldn't have to. Unless she was mistaken, this was the first time she'd seen a hint of jealousy in his eyes, but he seemed to be intent on hiding it from her.

Elizabeth decided now was the right time. "Nicholas," she began.

"Yes, Lizzie?"

"Why haven't you taken me upstream in a canoe yet—back to our waterfall? Are you scared? Should I be?"

Nicholas reached across the table and took both her hands in his. Smiling, he looked gently into her eyes as unblinking, he replied, "No, Lizzie, I'm not scared—and you needn't be either. At this point it would take an awful lot for me, and I'm just guessing here, but I think for you, too, to cross any lines we've drawn in the sand in our previous two summers. Heck, every time I hear the word 'Waterfall,' I wince, wondering how we'll ever end up crossing those lines if one day . . ."

"One day may never come for us, Nicholas, so let's just enjoy the time we have together while we have it."

Then before he could respond, she came right to her point. "Nicholas—tomorrow night is Christmas Eve, both our parents are going out dancing and from past experience, I know they'll be out till the early hours of Christmas. So, since we've already decided that it won't be any fun going to the dance with them all there—will you take me back to our waterfall tomorrow

afternoon?"

Nicholas gave both her hands a gentle squeeze and said, "Yes, Lizzie, I will. For now, nothing would give me greater pleasure!"

Lizzie squeezed his hands back, and said, "Good! That's settled then. I'll be waiting for you tomorrow afternoon!"

Their canoe trips far away from civilization, up into the mountains, to their waterfall, had been the very best time for them to discuss the most romantic, the most delicate, the most serious of matters, and she had plenty of those to discuss with Nicholas tomorrow.

Somehow they always both ended up being totally truthful with each other there, all alone, where nobody could witness what they were saying. That had never happened to her before, not with anyone, not even her parents—let alone any of her other boyfriends. It felt special. Nicholas knew more about her than anyone else on earth. Not even her parents knew as much, yet he seemed so accepting of her, so understanding. Even though neither of them had uttered the word "love" before, they may as well have done so. The kinds of things they talked about were both serious . . . and beautiful.

These three summer romances they'd enjoyed together, two of them against the odds, added up to the most lasting and memorable romance she'd ever had. Together they'd weathered quite a few storms . . . forced separations, guilt, even intense but unfounded jealousy. Still their feelings for one another had survived—and even grown stronger! She'd never had a friend like him. She was beginning to wonder what exactly that meant, and whether he felt the same.

* * *

The following day, after spending the morning on the beach together, eating lunch there and only returning home at around 3:00 p.m. to shower and prepare for the evening's festivities, Nicholas went to fetch Elizabeth to fulfill his promise to take her canoeing upriver.

Constance was so preoccupied with her preparations for the ball that she barely noticed what Elizabeth was up to, but Elizabeth had taken the precaution of making her preparations coincide with her parents' trip to the ablution block to take their showers. Then, without anyone to ask what she was doing, she'd taken several items, placed them in a bag and quickly walked them down to the Siestuary where she hid

them on the banks of the river, between the reeds. Then she'd gone to the Duka, bought several items, walked back down to the river, found the bag, and added those items to her secret stash.

Constance hadn't noticed a thing.

"Elizabeth . . ." Constance waited for her daughter's attention. "Remember that you and Hattie must be back here and in bed no later than midnight for you, and 9:00 p.m. for Hattie!"

"That's not fair!" Hattie said. "Why can't I stay out longer too?"

"Because Elizabeth is going into her final year of high school now, and you're still very much her junior," Constance replied, the firmness in her voice signaling that there would be no debating the issue. Hattie folded her arms and pouted, but she knew enough not to push the point. "And as for you Elizabeth, I imagine you will just be playing games and listening to Christmas music or whatever it is you youngsters do nowadays?" Constance asked while placing curlers in her hair.

"Yes, Mother," Lizzie replied, not wishing to elaborate. She looked up to see that Nicholas had just arrived and he was being greeted by her dad, who was sitting reading in his chair at the opening of the tent—just the distraction she needed right now!"

"Hi Nicholas!" Lizzie exclaimed, walking up to him. "Ready to go canoeing?"

Nicholas turned to her. "Ready and waiting!"

"Bye Mom, bye Dad—enjoy the ball!" Lizzie said, "We probably won't be back before you leave, so don't worry."

"Yes, yes, we have to hurry now, go on get along now—Edwin, tear yourself away from that book and come and get ready! Just now I'll need your help with my dress," Constance said, clearly flustered from having to prepare for such an important social event in such primitive conditions. She had to make a big splash tonight. They were now important people—people with rank and substance!

Lizzie took Nicholas's hand and followed as he led her to the canoe, both of them were dressed in only their bathing costumes, a loose shirt and flip-flops, and each carried a large beach towel.

As usual, Nicholas sat in the back of the canoe, paddling one

swift stroke after another, while Elizabeth sat in the front.

"Nicholas . . ." Elizabeth began. "Yes, Lizzie?"

"Before we go under the railway bridge and on up into the mountains, could you please take a short detour up the Serpentine River next to the Siestuary?"

"Sure," Nicholas replied, wondering why Lizzie would want to go there. It was not particularly scenic, just an endlessly-winding river connecting Island Lake with the dammed-up estuary of the main river—the Touws river. They normally canoed on up into the mountains on the main river, which only flowed noticeably at the very top of its course, near their waterfall.

Lizzie smiled, seeing Nicholas's puzzled look. "You'll just have to be surprised." *Soon enough you'll know what I've got planned for us tonight*, Elizabeth thought, her excitement building and threatening to bubble over prematurely.

As they rounded the corner into the estuary, Elizabeth became unusually attentive, as if she were looking for something.

"There it is!" she exclaimed, pointing to a small opening in a patch of reeds on the banks of the Siestuary.

"There's what?" Nicholas inquired.

"That big plastic shopping bag on the bank there, among the reeds. Can you get to it?"

"Sure—but what's in it?"

"You'll know soon enough, Mr. Inquisitive," Elizabeth said with a teasing wink and a smile spreading across her face.

Nicholas expertly steered the front of the canoe right up between the reeds, next to the large, bulging plastic bag, tied tightly with a knot to prevent water from getting in. Elizabeth deftly reached over and retrieved it, lifting the bag into the canoe and placing it in front of her feet. She made no move to open it.

"Okay, we're done here. You can go back to the rail bridge now and row us to our waterfall!" Elizabeth announced to a somewhat puzzled Nicholas.

In the distance, they could now hear the *chuff chuff chuff* of the steam train approaching the bridge.

"Oh, try to get us there in time for the steam train's crossing! I want to see it," Elizabeth said, encouraging him to row faster.

Nicholas' rowing now contained a certain urgency as his ears

and arms tried to coordinate events to satisfy Elizabeth's request. Then, right on cue, as they approached the bridge, there it was—the afternoon train just starting to cross the rail bridge that acted as a portal to the majestic mountains lining the Wilderness coast, blanketed with dense green jungle.

Nicholas stopped rowing, letting the canoe drift toward the bridge. They were just a few dozen yards away from the steam engine now. They made eye-contact with the engineer, an old man in overalls hanging out the open side of the locomotive, and he smiled at them.

Nicholas and Elizabeth waved. Rather than wave back, the old man reached up with his free hand and, finding the train-whistle's chord, he jerked it for a sharp *toot-toot*. He paused briefly and then did it again. *Toot-toot*. Now the old man had just enough time to look back and wave at them.

They smiled and waved back, and reaching up the engineer pulled the cord once more—toot-toot-toot—the pitch of the whistles now changing as the train receded and picked up speed—*chuff chuff chuff, chuff chuff chuff, chuff chuff chuff*. Billows of smoke and steam poured from the old steam train and drifted out over their heads as they passed under the bridge. They could hear the sound of the train cars passing overhead—Clickety clack, Clickety-clack, clickety-clack—those cars no doubt filled with people heading home for Christmas Day.

And then suddenly they were over the bridge, too, and the train disappeared from view as the canoe on the other side of the bridge, now headed straight for the dense, green jungle.

"That was special!" Nicholas remarked, did you count? That was seven whistles from the steam train. Just for us, Lizzie! Elizabeth smiled broadly and she agreed, "Yes, it was very special—a perfect start to a perfect Christmas Eve that's going to be spent completely alone with you, Nicholas!" she said, holding his gaze a moment before winking coyly at him. "And 7's a very lucky number—I think that train was a harbinger of sorts. Let's keep that in mind for later," she said, continuing to be secretive.

Nicholas gave Elizabeth a quizzical look. "Harbinger— isn't that like an omen?"

"Yes, kind of, but it implies major changes lie ahead, and it foreshadows things to come," Elizabeth responded, then

changed the subject: “Nicholas—aren’t you forgetting something?”

“No Lizzie, I haven’t forgotten, I’ve just been distracted,” he replied as he began scanning the riverbanks with purpose whilst Lizzie settled in to enjoy their surroundings.

Lush, tropical greenery—occasionally punctuated by a burst of red, white, yellow, pink, or even blue flowers—rose ever higher to either side of them as they meandered up through the mountains. The banks of the river were a dark, leafy green, all but impenetrable to the eye, and casting deep, flickering shadows across the shimmering, reflected, green surface of the river.

The further upstream they went, the deeper and narrower the river grew, until Elizabeth could feel the greenery closing in around them, and could see a canopy of leaves stretching high overhead, nearly bridging the stream and blotting out the sun.

Nicholas paddled a further stroke, and then rested, lifting his paddle from the water as the canoe drifted quietly beneath a lower ceiling of branches and leaves. As they slid into the shadows, they encountered a pocket of still, cold air, and Elizabeth gave an involuntary shiver. The cooler air might have been refreshing had Elizabeth been wearing more than just her pale blue bikini.

Nicholas smiled at her. “Cold?”

“I guess so. It’s amazing that the air can stay so cool here, even in the middle of the afternoon.”

Nicholas nodded, and Elizabeth listened as the sound of crickets and frogs chirping was caught and reverberated by the canopy of leaves overhead, making them sound closer and louder than they had before. The fresh, oxygen-rich air was honeyed with the smell of flowers and leaves.

Elizabeth watched curiously as Nicholas leaned over the side of the canoe, his attention fixed on something along the river’s edge. She followed his eyes to the object of his scrutiny. There, even deeper into the shadows, growing along the water’s edge, were a group of snow white flowers. Each of them with only one petal, rising like a trumpet from the flower’s hollow, reedy stem. And rising from the depths of each white trumpet was a long, yellow stalk, all but completely sheathed by the surrounding petal.

Elizabeth watched, smiling, as Nicholas leaned still further

over the side of the boat to reach the flowers as the boat drifted alongside. *Such a romantic*, she thought as Nicholas reached out and broke off one of the flowers high on its reedy stem. Turning to her, he held the flower out.

She accepted it, allowing her smile to blossom brightly. "That was sweet of you."

He answered with a grin and resumed paddling, dipping his paddle soundlessly with each stroke, as if he were afraid to disturb the crickets from their chirping.

Elizabeth stared lovingly down at the flower Nicholas had given her, twirling it back and forth in her hands. It was the same flower he always picked for her when they went canoeing up the river: a white Arum Lily. Suddenly, Elizabeth stopped twirling the flower and stared curiously down at it.

Seeing how strangely she was staring at the flower he'd given her, Nicholas feared for a moment that her mother's persistent warnings about the flower's unluckiness were finally beginning to take root. He matched her frown with one of his own. "What is it?" He held his breath as he asked the question.

After a moment's hesitation, Elizabeth met his frown with a glowing smile. "This flower . . . it's fuller than normal, shaped perfectly like a heart—" She held it out to him. "—see?"

Breathing a sigh of relief, he leaned closer to take a look, and sure enough, when viewed from the top, the flower's solitary white petal resolved into the distinctive shape of a heart, pierced at the center by a rising yellow stalk. *Like an arrow*, Nicholas thought.

"Wow. I wonder if all of them are that way, or just this one?"

Elizabeth shook her head absently and withdrew the flower from his scrutiny.

Nicholas paddled the canoe out from beneath the green canopy, and the sun shone brightly down on them once more, highlighting Elizabeth's hair a beautiful, golden honey-brown. He smiled, watching her caress the flower he'd given her.

A sudden thought occurred to Nicholas, and his smile faded. Christmas vacation was already half over—Christmas was tomorrow! After that, they would scarcely have another week before they left Siesta and each other. *And then it will be two years before I see her again. And she doesn't have a clue . . .*

Because you haven't told her yet.

Nicholas frowned at the accusatory tone of his thoughts. He

had a good reason for not telling her yet. *If I told her, it would just hang over her head, too. No, look at her. . . . how happy she is. I'm not going to spoil that.* Nicholas shook his head imperceptibly and went on paddling the canoe.

Ignorance is bliss.

The canoe was approaching the last bend in the river. They could hear the sound of water cascading down onto rocks in the pool below—the sound growing ever louder, though still muffled by the surrounding jungle. Both of them now appeared alert, excited—both silent with anticipation. It had been a year since they'd last been here—a long desperate, jealous, lonely year, but that was all behind them now. Just ahead, now tantalizingly close, lay their private hideaway, their secret place where both of them had shared so many special moments.

After a few final oar strokes, there it was! Nicholas stopped rowing, letting the canoe glide until it came to a stop in the middle of the pool below their waterfall.

Still looking at the waterfall and its lush surroundings, Elizabeth exclaimed: "I thought I'd never want to see this place again, that it would only ever serve to remind me of a doomed summer romance, but how wrong I was—about so much!"

Turning to face him from the front of the canoe, she continued, "Now I know what it must have been like for you."

Nicholas cleared his throat, as if to talk, but she placed one finger on her lips, tapping them gently and shaking her head almost imperceptibly. "If it had been me—" she began, now speaking softly. "—and I'd been left waiting for a reply to one of my letters—a reply that never came, all year long—I would have felt so rejected. I'm not even sure how I would have coped with that. I'm truly sorry, Nicholas! I had no right to do that to you, to treat you that way, after everything we've meant to each other, after you've treated me with nothing but the utmost respect and unselfish friendship for three beautiful summers." There were now tears forming in her eyes, and suddenly she found herself unable to continue.

Realizing that, Nicholas obviated the need for further words by leaning forward, deftly taking the big bag of Lizzie's surprises and placing it where he'd been sitting. That done, he moved to the middle of the canoe. Once there, he placed his big swimming towel down in front of him and then held out his right hand to right her, holding the side of the canoe with his

left hand to steady it. Lizzie carefully leaned forward, grasping his outstretched hand as he gently pulled her toward him, making sure not to make sudden movements until she was sitting on her haunches on his towel, right in front of him. Then, with his right hand, he gently held his index finger under her chin to lift her head so that they could make eye contact.

Lizzie's eyes were filled to the brim with tears and her bottom lip was quivering as she valiantly tried to speak. Nicholas moved his finger up from under her chin to gently rest on her lips and then, with his eyes now dangerously moist, too, he just smiled at her and said, "Apology accepted, Lizzie. It's all in the past now."

Lizzie slumped forward, placing her arms around his neck, tucking her head under his chin, resting it sideways on his chest and then, like the waterfall nearby, her tears came, in constant streams, wetting the front of his shirt, her body wracked with heart-rending sobs as a whole year of pent-up heartbreak now finally had its release.

All Nicholas could think to do was to wrap her in his arms with one hand playing gently with her hair at the nape of her neck, trying to get her to clam down, to stop crying.

Slowly it worked, and the sobs abated, replaced with just the occasional snuffle, but still she held her head tightly to his chest, hugging him as if she didn't ever want to let him go, which was exactly how he felt! He'd always felt that way.

After a while, calmer now, she removed her head from his chest, to look up into his eyes, silent, searching, trying to find evidence there of the forgiveness her ears had heard, and then, content that she had found it, she finally started to finish what she had set out to say to him.

"Nicholas, it would serve me right if one day, for no reason, you never wrote to me again—if you just left me twisting in the wind without any reasonable explanation, no closure, no final goodbye. . . ." Her voice was quite nasal, the evidence of all her tears still on her cheeks "But Nicholas, I'm begging you . . . please don't ever do that to me!"

Nicholas, struggling to contain the tears welling up in his eyes, breathed purposely slowly—deeply—and then replied, "I promise you Elizabeth Meriwether Smythe, I will never do that to you! You'd have to become a very different person before I

ever give up on you!”

Elizabeth’s face broke into a giant smile, then, not thinking, she lunged forward, locking her arms around his neck again.

Nicholas rushed to steady the canoe, which had now drifted to the edge of the pool and come to rest up against some reeds, but he didn’t chastise or even caution her for her dangerous enthusiasm—instead he just hugged her back. With a sigh, she left his arms, and looking up at him, she said, “Let’s go for a swim, Nicholas. I need to wash my face and eyes now, and then we need to get ready for tonight, before darkness sets in.”

“Tonight? You mean we’re not heading back to Siesta after our swim?” Nicholas inquired, suddenly remembering that Lizzie had not told him anything about her plans for Christmas Eve.

She smiled. “That’s right, Nicholas—I want to spend the night here with you, and see Christmas arrive right here before heading back to Siesta. Our parents won’t be back till two in the morning at the earliest, so we have plenty of time,” Lizzie replied. “If we leave here shortly after midnight, we’ll beat them all back to the park, and be safely tucked into our beds when they return!”

“Sure, that sounds good. . . .” Nicholas looked around the canoe, to the dense green jungle around them. “But what will we do when night falls? It’s bound to get very dark out here with the jungle all round us. Won’t you get scared?”

“No—you’re here with me. I feel safe with you, Nicholas. I’m sure we’ve nothing to fear. There are no crocodiles in this river—at least not the last time we swam here,” she said with a wink. Before he could reply, she continued, “Why don’t you row us up to that sandy shore over there and we can drag the canoe up onto it. I’ll show you what I brought once we get there,” Elizabeth said, motioning to the bag she’d retrieved from among the reeds at the start of their journey.

“Okay,” Nicholas replied, picking up the oars and paddling in that direction, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Soon the canoe ran aground on the soft white sand, and Lizzie clambered out of the canoe and gave it a tug up onto the little beach, helping Nicholas by taking the big plastic bag from him and placing it on the dry sand, while waiting for him to get out of the canoe and stretch himself.

“Okay, Lizzie, I can’t wait any longer—what’s in that bag?”

Lizzie knelt on the soft sand, next to the bag, and motioned to him to kneel next to her; then she opened the bag, and reached in.

“One soft picnic blanket—” She pulled it out with a flourish. “—in case we get cold. The pillow from my bunk bed, in case we find the rocks too hard to rest our heads on. Two thick citronella candles to give us some light and keep the mosquitoes at bay. One box of matches to light them, four chocolate bars, two bags of Simba potato chips, two cans of mountain dew—pardon the pun, it was intended. One portable cassette-tape player, with fresh batteries and two tapes of Christmas Music, and one dry shirt, in case you make me fall into the pool again,” she said with a smile.

Nicholas was amused. Cocking his head sideways, he exclaimed, “About the only thing you didn’t bring was a Swiss-army knife! You sure you weren’t ever a girl guide, Lizzie?”

Elizabeth just laughed. “Nope, I just used my head—and it seems my stomach—to figure out what we needed!”

“Well, we’d better go for our swim now, so that we can dry off before evening sets in,” Nicholas suggested, standing up and removing his shirt. It was still a bit damp from her tears. Hanging it on a nearby branch to dry off, he retrieved his towel and Lizzie’s from the canoe.

“Sounds wonderful!” Lizzie beamed up at him and removed her flimsy white shirt adorned with pink flowers, leaving her standing there in her skimpy, pale blue bikini.

It was more than Nicholas could handle, and rather than enter the pool right away, he stood looking at her for a moment, not noticing that she was doing exactly the same thing. He shook his head and said, “Wow, Lizzie, you’re gorgeous! How can you be so beautiful and still so humble?”

Lizzie blushed, suddenly realizing that she may as well be standing in front of Nicholas in her underwear. Her bikini offered no real concealment on dry land. She was almost tempted to move her arm over her chest to cover herself up, but instead Nicholas moved toward her, and took her in his arms. Now all that he could see was her face. Then he moved his hands around her, one to the small of her back, one to the side of her face and soon they were locked in a passionate embrace, their lips momentarily brushing one another’s before seeking one another’s with frantic urgency. These were hard,

passionate, hungry kisses as she grabbed fistfuls of his hair and he used his hand resting at the small of her back to pull her tightly against him.

She was the first to break free, gasping for breath, her face flushed, her eyes fluttering, and her legs weak. She felt glad that he was still supporting her with his hand at the small of her back, but then as he tried to draw her back for more, she withdrew, her lips quivering, her face and eyes taking on a pitiful look as she softly, almost pleadingly, mouthed their secret word: "Waterfall?"

Nicholas smiled, and took a step back while moving his hands to her shoulders. "Yes, let's go take a closer look. It's obvious we're both in need of a fresh, cold shower!"

With that, as he turned, he took her hand and walked into the pool with her. Lizzie was glad to follow, as suddenly all of the memories of their pool, their waterfall—this place—came rushing back. How would they make it through the night? Would their resolve to respect one another's boundaries still be left intact when their canoe ran aground on the grass outside of her parents' caravan?

Elizabeth wasn't sure anymore. The last few hours had been much more emotional than she had foreseen, and with both of them now almost eighteen years old, they were venturing into dangerous territory. So far their good intentions had survived their passions, but what if both of them weakened at the same time?

Would that really be so bad? Elizabeth wondered. She wasn't sure anymore. Her head felt fuzzy. She couldn't think straight. She needed to clear her head. Nicholas did too. He dove in first, disappearing under the water for what seemed like minutes as he swam underwater to the center of the pool. Then, at last his head emerged from the water. Wiping his hair out of his face, he beckoned to her with open hands. "Come on, Lizzie, it's refreshing! Dive in, swim over here to me, and—"

Lizzie didn't hear the rest of his sentence. The water swallowed her whole. She opened her eyes and saw the sandy bottom through the amber brown, murky water. What looked like a school of little fish darted frantically away from her, obviously startled by her sudden appearance in their world. The water was cool, refreshing—clean. It was exactly what she needed to sober up! As she broke the surface, her head held

back to draw in deep lungfuls of the fresh mountain air, she smoothed her long hair back and then did the breast stroke to cover the rest of the distance between her and Nicholas. Once there, they found themselves treading water next to each other, looking up at the waterfall, excitedly commenting on the luscious scenery. Both were relieved that the moment of tension had once again passed—at least for now.

A pattern was emerging for them. It seemed that the first temptation was always the trickiest to overcome, after which they became less scared of their own feelings, or of each other, and more confident about their self-control. Yet not every man would act that way—Elizabeth instinctively knew that everyone else she'd dated, would not have made the same pact with her that Nicholas had made, and nor would they keep it even if they were somehow convinced to make such a pact.

As for Nicholas, she was mostly sure that he would keep their agreement, and that he would help her, too, in case she weakened.

For now, their passions cooled by the fresh, clean water of their pool, that was not a concern—staying afloat was! Her legs were now quite tired from treading water, and so she swam over to Nicholas, and put her arms loosely around his neck from behind. "Save me, Sir Nicholas—save your damsel in distress, for she is weak and may drown if you don't!"

Nicholas responded by saying, "Hold on, Lady Elizabeth, I'll get you to yonder rocks safely, so that you can gather your strength for the long swim back to yonder shore, where our supper awaits!"

Laughing together at their bit of drama, Nicholas swam and Lizzie rode on his back toward the side of the waterfall, where large, smooth rocks awaited them. Once there, Nicholas rose up out of the water, and pulled Lizzie up onto the rock beside him. They sat there, side-by-side, catching their breath as they leaned back on their hands and surveyed the beauty before and around them.

"Nicholas, have I told you lately how special you are to me?" Lizzie asked.

"Not in as many words, Lizzie, but earlier in the canoe I got that point quite clearly!"

Lizzie just smiled, rather coyly, and before she could reply, Nicholas continued, "But Lizzie, have I told you lately exactly

how I feel about you?”

Now Elizabeth was quick to answer, “Yes and no,” she said. “Yes, because you’ve been consistent in your feelings for me, and never given up—even when I made that very easy for you to do, and no because you’ve not used any of the flowery words us girls like to hear,” Elizabeth concluded, looking at Nicholas with a playful smile on her face, while twirling her hair with her fingers.

Nicholas thought for a while. This was a trap. What if she lured him into being totally truthful, then didn’t like what she heard? Would she then try to distance herself from him? Was it too early to confide in her, to tell her exactly how he felt about her? Yes, he concluded. *Way too early, and not a good idea!*

But she was literally begging him to whisper “sweet nothings” in her ear. *Actually*, he thought wryly, *make that “sweet somethings.”*

What could he possibly do to satisfy her desire for loving banter, without compromising his long-term position? He still had to weather two years away from her—years in which she would likely be dating and meeting all kinds of men—rich men, handsome men, exciting men, maybe both while she was in high school and in university. He needed to keep something in reserve with which to up the ante later if he were to have any hope of competing for her heart. *What to do . . . what to do?* Then he had an idea.

“Elizabeth, do you have any background in theater in high school? Did you ever perform on stage with someone else, pretending to be in love with them?” Nicholas asked.

“Yes, a little theater, but I’m a ballerina, Nicholas, so I’ve often assumed roles like that in our high school’s productions. I’ve also read the parts of the maiden desperately in love, in many a school setwork book. Why?”

Nicholas smiled at her, weighing his words carefully. “What if we stage our own play here tonight? We can be as romantic and passionate as we want, but we’re only acting! Nobody gets hurt, nobody feels honor bound, and nobody leaves here unhappy, but we’re free to put our hearts and souls into our acting, because we want our performance to be the best that it can be!”

“That sounds like fun! Why don’t you set the scene—choose some names for us, give me background on the characters,

and then you begin,” Elizabeth replied, sounding excited.

“Ok . . . let me think. How about I call you Lady Guinevere or maybe something less formal . . . it’s the Welsh form of the English name, Jennifer, so how about we call you Lady Jennifer?”

Elizabeth sat up, her eyes bright with excitement. “Great! What about you? Who will you be tonight?”

Nicholas didn’t hesitate “I’ve always liked what Sir Gawain stands for, but let’s just make sure we don’t get our tongues tied up in knots here tonight, so what about Sir Ian?” Nicholas inquired.

“Yes, that name’s short and sweet—I like it! So tell me more, what is it about Sir Gawain that you admire?”

“Well, Lady Jennifer, Sir Gawain was a formidable, yet courteous and compassionate warrior, fiercely loyal to his family and to the king. He’s a defender of the poor and downtrodden, and he was also known as the maiden’s knight for being a defender of women. There’s a lot to respect about that, so I’ll try and portray those ideals in my character, but I’ll not stick to his actual story either, nor should you feel bound by Lady Guinevere’s story—it’s much too sad anyway, and you’ve shed enough tears for a while. Let’s keep this play happy, romantic, and chivalrous.”

“Sounds good, but I need more background than that. Who are we? What about our families? How old are we? What challenges do we face? What do we look like? Where do we live?” Lizzie asked, prompting Nicholas for details.

“OK, how about this—it’s the times of King Arthur, sir Ian is one of his many knights, a particularly handsome one—but not so handsome that he looks in the mirror a lot or anything—rather rugged handsomeness that shows he doesn’t take himself that seriously, but that a women, Lady Jennifer in particular, would find appealing.”

“Mmmm he sounds familiar.” Lizzie smiled wryly at him. “Keep going. What about Lady Jennifer?”

“Lady Jennifer’s around 28 years old; she’s a virtuous woman, with a strangely beguiling beauty—somewhat like what mermaids have, but without the tail in her case. She’s a woman who loves with a passion so strong that it causes the object of her desire to become obsessed with following her to the ends of the world—not as her slave, mind you, because she

always lets him be the strong independent man that she prefers. But she inspires him to love her, defend her, and take care of her, selflessly, to his dying breath if need be, and to enjoy every bit of his life with her while he's doing so!"

"Sounds like they're a good match! What about their families and where they grew up?" Lizzie pressed.

"Both grew up in England, of course. Lady Jennifer's a nobleman's daughter and lives in a castle with her family, high up on a hill, overlooking the town. Her mother is a tough one, always putting her down, never allowing her to feel good about herself, or even pretty. Her mother also prevents her dad from saying nice things to or about Lady Jennifer, and even from doing nice things for her.

"So Lady Jennifer's a bit of a loner, and most days she rides out from the castle into the English countryside to go and bathe in her favorite, private pool, where she knows she'll be alone—that is until Sir Ian, returning home, weary from battle, passes by her pool, and not realizing she's in it, he stops to refresh himself and water his horse there. Then he surprises her swimming in the pool, with just her long hair covering her - preserving her modesty ... but feel free to wear your bikini."

"Nicholas! I mean, Sir Ian! Behave yourself! I'll have none of that naughty stuff here tonight!" Lizzie responded, playfully punching him on the arm. "Besides, it's Christmas-eve!"

"Never fear, Lady Jennifer. Remember, Sir Ian is bound by his oath to defend the virtues of all woman—and yours, in particular, since from the moment he saw you, he's held you in particularly high esteem."

"So where do we start this story, then?" Lizzie prompted Nicholas, trying to hurry him up.

"Well, since it's my play, and I've got the director's role, at least for now, how about this—Lady Jennifer has never been allowed to find her own true love, since her bossy overbearing and manipulating mother always finds some well-connected, pompous, conceited—"

"Okay, I get the point—she's not a nice person! Let's hurry this along a bit," Lizzie insisted, feeling that description hitting a little too close to her own home, for her liking.

Nicholas cleared his throat, and then continued, "Lady Jennifer has fallen deeply in love with Sir Ian, and she has made him fall deeply in love with her, but Lady Jennifer's

mother forbids them to be married, because he's not a nobleman with a rich family and a giant castle. So they make a pact that if they cannot be married to each other, they will never marry—not even to a prince or a princess, but instead they will stay true to each other forever, longing for the return of each summer, when he will come home from battle, when he will take three weeks to sojourn in a small cottage, in the forest, near Lady Jennifer's private pool. There he will rest up and regain his strength before returning to the war, and there they will meet each other, each and every year, forever—or until her interfering mother dies so they can finally get married."

"Oh no, how sad! Must they wait until then?"

"If they don't, then they'll have to elope to a far-away land to love and live freely. Well—rather than finish the story, why not let's begin with Lady Jennifer swimming in her beautiful pool, awaiting the return of Sir Ian from the war to join her there as always for the summer?"

"Sounds good to me!" Lizzie replied, and before Nicholas could get too wordy again, she slipped gracefully into the pool, the sunlight now beginning to fade with red hues appearing in the sky and on the hilltops all around them. She swam toward the center of the pool, acting every bit like a mermaid. From there she swan over to some reeds and hid in them.

Nicholas took that as his cue and leaped into his role, standing up on the rock, stretching as if he were weary from a long trip, and then looking out over the waters, scanning their surroundings for his lady love. Placing a hand over his brow to shield his eyes from the setting sun, he called out, "Where, oh where is my true love, where may she be? Has she forgotten to meet her brave knight here this year? Has she been forced to marry that awful, pompous (but rich) Lord Cedric? The man that her mother has found for her? Has she forgotten about me? About our love?"

Elizabeth appeared from her hiding place among the reeds, wishing to cut short his dramatics before he got a second wind, swimming playfully out into the pool, teasing him shamelessly with her hands, her hair, her eyes and a beckoning smile.

"There's my true love!" Nicholas said, as he pretended to hurriedly strip off his clothing. That done, he dove into the pool and swam under water until he reached Elizabeth. He surfaced

right in front of her shaking his head to clear the water out of his eyes and hair; then he grabbed her under her arms, stood up, and lifted her out of the water, into his strong arms, hugging her joyfully before saying, "Lady Jennifer—oh how I've missed you these many months! I've dreamed of this wonderful day for so long now, dreading that maybe I'd return to find you not to be here waiting for me, dreading that I'd die here next to this pool, from a broken heart. But, as always, you've waited for me, my love! Have you missed me as much as I've missed you? Have you dreamed of me as much as I've dreamed of you?" Nicholas said, inviting Elizabeth to respond.

"Yes, my love—my wonderful, brave, ruggedly handsome knight. I've pined for you, longing to be in your arms again! I've dreamed of you often. Have you been true to me, and only me, all this time you've been fighting in France? Did you ignore all those cute French maidens making eyes at you, pushing out their chests and wiggling their derrieres in front of you?"

"Of course, my darling! Lady Jennifer, I know they have no real interest in me, only in my position at King Arthur's court. So I ignored their wanton flirting, and I dreamt only of you, waiting patiently until the summer when I would make the long journey home, to see if you would be here waiting for me, so we can have three wonderful weeks alone and together again. I wanted the chance to return, to be with you once more so that I can remind you of how much you mean to me and how I truly feel about you."

"Pray tell, my lord, how is it that you truly feel about me?"

"I love you, Lady Jennifer. I've loved you from the very first time I saw you swimming here. I'll always love you, and only you, my sweet Lady Jennifer! If one day I return here to find you missing or married to someone else, I will surely die of a broken heart, waiting for you to return to my arms."

"Oh, Sir Ian, what are we to do? My mother insists that I marry her choice for me, but he is not the one I love—you are! I'm just not sure I have the right or ability to resist her much longer. She is a forceful woman, bent on getting her way at whatever cost, and she has a tremendous distaste for knights, such as you, who are not men of means. She insists that I marry some spoiled, rich brat, the son of a nobleman with a big castle, lots of connections, social standing—instead of an honorable knight such as you."

"Then run away with me, my love! Ride with me upon my steed to Scotland. I have family there. We can start our lives anew among those remote mountains. There we can love each other freely, fall asleep in each others arms every night and awake next to each other each and every sweet morning."

"But what of family, Sir Ian? I will want a family! I am getting older. My fertile years are fast leaving me, many spent waiting for your return here each summer. I want babies with you, lots of babies!"

"Then let's start a family, my love. I will give you as many bonny babes as you could want. I will take an oath to provide for you all, and to defend you and our wee babes for the rest of my life!"

"Then, when I'm old, Sir Ian, and our babes are all grown up, with lives and families of their own, and they've left us alone once more—what then? Will you still love me then?"

"Oh yes, my love, my splendid lady, for I cannot think to ever love another! I'd be honored to die in your arms after enjoying your steadfast love for a lifetime, but if it should happen that you must die first, and I'd hope that should never be the case, I would want you to lie in my arms, and know that I've loved you loyally and devotedly my entire life. I'd want you to breathe your last feeling the warmth of my love for you, my tears falling upon your bosom like a waterfall, so that when you cross over to paradise, to the other side, you'll wait there for me, by a beautiful pool, swimming there each day ... patiently waiting.

"We'd be reunited again, Lady Jennifer! I will not ever love another, so that when I too arrive there, on that other side, I will have only one person to search for – you, my one true love! And when I find you, lady Jennifer—and find you I will!—we will live by that beautiful pool, together, forever, and love each other steadfastly there too, for an eternity, and then—"

Before Nicholas could finish, Elizabeth took his head in her hands, pulling him down to her as she lay imitating that she was dying in his arms. Her head tilted backward now, her eyes fluttered closed, and her lips parted, quivering slightly—her chest rising and falling as she struggled for air. Her breathing was now labored as she whispered, "Kiss me one last time my darling. I want to feel your loving lips on mine again. Kiss me like when we first met in our beautiful youth. Kiss me until I breathe no more, don't let me start out on the final journey to

paradise, without feeling the warmth of your love for me. Hold me tight, my love, for I want to die only in your arms—to feel your tender love and take the memory of it with me, so that—”

Nicholas wouldn't let Elizabeth finish. Instead, as he held her lovingly in his arms, he kissed her gently - his tears falling on her face, his own breathing sounding labored as he hugged her, kissing her forehead, her cheeks, her neck - then, holding her head gently in his hands, he pressed his head up against hers, and whispered his final farewell in her ear: “I've loved you steadfastly from the day I first laid eyes on you, Lady Jennifer. I love you still ... and I always will!”

With that, she breathed in deeply one last time and then let out her final breath and went limp in his arms.

“Lizzie!” Nicholas exclaimed, looking down at her in horror; the play had gone too far for him now. “Stop that! Wake up! Stop this stupid acting—I've had enough now!”

She opened her eyes, blinked, and then smiled up at him. Noticing the tears in his eyes, and keeping eye contact with him, she gently spoke to him: “I'm not sure how much of that was acting, Nicholas. I think maybe it was more about our dreams finding their voice, at last. I lost track of what was fantasy - and what was reality,” she said, shaking her head.

Nicholas pulled her up to his chest, and held her tight, saying, “Oh, Lizzie, I wish I could tell you how I really feel. I wish you would let me at least try without you being frightened by my words. I . . .”

Before he could continue, Lizzie reached up to his face and placed a finger on his lips to stop him from saying anything more. “Nicholas, I think you just did, and though I could have stopped you at any point, I didn't! Instead, I encouraged you. I did let you tell me exactly how you felt! And I've heard everything I wanted to hear. Why don't we just leave it there for now? Let's let fantasy mix with reality. Enough has been said to last us both a very long time, and there's no need to spoil it,” she said, smiling up at him. “Come now, it's time that we get out of the water and go and dry off. It's almost completely dark, and we'll need to light those candles soon, or else the hungry mosquitoes are going to find us!” Elizabeth stood up, rising out of his arms with water dripping off her body. Taking his hand in hers, she turned to head toward their sandy little beach, leading a stunned and silent Nicholas to the shore with her.

Nicholas wondered what had just happened. How did he lose control of his *play*, and when did their acting become real? Or was he ever really in control? He shook his head and shivered in the cool night air. This afternoon had been like none other in his entire life, and he couldn't help but wonder what lay ahead for them tonight.

He didn't have to wait long to find out what the rest of the night held in store. Elizabeth towed off, patting her legs and arms dry. She towel-dried her hair, and then ran a huge comb through it to remove the tangles. That done, she slipped on her dry shirt.

Meanwhile, Nicholas had dried himself off, taken his shirt from the tree branch, and put it on. He took Lizzie's towel from her, and along with his, hung it on the tree branch above them. Lizzie opened the blanket, spreading it out on the sand and she placed her pillow at the top of it, in front of a big rock that separated the small beach from the jungle.

Elizabeth sat down on the blanket, on her haunches, facing their pool. Patting the blanket next to her, she motioned to Nicholas to come and join her there. He did.

"Which one should we open first?" she said to him, holding a packet of potato chips in both hands.

Nicholas smiled. "How about you choose first, and I'll choose second?" he said, winking at her.

"Okay." She placed the barbecue flavored chips packet down, and tore open the salt and vinegar one. She brought the open bag up to her nose, and then inhaled. "Mmmm . . ." she said. "It smells nice. Here, have one!" holding the bag out to Nicholas, he took a chip, but didn't eat it right away.

"Lizzie," he said, to get her attention. "This Charles guy you've briefly told me about—is he nice to you?"

Elizabeth finished munching on her chip before speaking, taking the time to think.

"Well, yes, I think he is. He's so self-confident, though, that sometimes I get the impression he thinks he's doing me a favor by dating me, but otherwise he really does come across well—polished."

"Okay, just thought I'd ask. You know I don't mean to sound jealous or anything—it's just that, well, Lizzie, I can't picture you with anyone who doesn't value you as priceless."

"Thanks." She smiled at him and nodded. "But what about

Denise?" she asked, prodding him playfully in the ribs, making her point that he too had someone waiting at home for him.

"She's so sweet, Lizzie—I wonder how I'll ever be able to even think of breaking her heart. But . . . I'm afraid it might come to that one day. It wouldn't have, you know, if I'd never met you."

"Ouch!" Lizzie retorted. "That's a squiggly monkey to place on my back," she joked, trying to make lighter conversation. "Where is she now?"

"At the seaside, with her parents and family, like us, but far away from here, in East London."

"Do you think she's being faithful to you right now?" Lizzie inquired, trying to get Nicholas to not feel so bad.

"No actually, I don't, but then again, we've never required that of each other. She's far too young to commit to me, or anyone else, for life. We both know that our moms are best friends and love matchmaking the two of us, but even though we know they mean well, and we love them both, we don't feel bound by their wishes for us." Nicholas replied.

"That sounds like such an agreeable friendship, in which everyone just wants what's best for each other," Lizzie remarked, her tone of voice betraying a hint of jealousy.

"Do you have a nickname for her?" Lizzie suddenly inquired.

"Um - yes, *Rooikoppie*, which as you know means little redhead," Nicholas confessed, a little taken aback by her question.

"But I thought she's blonde?"

"Yes, she is, but with just a hint of strawberry mixed in—enough to earn her that nickname," Nicholas explained.

Elizabeth frowned. Clearly he was fond of Denise, so she asked, "Don't you worry that you could lose her because of me?" Nicholas thought for a while before replying.

"Yes, that's definitely a risk, but Lizzie, she knows me well enough to suspect that you and I meeting was . . . well, let's just say, unusual. Naturally she needs to know how it will end for you and me before giving her heart completely to me."

"And how will it end—for you and me, Nicholas?" Lizzie inquired, holding her head sideways, looking at Nicholas, while twirling her hair around her fingers. A faint smile appeared on her lips.

"At times, I really don't know, at other times, I think I do," Nicholas replied, looking deeply into her eyes. She now averted

her gaze, looking down, but still playing with her hair.

"That's a little evasive . . ." Elizabeth chided. "But either way, I feel I already know Denise well enough to say that we could be good friends—and why not? I mean, she and you are best friends, you and I are best friends—we have that much in common already, so she comes highly recommended!"

Nicholas shrugged. "She's blonde, young, gorgeous, tall, and plays volleyball on the beach in her skimpy black bikini, with her two equally lovely Irish sisters and others, so I'd have to say they're all having a lot of fun right now, and attracting a lot of attention—there's no doubt about that!"

"I'd love to be blonde, tall, and gorgeous. I have a cousin like that . . ." Lizzie said wistfully, but before she got any further, Nicholas interjected.

"But Lizzie, I have a standing invitation to join her family for summer holidays—yet here I am, spending my summers with you and counting down the weeks before the next summer holiday arrives, hoping and praying that we'll meet and get to relive our romance—yet again! That should tell you something."

Lizzie looked up at him quizzically. "That's true—you are here," she said, reaching over and giving his hand a squeeze.

By now they'd finished the packet of potato chips, and Lizzie took a can of Mountain Dew, and held it out to Nicholas. He took it and then she found a can for herself. Together they opened their drinks, and then sat there, looking out over the pool, sipping their sodas. Suddenly they realized how dark it was getting. Nicholas could just see her silhouette now as they sat there. The mosquitoes hadn't found them yet, probably because no people ever ventured there after dark, a fact which made this night even more special. It was their secret place, the most private place in their little world, and here they could talk about anything, and everything—for hours.

Elizabeth took the last sip of her drink; then placing the can back in the packet next to her, she looked up at the stars. It was a black night * with no sign of the moon, but the stars were boldly on display in the sky.

"Nicholas . . ." She started to say. "Do you remember how

* Dec 24th, 1973 was a moonless night—the darkest night of the summer holidays.

many blasts of the steam whistle the kindly old engineer sounded for us today as we approached the bridge?"

"Yes, how can I forget—exactly seven times! You know, the harbinger . . ." Nicholas reminded her.

"Correct! So how about this," Lizzie continued. "How about if we had seven wishes—ones that we had to use very wisely, ones that we could never reuse, ever again, and tonight we each got to use one of those wishes. What would yours be?"

Nicholas took a minute to think, putting his can of Mountain Dew down on the sand next to him and then lay down on the blanket next to her before he replied.

He found himself unable to choose. There were too many things to wish for. "Lizzie, come here and lie in my arms while I think about that. It's not a wish to be taken lightly, you know," he said as she moved to get comfortable in his arms, lying snuggled up against him for warmth, her head resting on his shoulder, her hand on his chest, "How about this . . . remember, I'm always bound to being chivalrous, so I insist - you make your wish first!"

Lizzie chuckled, "That's called passing the buck, I believe, but all right, I'll go first," she replied, turning to lie with the back of her head resting on his shoulder, her face looking up toward the stars. She paused for a while before speaking, but as soon as she thought she had her wish, she said, "I have an idea, but you have to do this correctly, so listen up carefully as I make my wish. You wouldn't want to waste it!"

"Ok," Nicholas replied. "Go on then—what's your wish?" Lizzie drew in her breath, and in a very measured tone, she said, "I'm going to use the words of the blue fairy in Pinocchio," and then she made her wish.

"Star light, star bright, the first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight . . . That one day I may get to live in a place like this, and lie there, every night, in my true love's arms ... with a love that's forever right!"

She turned to give Nicholas a kiss on his cheek, then moved her lips up to his ear, her warm breath feeling suddenly moist against his ear as she whispered, "There, I've used my wish, and it will be our little secret. Now it's your turn, but be careful what you wish for, Nicholas—it may just come true."

"Wow, Lizzie—that's a beautiful wish. I'd be hard-pressed to match it! Give me a moment to think, will you? I'd hate to

waste it!”

“Take all the time you want, Nicholas,” she replied. “I’m quite comfortable here in your arms.”

For a moment Nicholas lay there thinking, aware of Lizzie’s hand rubbing his chest lightly. Then he had it and he interrupted, saying, “I have my wish. Care to hear what it is? Or should I wait till midnight – till Christmas, to tell you?”

“Nicholas, stop teasing me! This is serious stuff! Remember what happened in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago—how three wise men followed a bright star to find a baby in a manger? Stars are important!” Lizzie scolded. “Go ahead; make your wish.”

Nicholas thought for a moment about what she’d said, and then he smiled. She had just changed his wish, and it kind of fit the moment! He paused, remembering, what he had in mind, and then he made his wish.

“Star light, star bright, the first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight . . . That one day I may also get to live in a place like this, and lie there every night, with my true love in my arms—both of us with a love that’s forever right!”

“Hey, that’s almost exactly the same as my wish, Nicholas! That’s cheating! That’s wasting a wish!” she exclaimed.

“Not exactly the same—yes, it’s similar to your wish Lizzie, but it’s not cheating. If three wise men can follow the same star and agree on the same thing, then why can’t the two of us do so, too? They set the precedent, you reminded me of it, and I changed my wish at the last moment, just before it was too late!” Nicholas replied, giving her a hug.

“Hmmm, you have a point, Sir Ian,” she said. “I remember well how the dream played out for Lady Jennifer, so let’s just wait and see shall we?” Lizzie remarked, and then added, *“When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are, anything your heart desires will come . . . to . . . you!”* She kissed him gently on his cheek and whispered in his ear, “Remember, nobody gets to hear about our wish until it happens—which, of course, may be never,” Lizzie concluded, swatting at the night’s first mosquito buzzing around her face.

Nicholas stood up, took a candle, wedged it on the rock behind their heads, and then striking a match, lit it. Now he could see Elizabeth lying there on the blanket, looking up at the stars. *If only I could have said what I really wanted to*, he

thought. *If only I could have said it out loud to Lizzie—I wish I might one day get to live with you in a place like this, and lie there with you always in my arms - both of us there with a love that's forever loyal and right!* He sighed. It wasn't the right time, at least not yet. He wasn't sure when the right time would be, but the play-acting they'd done tonight was as close as he could safely get to telling Lizzie that he loved her.

Nicholas took the other candle and placed it in the sand next to Lizzie's bare legs. He lit that one, too, and nodded to himself, satisfied that now the mosquitoes would leave her in peace—and if he snuggled up close with her, just maybe they'd leave him alone, too. He bent down and picked up his Mountain Dew, drinking the last bit before looking down at Lizzie where she lay. In the light of the two candles, she looked so peaceful, so pure, and so perfect.

How could he tell her that this summer was to be their last together? Maybe his first wish would have been better if he'd wished them back here again next year instead of casting his one precious wish so far out into the future. He sighed again and then bent to pick up the two bars of chocolate Elizabeth had brought. He held them up for her to see. "Cadbury's or Nestle?" he asked.

She turned to look at him, and then replied, "You choose for me. When it comes to milk chocolate, it's tough to choose wrongly," she joked.

"Okay, I'll pick the Cadbury's first," he said. Then he thought to add, "Do you want to know why?" Nicholas started unwrapping the purple covering and opening the foil. Then, kneeling down next to Elizabeth, he broke off a piece and held it to her lips. Elizabeth drew in her breath, savoring the aroma of the slightly soft milk chocolate before she began to nibble at it with her two front teeth. Then she reached up and placed her fingers around it, biting off a bigger piece "Why?" she asked as she let it melt in her mouth.

"Because, Lady Jennifer, you are my white, English rose and Cadbury's is a very English treat too!" Nicholas replied, biting off a piece of his square and rolling it around in his mouth.

"Oh Nicholas," Elizabeth laughed, you are a hopeless romantic. Don't ever change! If not me, one day some lucky girl's going to really appreciate that!" she teased. *But could it be me?* she wondered. *Is it even possible? Am I being realistic?*

Noticing Elizabeth's suddenly pensive look, Nicholas asked, "Penny for your thoughts, Lady Jennifer?"

She looked up and said, "I've a feeling that if you keep coming back into my life, as you have Nicholas, that my thoughts are going to come at a much higher price than that! Come lie down next to me again—I'm lonely—but first, turn on the tape player. It's Christmas Eve we need to remember!" Lizzie reminded him.

"Yes, that's a good idea, Lizzie," Nicholas said as he took the Philips cassette player, placed in on the rock above their heads, next to the candle, and turned it on. He adjusted the sound so that it was playing softly, so as not to overpower the sound of the waterfall which was now hidden in total darkness at the other end of the pool.

He knelt next to Lizzie, kissed her forehead, and then lay down next to her once more, moving his back to make a comfortable spot in the sand, while she once again got comfortable in his arms.

"Siii-ilent night, Hoo-lly night . . ." That Christmas carol sounded so appropriate here, and soon he could feel Elizabeth loosen her grip on him, becoming limp in his arms, her breathing more regular now as she lay fast asleep in his arms.

"Away in a manger, no crib for His bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head, the stars in the heavens, looked down where He lay, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay . . ."

Nicholas smiled. What a sweet song. He'd sung it at so many carol services as part of the St. Andrews choir, in cathedrals and churches alike, dressed in his royal-blue cassock, but those times were behind him now. It had been his home from 8 to almost 18.

Nicholas frowned as his thoughts strayed to Shorty and Bakkies, to Jumbo, Muffy, and Checkers. . . . His childhood was almost over now. What lay ahead for him? Where would he go? What would he do?

Before he could think about that much, he drifted off into a welcome, calming sleep, now only vaguely aware of the familiar lines of the Christmas carols as the music continued to play.

"Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay, close by me forever and love me I pray, bless all the dear children in Thy tender care, and fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there."

As the candles flickered, illuminating Elizabeth and Nicholas

sleeping peacefully there in each other's arms, they dreamt beautiful, loving dreams—innocent dreams that only seem possible for a short time in life—before awakening to the harsh realities of an adult world. . . .

* * *

“Nicholas! Wake up!” Elizabeth cried out. “We both fell asleep! What’s the time?”

Nicholas sat bolt upright, confused until he remembered where he was. The Christmas music had finished playing while they slept. He turned to find his watch, lying on the rock behind him, and he held it up to the candle. Squinting at it, he turned it a few times to see the position of the hands.

“It’s 20 minutes past midnight, Lizzie!” Turning to her, he kissed her forehead and said, “Merry Christmas, Lizzie!”

She was distracted for a moment, but then she smiled up at him and replied, “Merry Christmas to you, too, Nicholas! But if we want it to continue being a merry Christmas, we’d better pack up and get going rather fast now, I’m out later than my curfew—remember?”

Nicholas nodded. “Right! Well, don’t worry, I’m sure your parents won’t be back yet.”

“No, but still . . .”

“Yes,” Nicholas peered into the forbidding shadows of the jungle. “I suppose we should go.”

Just minutes later they had everything packed back inside their canoe and Nicholas was pushing it off the sandy riverbank in the dead of night. They’d placed the candles in the middle of the boat to light their way and keep the mosquitoes away, but those tiny flickers of flame did nothing to break the darkness of the night, but, at least they could see one another—silhouetted in the candles’ orange glow.

There was no moon, and with only the stars to light their way it was hard for Nicholas to judge where the water ended and the trees began. He paddled slowly, and they listened to the sounds of crickets and frogs chirping through the night. The water was still and very clear. Looking down at it, it was like a mirror, showing perfectly clear sections of the midnight sky. Stroke after steady stroke, Nicholas led them downriver as best he could, squinting out into the shadows of the night to see whether they were heading downstream or into the reeds along the riverbank.

A few times they began to get into the reeds, but Nicholas quickly steered them away, pushing them back out into deeper water, closer to the middle of the stream.

They made slow progress down the river, but Nicholas reasoned that it would be okay. Even though Elizabeth was out past her curfew, her parents wouldn't be back from the ball yet. If she'd been awake to notice her sister's absence, Hattie would have to be told to keep quiet about it, but otherwise they would be fine. They still had plenty of time to return, and soon, Elizabeth would be in bed, her parents none the wiser that she'd broken her curfew.

Nicholas smiled at Elizabeth from the back of the boat. She smiled back and played coyly with her hair. "Thank you, Nicholas," she said. "Thank you for tonight."

Nicholas shook his head. "No, thank *you*, Lizzie."

* * *

Constance sat and watched in the dark as Nicholas and Elizabeth returned from their canoe trip. She had a good view from where she was sitting beneath the eaves of the tent, a few dozen yards back from the shore. Her chair was to the far side of the tent opening, beneath their scraggly little tree. Constance's eyes followed the blue and white canoe as it drew closer, the candles acting as its beacons, illuminating the canoe and its occupants well enough that she could see their movements and gestures. Nicholas guided the canoe expertly into the opening of the small estuary in front of her, and then headed away from her as he ran the canoe aground on the grass some thirty yards away from where she sat in the dark quietly watching them.

Unaware of her mother's presence, Elizabeth hopped out of the canoe and onto dry land again. She was holding her pillow and blanket draped over one arm, with the white lily Nicholas had picked for her in that same hand. She waited for Nicholas to fetch the packet with the rest of the items from the canoe and then they walked hand-in-hand the short distance to the darkened caravan. The moon was still not out.

As they approached, Constance prepared herself for the rebuke she was about to deliver. She noticed Elizabeth was holding something in her left hand, and her eyes narrowed as she tried to determine what it was. Then she saw it. *Of course, it's another one of those stupid lilies.*

But they stopped some 20 yards away, still not noticing her sitting quietly there, waiting for the perfect moment. She watched as they put some of their things down, but Elizabeth clung foolishly to her long-stemmed, white Lily. Then Constance saw Elizabeth turn toward Nicholas. He was looking into her eyes, playing with her hair, whispering something which Constance couldn't hear. She continued to watch as Lizzie looked up at him, kissing him gently. Somehow the tone of Elizabeth's voice made it easier to hear her.

"Thank you, Nicholas, for the best Christmas Eve of my life!"

Constance heard most of what Lizzie said, easily able to piece together the rest. *Well, what a surprise you're in for, Elizabeth!* Constance gloated to herself. *Your precious Christmas Eve will soon be forgotten. Prepare yourself for the worst Christmas of your life, my girl!* A cruel grin appeared over Constance's thinly pressed lips, her eyes narrowing. She'd wait a few more moments. As she watched Elizabeth leaned her head against Nicholas's shoulder. She was unable to make out Nicholas's response. As they stood on the shore, looking out at the river, Nicholas turned and kissed the top of Elizabeth's head.

Constance's lips reformed into a thin line as she watched them. *They're certainly very . . . familiar.* It wasn't a problem, really. Why shouldn't her daughter have fun on vacation? So long as Charles never found out. But even if he did, it would only make Elizabeth more desirable to him. In her experience, a little jealousy was not altogether bad. *It forces men to stop waffling and fight for what they want.* It'd happened that way with Edwin. He hadn't been her first choice, but that hadn't mattered, because he'd made sure that he'd been her last.

Besides, Nicholas isn't really competition for Charles. Even if he might have been competition, he's going off to war soon, and that will be the end of it. Constance shook her head at that, wondering if it had occurred to Elizabeth yet. *In all probability, my dear, this will be the last time you ever see him. He's not going to be able to get away from those dirty little wars to come and spend Christmas in Siesta with you. And, of course, one never knows . . . he may even be among the casualties.*

How would Elizabeth react when she realized that she might never see Nicholas again? *She'll be heartbroken at first, but that's for the best.*

Constance focused her gaze on Nicholas as he and Elizabeth

stopped to pick up some things from the ground. Turning from the river bank, they began ambling up toward her. *And what about you, young man? Has anyone taken the time to explain to you what's about to happen, or have you figured it out yourself?*

Raising her teacup to her lips, Constance considered that she might save Nicholas some trouble by apprising him of his circumstances—and of his *competition*. Perhaps Elizabeth hadn't mentioned Charles yet. Well, it would be kinder if he knew. *Then he'll suffer no illusions about his chances with her.*

Constance sighed. *But, men are really terribly illogical. Rather than accept the inevitable, he'll probably keep in touch by writing to Elizabeth. . . . and she'll write back . . .*

She had seen and sometimes read the letters going back and forth between Nicholas and Elizabeth. They confided in each other details about one another's lives, even the meaningless details, just because they like to hear from each other. *It's the sort of correspondence that friends would have . . . best friends. A rare thing to find in a man. And Elizabeth hardly has any friends. She might conceivably fall prey to that sort of connection and imagine it turning into something more serious one day. Just because that's foolish and impossible doesn't mean she won't wish it were so, and maybe, in so doing, sabotage her chances with Charles.*

Constance resisted the urge to shake her head. No, she decided, smiling up at Nicholas and Elizabeth as they came within a few yards of the tent—and her. *I'd better remind them just where they stand.* She took another sip of her tea, draining it to the last drop.

Better to be safe than sorry.

Nicholas and Elizabeth stopped just short of the tent, close enough that she could hear everything they were saying now.

"Good night, sweet Lady Jennifer! Merry Christmas and sweet dreams! I'll see you tomorrow some time—whenever you're free and able to spend time with me again," he said.

"Good night, my gallant Sir Ian—I will indeed dream sweet dreams! Thanks for bringing me back safely—and just in the nick of time! That was quite a challenge in the dark."

Before she continued, he interrupted her in a hushed, urgent tone. They froze, Nicholas looking over her shoulder at something sitting in the darkness under the eaves of the tent.

Constance smiled. *Now was exactly the right time!*

Chapter 17

“Hello there, did you two have fun?” Constance asked.

Nicholas was pleasantly surprised. He’d been expecting the first words out of Constance’s mouth to be: *“Get rid of that flower! Don’t you know it’s unlucky?”*

Elizabeth turned to face her mother. “Yes, it was wonderful, we went for a midnight canoe ride up the river,” Elizabeth replied, speaking for both of them.

“Oh, that’s nice.” Constance nodded.

Elizabeth turned to Nicholas. “I’ll be back in a minute. I just need to put these things down.” With that, she withdrew her arm from his, took the bag from him, and disappeared inside the tent.

Constance gestured to the empty lawn chair beside her and said, “Take a seat, Nicholas.”

He started toward the chair. “Thank you.”

Constance waited a couple of seconds after he had taken his seat, and then launched right into it. “You and Elizabeth seem to be getting along well.”

He nodded. “She’s a remarkable girl, but I’m sure you already know that.”

“Indeed.” A couple seconds of silence passed. “You know,” Constance began, “there’s only one other person I’ve seen her get along with as well as you.”

Nicholas turned his head to Constance, giving her his full attention. “Only one . . . ?” A wry grin formed on his lips. “Her best friend, Dilly?”

“No—” Constance shook her head, then met his gaze with a small smile. “—her boyfriend, Charles.”

Nicholas sat abruptly back, his grin quickly fading. “Charles?”

Constance appeared not to notice his shock. "You've heard about him from Elizabeth, I assume?"

Nicholas frowned. "Yes, but Lizzie hasn't really mentioned much about him yet."

"Oh? Well, she met him earlier this year." Constance looked away, out over the river, and Nicholas watched her shrug. "It's little wonder why she gets along so well with him. With a chauffeur-driven Mercedes and private tables at all the best restaurants . . ." She turned back to face him, her smile blossoming into a grin. "Which girl's heart wouldn't melt?"

Constance's tone was light, but the words it carried seemed to pierce Nicholas over and over again. He wasn't sure why it bothered him to hear this from Constance. Maybe it had something to do with that chauffeur-driven Mercedes. . . . *Is Elizabeth really that shallow?*

As if reading his mind, Constance went on, laughing lightly, "You should have seen her face when I told her that Charles stands to inherit his father's fortune one day! And, of course, his father is already quite old—and fat, unhealthy . . ." She looked away. "One doesn't like to think about it, but . . . well . . . everyone dies sooner or later. You know how it is."

Nicholas nodded. *So if Elizabeth acts fast and gets married to Charles, she could stand to inherit that fortune right alongside him. Yes, I know exactly how it is.*

A long silence began stretching through the air like a rubber band. It was stretching to the point of breaking as Nicholas sat there, grinding his teeth over what Constance had said. He wasn't entirely sure he managed to keep the anger out of his voice as he asked, "What does Charles's father do?"

Constance smiled. "He owns Africa's largest textile mill—Berg River Textiles, in Paarl, just minutes away from where we live."

Nicholas's eyes widened fractionally. "I see."

"They'll be going to the University of Cape Town together the year after next." Nicholas's jaw grew slack, but Constance went on blithely: "But of course, by then, they may even be engaged."

Nicholas's voice came out softly, hoarsely. "Why are you telling me this?"

Constance looked straight at him, her eyes full of sympathy, a faint smile on her face. "It's better that you know where you stand, don't you think?"

Elizabeth chose that moment to come striding back outside, now wearing a soft, cotton track-suit.

"Okay, I'm ready to say good night, Mother—Nicholas, maybe you should go back to your parents now? They might be worried. We are a little late . . ." Elizabeth nervously suggested, wondering when her mother was going to point that out.

"Oh, well, no need to worry, Nicholas—we left early, as Edwin drank a little bit too much and needed to lie down, but your parents are still at the dance. I doubt they're back yet—and they don't seem the sort to worry about you much, anyway. Boys are so much easier to raise! As for you, my girl, we'll get to your lateness tomorrow, but be ready for an austere Christmas day!"

"Mom, please, it was an honest mistake! We really didn't count on the difficulty of getting back here in a canoe, in the dead of night—and tonight, of all nights, there was no moon! It's not like I have Charles's chauffeur to drive me back in his dad's Mercedes—a canoe's different!"

The words had scarcely left her lips when Nicholas looked up at her, his face clouded with doubt and . . . *suspicion*? Elizabeth's smile faded. Suddenly, she found herself wondering what had happened while she'd been gone. She opened her mouth to ask him what was wrong, but her mother replied before either she or Nicholas could say a thing.

"Well, I'm glad the two of you had fun," Constance said, levering herself out of her chair. She turned to face her daughter. "You may as well make the best of your time together. After all, while Nicholas is in the military for the next two years, he's not going to be able to make it back to Siesta. And in that time . . . well, your uncles got married while they were in the military—women *do* so love a man in uniform—so don't take anything for granted. Make the most of what you have while you have it."

Constance was smiling sympathetically, and Elizabeth was just standing there, a few steps from the entrance of the tent, staring at her mother, her face blank and her eyes wide with shock. Her gaze panned slowly over to Nicholas, as if she couldn't believe what she'd just heard and wanted confirmation from him. Questions were running furiously through her head but never made it to her lips: *Two years? Not going to be able to make it back to Siesta? Why didn't you tell me, Nicholas? . . .*

Women love a man in uniform?

Nicholas appeared to be just as shocked as she—his mouth agape, his lips moving noiselessly.

“The two of you may want to sit down in these chairs and chat for a while longer. I’m off join your father in bed.”

Having said everything she’d meant to, Constance brushed past her daughter and disappeared inside the tent, leaving them alone, staring at one another in silent accusation. Nicholas was actually staring *past* Elizabeth, however, his gaze following Elizabeth’s mother through the darkened recesses of the tent.

Elizabeth watched as Nicholas closed his gaping mouth into a frown and sank woodenly into the chair next to the one her mother had been sitting in—the one Elizabeth now sunk into. He reached over and took her hand in his. Elizabeth allowed it, but almost mechanically.

Hearing the caravan’s door close, and feeling they were well out of earshot of her mother, Elizabeth broke the silence. “Is what my mother said true, Nicholas?”

Nicholas didn’t hesitate. “No . . . and yes. We *will* see each other again, Lizzie. I don’t know how yet, but I know we will.” His voice was determined. “But she’s right—it probably won’t be for another two years. I won’t be able to make it to Siesta next year because I’ll be in basic training—boot camp—and I won’t get more than a few days’ leave, if any. That wouldn’t even be enough time to get from Pretoria to here and back again, let alone for me to actually spend any time with you.”

Silence.

“I meant to tell you, but I didn’t want to upset you.”

Elizabeth bristled. “I’m not a child, you know. You could’ve told me. I would’ve understood.”

Nicholas shot her a strange look that thinly masked his own irritation. He wasn’t the only one keeping things to himself in order to save feelings.

She frowned at the look he gave her, and he looked away. “I was going to tell you.”

“When?” she shot back.

He shrugged. “At the end of the holiday, when we said goodbye.”

“I see.”

“Apparently you don’t, but listen, I’m not the only one who’s

been less than forthright here—I'm not the one who's secretly dating the heir to Berg River Textiles. When were you planning on telling me about *that*?"

Elizabeth gaped at him. "How did you—"

"From your mother."

"Well, so what if I am? We did briefly discuss Charles tonight, and anyway, you're dating someone else at home, too."

"That's not what I meant. I meant that . . ." He trailed off, looking for the right words. A moment later, he sighed in frustration, not having found them. "You didn't tell me anything about Charles, and now I find out from your mother that you're going with him in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes to private tables at all the best restaurants. . . . It kind of makes a guy wonder what *really* turns your head."

"Well, that's just silly!"

"Is it?" he asked, gauging her sincerity with a disapproving frown.

Elizabeth tore her hand free of his. He stopped talking, and turned to face her with eyebrows raised. She just sat there, fuming at him. This was the same argument she'd had with Pieter just before breaking up with him. *Don't they get it? I don't care about all that stuff!*

"Don't try to turn this around on me!" she said. "You should have told me that this would be the last time I'd see you for two whole years. I don't need you to coddle me by shielding me from the truth. I don't like it! I get enough of that from my mother," Elizabeth finished, her chest rising and falling with barely contained fury.

Nicholas was smiling faintly at her.

Elizabeth's hands were on her hips. "What?" she demanded.

"You know, you're pretty cute when you're angry. . . ." She narrowed her eyes at him, and he held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, you're right, I should have told you. I'm sorry. But *you* should have told me a little me about Charles. It appears that I've got a lot more competition than I thought—and he's going to have you all to himself for almost two years—for not one, but two Christmases! How would you feel if you were in my position, Lizzie?"

Her expression softened, and her gaze dropped to the ground. "I know. I was afraid that it would bother you if you knew much about him."

Nicholas stood up and cupped her chin with one hand, lifting her eyes to his. "And I was afraid it would bother you if *you* knew. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?"

"Let's forgive each other." Elizabeth stood up to meet him at eye level.

He grinned and leaned in toward her. His lips met hers in a fiery kiss, sending the last vestiges of her ire rushing away.

He broke away a few seconds later. "Am I forgiven?"

She gave him a coy look. "Maybe."

He grinned. His hand sliding down to the small of her back, he gently pulled her toward him and kissed her again.

Ten seconds later, she broke away, breathless.

"And now?"

"What?" she asked dreamily, her eyes still half-closed.

"Now do you forgive me?"

"For what?" she asked, feigning amnesia.

He nodded. "Good, let's not let this spoil the time we have left. Your mother was right about one thing—we can't take anything for granted." Taking her hand in his once more, he looked deeply into her eyes.

"I'm sorry, too," she said after a moment. "For not telling you more about Charles. I guess I was afraid that if I did, you'd think that I was only interested in him because of his money—" She gave Nicholas a look that mixed regret and disappointment. "—and it seems I wasn't far wrong."

Nicholas caught the look she gave him and hesitated visibly before replying. "If *you'd* told me about him, I wouldn't have jumped to that conclusion, but the way your mother explained things, it was hard not to wonder."

Elizabeth's eyebrows drew together. "What do you mean?"

Nicholas did his best to remember her mother's words: "You should have seen Elizabeth's face when I told her that Charles will inherit his father's fortune one day. . . . and his father is already old, and quite unhealthy . . . one doesn't like to think about it, but sooner or later, everyone dies. . . ."

Elizabeth blinked with shock. "She didn't say that!"

"Yes, she did."

"But . . ." *She couldn't have said that!* Elizabeth almost blurted it out. "Why would she say something like that?"

"I don't know, Lizzie. You tell me and then we'll both know."

"Well, it's really not like that between me and Charles. I

could care less about his money. I even *told* my mother that, so I'm not sure how she got any other impression."

Nicholas began nodding. "From what I know about you, that does make more sense, but you can see why I wondered."

"I guess . . . I'd better get to bed now. See you tomorrow?"

Nicholas let go of her hand, and Elizabeth surreptitiously shot Nicholas a suspicious look as he did so. *I only have his word for it that my mother really said that. He could just be twisting her words in order to defend himself. . . .*

Nicholas noticed the strange look on her face, but he misinterpreted it. "You're not still mad at me, are you?"

She shook her head absently.

"Ah, okay. Good."

"Good night, Lizzie—it's been an unusual Christmas so far, but the best Christmas Eve I've ever had, without a doubt!"

Lizzie smiled, remembering the previous night and evening as she turned to go. "Yes, it was, wasn't it?" she replied.

Yet somehow her mother had managed to rob her of some of that joy. She had that knack! She would have to ask her mother about what she had said to Nicholas. Someone was obviously lying, and she needed to find out who.

* * *

The next day Nicholas went straight to Elizabeth's camp site after breakfast. With the memories of last night and evening still fresh in his mind, there was a bounce in his step and a smile on his face.

As he drew near to the camp site, however, he saw everyone but Elizabeth sitting outside around the camp fire. With a frown, he approached them, and once he was near enough, he called out, "Merry Christmas!"

Constance looked up with a smile, while Edwin pressed a hand to his forehead and groaned, looking like he might be sick. "Hello there, Nicholas. What brings you here?"

"Ah . . . I was going to ask Elizabeth to join me for a walk."

"Oh no, I'm sorry Nicholas, but she can't; she's grounded."

"Grounded?"

"Yes," Constance said, smiling as she moved to pick up the discarded plates scattered around the dying embers of the fire where they'd obviously just cooked breakfast.

"Is that because she arrived late last night? Because that really was my fault . . ."

"She knows what she did wrong, and she knows better than to violate her curfew. One day spent apart won't hurt the two of you. She needs time to think about what she did."

"But it's Christmas! Isn't that a bit harsh, Mrs. Smythe?"

She straightened and looked him dead in the eye, her smile suddenly vanishing. "I'll decide what is and isn't too harsh for my daughter. You'll understand when you have kids someday."

"But—"

"Nicholas, go spend Christmas with your family. You can come back tomorrow. I won't be forced to repeat myself again."

Nicholas looked crestfallen. "Okay. Tell her I came by, please, and that I wish her a Merry Christmas. . . ."

"Goodbye, Nicholas," Constance said.

Edwin waved soundlessly and Nicholas turned to head back the way he'd come. It wasn't fair! But what about life was ever fair? He sighed. There was so little time left for them to spend together, and Constance had just taken away a whole day—smiling as she'd done so!

Yesterday might have been the best Christmas Eve ever, but today was about to become the worst Christmas Day ever! But then he remembered, technically, they had spent almost two hours of Christmas together already! They'd awakened in each other's arms on Christmas morning, in their special secret place and there they had already wished each other a loving, private "Merry Christmas" – and nobody, not even Constance, could rob them of that!

Then they'd also had a magical canoe trip back, with the light of the two candles barely strong enough to illuminate just the two of them as the canoe glided silently on the black, mirrored surface, surrounded by almost total darkness, with just the stars to guide them. Constance couldn't take that away from them. Nicholas sighed, but as he walked back to join his family, a happy smile crept onto his otherwise weary face. It was going to be a long day without Elizabeth.

Chapter 18

“Hey, look! I think that’s Samuel over there,” Elizabeth said, pointing with the hand which wasn’t holding Nicholas’s as they walked toward the Duka. It was now two days after Christmas. And ever since their forced separation they hadn’t spent a moment out of each other’s sight. They were savoring the time they had left—short as it might be.

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Nicholas said, following her gesture to where Samuel stood outside the Duka, staring at a large cork board on the wall of the store. “I wonder what he’s looking at.”

Elizabeth shook her head.

They walked up behind Samuel and stood silently beside him as they joined him in staring at the cork board. Above the board was a sign which read: *Wall of Memories*. Pegged all over the board were photographs, some of them with captions. All of the photographs appeared to have been taken in and around Siesta. Some showed people clustered around evening barbecues, drinks raised in toasting; others showed people sun tanning on the beach, and still others showed the scenery: sunsets over the water, the waves crashing along the beach, sunlight sprinkling through the hanging fronds of a Willow tree . . .

After a while, Samuel noticed them standing beside him. “Oh, hello, Elizabeth—Nicholas. I didn’t see you standing there.”

Nicholas pointed to the cork board. “What’s all this about?”

“More or less exactly what it says,” Samuel said, turning back to the wall. “I asked George what it was doing on the wall of his store, and he explained to me that Mister Nixon had the idea for it last week. He’s been going around the camp

collecting photographs from people to post up here so they'll have something to remind them of their time here when they come back year after year. Apparently he's going to have it framed behind glass when it's done. He wants to do that every year from now on."

Nicholas was nodding slowly as he listened to the explanation. "Well, that's a neat idea. I should ask my dad if he has any photos we can put up here."

Samuel began nodding—then froze as though suddenly remembering something. He turned back to them. "Hey, listen, I just remembered: I left Roderick all alone. He got a slingshot and a Polaroid instant camera for Christmas. He's been terrorizing people with them ever since. I better go make sure that he's not getting into any trouble."

Nicholas turned to Samuel with eyebrows raised. "A Polaroid instant camera? That's an expensive gift. I'm jealous."

Samuel shrugged and shook his head. "What can I tell you? He's a spoiled brat. Anyway, nice seeing you two again. Take care, okay?"

Nicholas nodded and extended his hand to Samuel. "You, too. Say hello to Claire for me."

"I will," Samuel said and then jogged away.

Nicholas chuckled, watching Samuel go. "It must be a pain to have Roderick for a brother."

"He's just looking for attention," Elizabeth replied.

"Yeah, the wrong kind."

* * *

"Mom—" Elizabeth paused, uncertain how to broach the subject with her mother.

"Yes?" Constance turned from the dressing mirror in her room inside the camper. She was getting ready for bed, removing her earrings and combing the tangles out of her hair. "What is it, Elizabeth?" Constance asked, still combing her hair.

"Nicholas told me something a few days ago, about something you said to him. . . ."

Constance cocked her head and raised her eyebrows. "You're going to have to be more specific than that, Elizabeth, if you want me to remember."

Elizabeth bit her lower lip, hesitating. She decided to just come right out and say it. "He said you told him that I'm only

interested in Charles for his father's money."

Constance stopped combing her hair. "Did he?" She turned back to the mirror and went on combing her hair. "Well, I'm not sure where he got that idea, but it wasn't from me."

Elizabeth frowned. "You're sure? There's nothing you can remember saying that might have given him that impression?"

Constance turned back to her daughter with a frown of her own. "I've already given you my answer, Elizabeth. Now who are you going to believe: Nicholas, or your own mother?"

Elizabeth hesitated again, but after a moment's contemplation she shook her head and her frown lifted. "You're right. There must be another explanation. Well, goodnight, Mom."

Constance nodded. "Goodnight, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth turned and left her mother's room. *Maybe Nicholas did make up that story about what my mother said just to defend his accusations. . . .* Her frown returned. Someone who could lie that easily in order to get out of an awkward situation could lie about other, more serious things as well.

* * *

Gazing down into that gaping hole in the hard, sun-baked ground, seeing Benjamin's small, wooden coffin inside, Constance was struck by a sudden, numbing sense of dread.

She felt the breeze hit her full in the face, but it was like the blast from a furnace, rather than the fresh, bracing wind she remembered. The minister's words rolled over her, too faint to hear, yet strangely disquieting.

The minister's voice was familiar, but not as she remembered it. Trying to still her nebulous fears, Constance looked up from the grave and her eyes alit upon the minister's face—

But it can't be! He's dead! Yet there it was for everyone to see: Lawrence Stevens was very much alive, and performing the service at his own funeral. Disbelieving, she looked to her husband to see if he had noticed the irregularity. But there was no sign that he had. Tears glistened upon his cheeks as he stood in quiet reverence, listening to the service—just as she remembered he had done. She scanned the faces of the other mourners, wondering if any of them had noticed that the funeral was a sham, but they, too, were just as she remembered.

She turned back to watch Lawrence preside over his own

funeral. An ironic smile formed on her lips despite the gnawing dread in her gut. Time seemed to slow and she watched as Lawrence looked her straight in the eye and said, "Dust to dust, ashes to ashes . . ." Lifting the urn that was supposed to have contained his ashes, Lawrence opened it and poured its contents over the open grave of his only son. But instead of the ashes falling down as she expected them to—as she remembered they had—Lawrence's ashes hit a sudden gust of wind and were carried swiftly upon it until they hit her full in the face.

She choked and reflexively shut her burning eyes. Coughing into the searing wind she said, "Go ahead! Do your worst, Lawrence, but the last laugh is mine! I have your house, my husband has your job, and you have nothing! God is just." For a long time, there was no reply. "Did you hear me, Lawrence?" She looked up and forced her eyes to open. She gasped. Lawrence was gone. So were all the mourners. It was dark now, and there was only one person left, standing before her on an eerily windswept version of the graveyard. He hadn't been there before, Constance was sure of that. He couldn't have been!

Instead of Lawrence standing there in front of her, it was her father. He was shaking his head, slowly and sadly.

"So be it," he said. "But you, my girl, will spend the rest of your life trying to recover what you've so foolishly cast aside. And I . . ." Her father's back began to turn and he started fading away. "I shall forget I ever had a daughter." He disappeared into the darkness just as the last word reached her ears, and suddenly, from the direction where he had been standing, came another gust of wind—this time cold, not searing. She shivered, and a second later, carried by the wind and coming from where her father had been standing, came another fist full of ashes.

She fell to her knees, her eyes burning more fiercely now. Tears welled; she gritted her teeth against them; they rolled down her cheeks anyway. She viciously swiped the tears away.

"I did it, Father! Do you hear me?" she screamed. "You were wrong! I did it! I've got everything now!"

And then his voice returned, distantly now, whispering, mocking her in a laughing tone as it echoed through the darkness: "Yes, girl, now you have everything, but can you

hold onto it?"

Her mouth began to form an angry reply, but then she stopped, distracted by the sticky feeling on her hands. She stopped wiping at the tears coursing down her cheeks and looked down at her hands—

And stared with horror. It wasn't ashes or her tears that she saw clinging to her fingertips in the eerie, effervescent light of the graveyard.

It was blood.

Suddenly, she was back at home in Wellington, in her bedroom, working feverishly in the dark, scrubbing until her knuckles were raw to get rid of the bright crimson stain of Campari on the pale alabaster carpet—the stain that looked for all the world like . . .

Blood.

And no matter what she did . . .

It wouldn't come out.

"What are you doing, Constance?"

She looked up. It was Lawrence. Suddenly, without knowing how, she was standing before him, a gun lying in her open palms, held out like an offering. She heard her own voice then, but the words were a memory. She'd spoken them before: "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 heard herself go on anyway. "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. I'm afraid Edwin was never really your friend." Constance heard an appropriately sympathetic tone in her voice as she added the final nail to Lawrence Stevens's coffin.

Lawrence's eyes dipped to his revolver, where it lay in her open palms, then elevated briefly to meet her gaze. He inclined his head to her, once, 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 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.”

* * *

Constance awoke with a start, covered in a cold sweat, her heart racing, her eyes wide, her breath rhythmically shuddering in and out of her lungs. She had to silence an involuntary scream before it tore from her lips and woke everyone else in the camper. As she lay there, cold and shivering with sweat and spent adrenaline, she tried to still her racing heart, tried to will away the feelings of terror and helplessness that always accompanied the nightmares.

The same nightmares, with minor variations, over and over again . . . for months! Except this one had been different: it had included her father.

It didn’t mean anything; she was sure of that. It was just a dream. He had probably featured in her dream this time because she had been thinking of inviting him and her mother for a visit when she got back from Siesta.

She raised shaking hands to hold them in front of her eyes, irrationally checking to see if there was any blood on them—she peered at her fingers, realized that it was too dark to tell, then rubbed her fingertips together as a surer way of checking.

Nothing.

Then she checked the back of her neck and side of her face. Still nothing.

She let out a shuddering sigh. She had to get a grip. It was just a dream. It wasn’t real. But there *were* elements of reality to it. She’d been there, at the funeral, and had watched as Lawrence’s ashes were sprinkled into the grave of his only son. She *had* worked feverishly, obsessively, to get rid of the bright red stain of Campari on her carpet. Those *were* her father’s words, echoing through her subconscious word for word, spoken to her so many years ago. And that *had* been a part of the exchange between her and Lawrence just before he’d pulled the trigger.

But there were also lies mixed in with the truth. Her father had never mocked her by saying, “*Yes, girl, now you have everything, but can you hold onto it?*” Not that it would be very unlike him to say that, just that he’d never been given the chance to say it. . . .

Because she hadn’t seen him in years. And apart from the

perfunctory happy birthdays and merry Christmases that they delivered to each other over the phone, she hadn't *talked* to him for years, either.

He'd never forgiven her for marrying Edwin. His primary objection had been Edwin's lack of means to support her, but now that Edwin was the managing director of Western Tanning, and had the best home in all of Wellington, she couldn't help wondering if he would change his mind about Edwin. She hadn't told her father about any of that yet. She was waiting until she could show him in person.

She had been planning to invite them for months already, but every time she thought about inviting them, she found a reason to put it off.

Perhaps that was why her father was appearing in her nightmares now. She'd been secretly putting off inviting her parents for fear that her father would still disapprove of her, and of her marriage, in spite of everything she'd accomplished. And now her fears were manifesting in her dreams.

Stupid, stubborn old man! she thought, shaking her head. *It's not enough for you to haunt me with your words while I'm awake, now you must do it while I'm sleeping, too?*

If she were ever going to get a peaceful night's sleep again, she was going to have to invite her parents to visit her in Wellington. *And if he doesn't approve of me and my life now, perhaps I shall simply have to forget him.*

Feeling suddenly tired, Constance considered trying to go back to sleep. But, no, she knew what would happen if she did. The dream would be back. She sighed and sent Edwin a sideways glance. He was snoring softly beside her. If she had made any noise in her sleep, it hadn't woken him. She frowned. *Well, then you won't notice if I disappear for a little while.*

Carefully, slowly peeling back the layers of sheets, Constance held them away from herself so as not to tug on them as she climbed out of bed. Once she'd freed herself of the bedding, she stood beside the bed, watching to make sure she hadn't woken Edwin. The rising and falling susurrus of his snoring went on uninterrupted, and Constance gave a brief, quiet snort. *Good.* She didn't want to have to explain to him what she was doing. And she was even more determined that he not find out she was still having nightmares. *Children have nightmares,* she

thought as she stepped into her slippers and clasped her watch around her wrist.

She made her way to the door of the camper, wearing nothing but her silken, blue nightgown. Quietly, Constance unlocked and opened the door. She was careful to hold the spring-loaded door to prevent it from slamming behind her.

Once outside the camper, Constance made her way through the tent and then took a seat in one of the two lawn chairs which sat beneath the eaves of the tent. She wasn't concerned that someone might see her sitting outside, wearing nothing but her nightgown. After all, it was still dark—*probably the middle of the night. Too early for anyone to be up yet.*

Anyone, that is, but her.

She looked out over the inlet of the Touws River, trying to forget about the nightmare she'd had. She watched the shimmer and sparkle of moonlight skipping across the water. Isolated from the flow of the river, the inlet was usually devoid of ripples, flat and clear like a mirror, but now the surface was wrinkled by a steady breeze.

Feeling the cool breeze play gently through her hair as it came off the water, Constance let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding and allowed the breeze to carry away some of her anxiety. *Nightmares are for children*, she reminded herself, allowing her eyes to drift closed as she concentrated on taking deep, calming breaths of the refreshing night air.

Unbidden, her father's words came back to her. "Yes, girl, now you have everything, but can you hold onto it?" Constance's eyes cracked slowly open.

She shivered. It was a cold night. She was struck by a sudden urge to go back to the warmth of her bed, but instead she just sat there, staring vacantly over the river. She turned the question over and over in her head, driven by an obsessive need to answer it.

The more she thought about it, the more she was certain that the question made no sense. How could she and Edwin possibly lose what they'd acquired? The best home in Wellington, a new company car, a new camper, greater status . . . Edwin, now the managing director of Western Tanning and earning a salary far in excess of what he had been . . .

She couldn't think of any way that she and Edwin might lose

what they'd gained through their painstaking efforts—*my painstaking efforts*, Constance thought, with a short, bitter laugh bubbling from her lips. *What did Edwin ever do to get us where we are today? I had to do it all for him.*

Constance shook her head and leaned luxuriously back in her chair. She allowed her eyes to drift closed once more. Her father couldn't help but approve of her now. She had everything that had ever mattered to him.

And everything that had ever mattered to her.

* * *

Distantly, she heard it . . . growing ever closer—or farther away?—seeming to come from dozens of directions at once and dopplering higher and lower in pitch. . . . Coming slowly awake, her mind identified the sound as familiar . . . and *annoying*. Every morning in Siesta the air was alive with a mellifluous tapestry of chirping—an ever-changing melody woven through the air by dozens of colorful, tropical birds, flying every which way and singing as they went.

Now awake enough to feel the sun beaming hotly down upon her face, Constance risked cracking one eye open. The sun greeted her effort with a blinding flash and she quickly shut her eye again. Had Edwin forgotten to close the blinds last night?

Click.

"Good morning."

Constance jumped at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. For a second it made no sense—both the words and the fact that there was a stranger inside the caravan—and then it all came rushing back. The nightmare . . . waking up, coming outside to get some fresh air, and then . . . Her eyes shot open as she realized the horrible truth: she hadn't gone back to bed! She'd fallen asleep in the chair outside the tent, sitting in her nightgown! And now, if the blazing sun was anything to go by, she was sitting in plain view, for everyone to see.

Constance's eyes sought and then fixed upon the source of the unfamiliar voice. Her gaze narrowed. He was a boy—*probably no more than ten years old*. She studied him for a moment, trying to formulate her reply. The boy was wearing round, black-rimmed glasses and a pair of brown, knee-length shorts with a white, short-sleeved, button-up shirt tucked neatly into them. There was a Polaroid instant camera dangling

from a strap around his neck, an army camouflage boonie hat on his head, and a slingshot tucked into his pocket.

"Aren't you afraid that someone will see you sitting outside in your pajamas?" the boy said.

Glancing quickly about, taking in her surroundings, Constance noted that the sun was still rising, and apart from the boy in front of her, there was no one else around. Relaxing slightly, she turned back to give her reply.

"Well, you're an impertinent child. I can see that the finer points of tact and minding one's own business have been thoroughly lost on you."

The boy bristled at that. "I tell things as I see them."

Constance gave him a withering look as she eased out of her chair. She had no intention of staying outside, chatting with this boy. Someone else might see her. "Then perhaps you should close your eyes once in a while."

The boy looked her up and down, taking in her appearance, then he inclined his head. "Perhaps I should."

Constance's eyes narrowed. How dare he talk to her like that?! Mustering as much patience as she could manage, she took a deep breath and forced a thin smile.

"What's your name?"

"Roderick."

"And what are you doing up so early, standing out here in front of my tent?"

"Apart from asking an old lady why she's sitting outside in her pajamas?"

Her eyes flashed. *Old lady!* Constance had half a mind to flip that boy over her knee and give him the spanking he so rightly deserved.

Constance renewed her failing patience and replied through gritted teeth: "Apart from that."

Roderick shrugged and hefted his camera from where it dangled at his chest. "I'm bird-watching."

Amused in spite of herself, Constance raised one eyebrow and pointed to the slingshot in his pocket. "And what's that for?"

"Close-ups."

Close-ups? Her brow furrowed as she wondered what he meant. Then she thought she understood. *He shoots the birds with the slingshot, then takes photographs of them when they're*

lying stunned—or dead—on the ground. She shook her head. *At least there'll be less chirping to wake me in future.* "I see, well . . . take care that you don't hit any windows." She turned to leave, but caught his wordless reply in her peripheral vision—he was sticking his tongue out at her. *The little miscreant!*

In her hurry to get back inside, she was about to ignore the rude gesture, but then a sudden thought occurred to her, and she rounded on Roderick from the entrance of her tent. His tongue promptly flicked back into his mouth, and he affected an innocent look. She chose to pretend that she hadn't seen. She had a more important matter to address. "This will just be our little secret, won't it?"

Roderick's brow furrowed beneath the stiff brim of his boonie hat. "What will?"

Constance gestured impatiently to her attire. "You finding me sitting outside like this."

Roderick smiled pleasantly. "Of course." Constance nodded and turned to leave again. "Although . . ."

She whirled around. Roderick's eyes were sparkling with glee. He'd found a shiny red button marked *don't touch* and he was just about to push it. "My memory for keeping secrets isn't so good. Every now and then I blurt out something that I wasn't supposed to." Roderick affected a hangdog look and studied the ground at his feet. Constance was already opening her mouth to give him a scathing lecture about the evils of being a gossip when his head came up and his expression brightened. "But it helps if I have a little something to remind me of the secret I was supposed to keep. . . ."

Constance put her hands on her hips. "Are you trying to blackmail me?" Roderick just grinned. Constance wagged her finger at him. "Take care how you answer that question."

Roderick shrugged and began turning to leave. "I guess I'll just have to try to remember without a reminder. . . ."

"You do that," Constance said. She watched him go, thinking, *Wretched little boy! He probably thought that he was going to get some money out of me in return for his silence.* She shook her head in disgust, then turned and hurried inside the tent.

Who could he tell, anyway? She had never even seen the boy before, so anyone he could tell would probably be as much a stranger to her as he was. They'd hear about some lady sitting

outside in her pajamas, but they'd have no way of knowing that it was her.

Satisfied that there was nothing to worry about, Constance quietly opened the door to the camper, hoping as she did so that no one else was awake yet. Perhaps she could sneak back inside without having to explain where she'd been.

* * *

Three days later, Constance opened the small refrigerator inside the camper, spent a moment searching for the milk, realized there was none, and cast a rueful glance toward her cup of tea where it sat growing cold on the counter behind her.

Leaving the camper in a rush, she strode through the tent, searching for any signs of her family. She continued her search outside the tent, but she couldn't find anyone anywhere. Constance sighed and her hands went unconsciously to her hips. *Where can they be?* she wondered, her eyes sweeping in every direction, scanning the horizon in ever-widening circles.

. . .

But she already knew where they were. Elizabeth was with Nicholas, saying goodbye and making the most of her last couple of hours with him. Hattie was no doubt doing likewise with her friends, and Edwin . . . Well, he *should* have been close at hand, making the final preparations for the journey home. Now, because of his absence, she was going to have to go to the Duka and get the milk for herself!

When Constance drew near to the Duka, she spotted a small group of people huddled to one side of the entrance, staring at the wall. More interested in her own business, Constance swept by them without a second glance. It was only as she reached out to open the door of the store that curiosity belatedly struck her. She hesitated, backedpedaled a few steps, and then joined them in staring at the wall. There was a framed display—a corkboard with a myriad of photos and associated captions pegged to it and encased behind glass. Also pegged to the corkboard, along the top, was an enamel white heading with bold black print:

Wall of Memories (December 1973)

Of course, she thought, her gaze dropping to scan the photographs in the framed display. She remembered now. Mr.

Nixon had been by last week to ask for the photographs for the display. She had given him just a few—the most flattering few she could find. After all, if one was going to be put in an exhibition for everyone to see, one couldn't afford to be immortalized in unflattering photographs.

Constance smiled, nodding slowly, approvingly, as she found and studied each of the photos she had submitted for the display. Her curiosity satisfied, she turned from the display and back toward the entrance of the store.

As she reached out for the door again, a voice stopped her. "Hello, dear."

Her eyes widened in recognition of the voice. She turned to look. Sure enough, it was Edwin. She hadn't spotted him standing there with the others. "Where have you been? I was looking all over for you!" Constance replied.

Edwin hesitated, a slight frown forming on his lips. He cast a momentary glance back to the display of photographs on the wall. "We ran out of milk," he explained, so I came to get some. "You've seen this?" He nodded to the display.

Constance matched his frown. "Yes, yes, I've seen it. Didn't you see me looking at it just now? I was standing right over there." She pointed to the spot.

He hadn't actually noticed her, but then, apparently she hadn't noticed *him* either.

"Of course, I noticed you. That's why I greeted you."

Constance gave a shallow nod. "Well, don't just stand around looking spare. I'm going to finish your errand for you, and you should get back to camp to finish whatever it is you have to do before we leave." She reached for the handle of the door again, and this time opened it partway before Edwin interrupted her.

"Constance . . ."

Holding the door open, she turned back to him with eyebrows impatiently raised. "Yes?"

"You really *need* to see this." He pointed to the display again.

"I told you—I've already seen it."

He shook his head. "No, I don't believe you have."

Hearing the note of warning in his voice, she let go of the door and allowed it to swing shut, the door bells chiming in its wake. Walking over to stand beside her husband, she followed his wordless gesture as he pointed to the display—to one picture in particular.

She gasped. It was a picture of her, but it wasn't one of the ones she had given to Mr. Nixon! In this offensive picture she was sleeping slumped over in one of the lawn chairs in front of her tent, wearing only her nightgown, no makeup on, with dark circles clearly visible beneath her eyes. The caption read: *Sleeping Beauty*.

"But, but . . ." Her heart racing, Constance glanced quickly from one side to the other, taking in the rest of the people around her. She realized too late that Edwin was still pointing to the offending picture and that now others were looking at it, too. It was scarcely a second before chuckling and muted laughter began bubbling from the group. They were laughing at her! Edwin realized his mistake and sheepishly lowered his arm.

Feeling a hand land on her shoulder, Constance promptly rounded on the person it was attached to, shrugging the hand off. It was Nicholas's father, Johann. He was grinning broadly at her. He nodded to the photograph that was now behind her. "I had no idea you had such a good sense of humor." He shook his head in wonder. "My wife would be mortified to have such a photograph of her framed in that display."

His words barely penetrated Constance's shock. She just stood there, blinking up at him, then slowly turned back to the display and studied the photograph once more. Gradually, her shock gave way to anger, and from there to a blinding rage that caused her face to flush bright red and made her body tremble.

How had that picture been taken? And who had submitted it to Mr. Nixon? She shot Edwin a furious look, wordlessly asking if he were to blame. He stared blankly back at her, his eyebrows elevating as he noted the expression on her face. *No, it couldn't have been him. He wouldn't dare. . . . Then who? And when . . . ?*

Suddenly, she remembered: that boy . . . *Roderick!* She gritted her teeth, remembering the precocious little brat. But there was no question that it was he who had taken the picture and submitted it to Mr. Nixon. She remembered the Polaroid camera that had been dangling from a strap around his neck, and how he had tried to blackmail her in exchange for his not telling anyone that he'd found her sitting outside her tent in nothing but her nightgown. *That rotten child!* She briefly considered hunting through the park until she found him and

made him apologize for what he'd done. But that could take hours, and there was no guarantee that he would still be in Siesta. There was also no point to such an endeavor. It wouldn't do anything to remove that hateful picture from the display. But Mr. Nixon . . . he was at least half to blame. He'd accepted the picture from Roderick and put it in the display without asking her. Perhaps he had even done it on purpose, knowing what her reaction would be.

Constance's eyes narrowed. Without bothering to explain, she about-faced and stalked off in the direction of Mr. Nixon's house. She would make him take the display down and remove the photograph. And he would do it . . . yes, he would do it, or else she'd never come back to his wretched park again. Then he'd be sorry.

She had only made it a few dozen steps from the little store and the knot of laughing people when she heard Edwin's voice call out behind her: "Constance! Where are you going?"

Wasn't it obvious? *He should know better than to ask stupid questions.* She gave no reply.

While I'm at it, I'll demand that we be given a better spot in Siesta when we come back next year. In years prior, she had left that task to Edwin, but she should have known better. He was too spineless to make any headway with the park owner. *But Mister Nixon wouldn't dare refuse me.*

pilogue

Elizabeth could scarcely believe that she would be leaving Siesta in just a few short hours. Had three weeks gone by already? It hardly seemed possible.

Elizabeth glanced at Nicholas, walking silently beside her. His expression seemed so serious, his eyes so far away. She wanted to say something to lift his spirits—and hers—something like, *Don't worry; we'll see each other again soon.*

But that would be a lie. She wasn't going to see him again, not soon, not for at least another two years, and they both knew it. Elizabeth looked away, frowning out at a horizon of soaring mountains, blanketed by an unbroken green carpet of jungle.

Two more years and then what? They'd be at university together. All three of them: Nicholas, Charles, and her. She winced. That would be awkward. She had no idea how she was going to handle it. *But a lot can happen in two years. . . . Maybe Charles won't be in the picture by then?*

A pang of guilt struck her even before she'd completed the thought. She felt like she was betraying Charles by thinking that way, but the alternative was that Nicholas wouldn't be in the picture, and she didn't want that either. There were two of them and only one of her. No middle ground where everyone could be happy. By the time Nicholas appeared on the scene again, she would have been dating Charles for more than two years already. Yet she had known Nicholas for longer. They had a history together; they were friends as much as anything else.

So maybe it wouldn't be a problem? Maybe Nicholas wasn't really that serious about her. Maybe she was just that girl he saw while he was on vacation. Maybe he wouldn't bother

fighting for her, and they would just go on being good friends.

. . .

And nothing more? Elizabeth winced again and her head dipped to study the ground as she walked. The idea of being nothing but friends with Nicholas made her feel ill. She gave an involuntary shiver and let out a long, quiet breath. She didn't want to lose Nicholas, but she didn't want to lose Charles either.

Why does everything have to be so complicated? she thought, looking up from the ground and noticing as she did so that they had reached their destination.

* * *

Nicholas had seen Elizabeth periodically stealing glances at him. He didn't know what to make of it. Was she wordlessly imploring him to break the silence and say something? If she was, she would have to wait. He wasn't sure that he could trust himself to speak. At least, not without betraying his feelings to her. And he wasn't about to do that, especially not now that he knew about Charles.

It wasn't fair. He was sure that if he had equal opportunity to win Elizabeth's heart, he would have no trouble doing so. *But life isn't fair, is it?* Nicholas thought. His bright green eyes widened in despair and his jaw grew slack as another thought occurred to him: when next he saw her, who knew how things might have changed? *Two years, at this time in her life . . . she could easily be engaged by the time I see her again! And where will that leave me?*

Out in the cold.

There had to be *something* he could do.

Maybe I should tell her how I feel. At least then I'll know where I stand.

When they reached their destination, Nicholas snapped out of his reverie and sent Elizabeth a smile that he hoped would look more genuine than it felt.

She returned his smile, but there was no mistaking the sadness in her eyes. He let go of her hand and then ushered her through the wooden archway of the Siestuary. She ducked beneath a low-hanging frond of the red bougainvillea, and he followed her through.

They walked on for another few dozen steps, weaving their way between neatly organized islands of flowers until they

came to their usual spot: an old, gray bench that sat overlooking the point where the Touws and Serpentine rivers met. They sat down together, preserving the silence as they gazed out over the water. Eventually Nicholas couldn't stand it anymore. He had to say something.

"Eliza—"

"Have you—"

Nicholas grinned and she laughed. They both looked at each other, and Nicholas said, "You first."

She shook her head. "No, you. I didn't really have anything to say. I was just trying to fill the silence."

"So was I."

"Oh."

His expression grew serious, and he gazed unblinkingly into her startling blue eyes. "But I did have something to say." She raised her eyebrows, cocked her head slightly to one side, and waited for him to go on. He hesitated, then looked away, deciding that it would be easier to say when he wasn't looking directly at her.

Idly, not really sure what he was doing other than buying himself some time, he hunched forward and picked a small, white flower growing in the grass at his feet. But instead of giving it to her, he just sat there, elbows on his knees, twirling the flower back and forth between the thumb and forefinger of one hand. Elizabeth watched him curiously.

The seconds ticked by and still he kept silent, gazing distractedly down at the flower he had picked. Just as she was about to prompt him to go on, he spoke:

"I'm really going to miss you, Lizzie."

Elizabeth's frown faded and her expression softened. She absently brushed a strand of hair away from her face. "I'm going to miss you, too, Nicholas, but . . ." She struggled for a moment, trying to find something reassuring to say. "We'll see each other again. . . ." she trailed off as Nicholas looked up from studying the flower he'd picked. He gave the barest shake of his head, and her heart wrenched.

"I don't know that we will."

She blinked and gaped at him. "Of course we will!"

He smiled back at her, his eyes sparkling. Straightening, he took the flower in his hand, reached up, leaned slightly toward her, and then tucked it neatly into her hair. His hand fell to

her cheek and he just sat there, staring into her deep blue eyes for a long, painful moment. "Don't forget me, Lizzie. Don't forget this." And with that, he leaned the rest of the way to her lips, kissing her with all the pent-up frustration of a man who knew he was in a battle he could not possibly win.

* * *

"Insufferable man!" Constance said, speaking to no one in particular as she stormed into the tent and continued on to the camper. She went inside, allowing the door to slam behind her. "Edwin?" She called from just inside the doorway. Hearing no immediate reply, she muttered under her breath, "Where is he now?"

Rounding the corner to the kitchenette inside the camper, she found Edwin pouring milk into *her* cup of tea, which she'd left standing on the counter. She narrowed her eyes at that. At least he'd had the sense to get the milk after she'd stormed off from the Duka. He finished pouring the milk and calmly—too calmly—lifted a spoon from the countertop and began stirring the tea.

"Yes, dear?"

"We're leaving."

He looked up, his eyebrows curiously raised. "Of course, at four o'clock." He glanced at his watch. "Two hours from now."

Constance frowned and shook her head impatiently. "No, now, so stop dawdling and do whatever it is you need to do before we go. I'm going to go find Elizabeth and Hattie so long."

Edwin took a sip of tea, his eyes studying his wife over the rim of the cup. Slowly lowering the cup from his lips, he said, "May I take it that Mister Nixon was less than sympathetic when you asked him to remove that photo of you from the display?"

Constance's eyes flashed and she gave a vicious nod. "I daresay I've never met a more horrid man in all my life!" She began turning to leave. "Half an hour, Edwin," she said as she left. "I expect you to be ready to go by then."

As he heard the camper door slam again, Edwin sighed. He permitted himself one last sip of tea before throwing the remainder down the sink.

* * *

Constance passed beneath the archway of the Siestuary, walking with long, purposeful strides—

And came to a sudden stop.

She'd already found Hattie and sent her back to camp. From there, she'd headed straight for the Siestuary, guessing that that's where Elizabeth would be.

She'd guessed right, but the timing of her arrival had been poor and now she found herself watching, unnoticed, from beneath the archway as Nicholas and Elizabeth sat kissing on a bench overlooking the river. She considered withdrawing to give her daughter a few minutes' privacy with Nicholas. But she'd already worn out all of her patience on Mr. Nixon, and now she was in no mood to wait for anyone. Watching with a frown, she just barely resisted the urge to tap her foot. Once the kiss was over, she shook her head and started forward. *At least they've already said goodbye.*

Coming up behind Nicholas, but in Elizabeth's periphery, Constance began to hear Nicholas speaking, but he was whispering and she couldn't make out the words.

Catching a glimpse of her mother in the corner of her eye, Elizabeth's head began to turn away from Nicholas, her eyes widening as they sought and found her mother's stormy face.

* * *

Nicholas withdrew, letting his hand fall from Elizabeth's cheek, ending the kiss. He watched her carefully as her eyes slowly opened, trying to gauge her reaction.

She gave him a curious look.

He had to risk it. If Elizabeth didn't know how he felt about her before he went into the air force, there'd be no reason for her to wait for him and nothing to prevent her from giving her heart to another while he was away. *It might already be too late*, Nicholas considered, frowning as he remembered Charles. But besides that, he needed to know if he was the only one who felt that what they had was something special.

"Elizabeth . . ." he began, his voice coming out in a whisper. Her head tilted curiously to the side. He hesitated for just a second, steeling himself for her reaction. "Before you go, I just want you to know . . . I lo—" He broke off in mid-syllable as her head turned away from his, her attention fixing upon something over his right shoulder.

"Elizabeth, we have to go now," a familiar voice said, coming from behind him. He identified the voice a split-second later. It was Elizabeth's mother.

Nicholas was already getting up from the bench and turning to face Constance when Elizabeth replied: "Already?" She glanced down at her watch and stood up from the bench now, too. It was just past two o'clock. "I thought we were leaving at four?" she asked, looking up from her watch.

Constance began shaking her head even before Elizabeth finished that sentence. "We were. Not anymore. Now come on, let's go."

Elizabeth sent Nicholas a look of silent apology.

Slowly, turning a disbelieving stare from her mother, Nicholas sent Elizabeth a wordless reply: an expression of bafflement, despair, and desperation. They just stood there for a long moment, not knowing what to say.

Constance gritted her teeth, enduring the silence for only a couple of seconds before reaching out and grabbing Elizabeth by the arm. "Goodbye, Nicholas," Constance said for the both of them as she began hauling her daughter away. Elizabeth resisted just enough to slow her mother's progress. She glanced back over her shoulder, her mouth hanging slightly open, looking like she wanted to say something.

Realizing that Elizabeth was caught in the middle—between urgently needing to go with her mother for some inexplicable reason, and wanting to stay with him for just a few more minutes to say goodbye—Nicholas offered her a reassuring smile, and called out after her: "Two years time, Lizzie, I'll be back here again, and I'll find you—just believe that if you can!"

Upon hearing that, Constance suddenly stopped beneath the archway of the Siestuary, turned around, and gave Nicholas a scornful look. "I'm afraid she won't *be* here two years from now."

Nicholas's eyes widened, and Elizabeth shot her mother a horrified look.

Still looking at Nicholas, Constance went on, "Mister Nixon has defied me for the last time. We're not coming back." Without waiting for his reply, Constance turned, looped her arm through Elizabeth's, and resumed walking.

But Elizabeth held her ground, forcing her mother to stop again. Her eyes locked with Nicholas's, and from beneath the bougainvillea-covered archway she called out to him: "Visit me, Nicholas! In Wellington, before you go to the air force."

Surprised by the sudden invitation, and unsure of how or

whether he would be able to accept it, Nicholas hesitated. But he realized that he only had a few seconds before Constance became fed up with her daughter's resistance and dragged her through the archway. Quickly, he nodded, smiled, and called back to her: "Count on it, Lizzie—whatever it takes, I'll be there!"

Elizabeth returned his smile with a weak one of her own, then turned around and finally went along with her mother.

Overwhelmed by the myriad of thoughts and feelings that were spinning through his head, Nicholas sat on the edge of the bench and watched them go. It wasn't until they disappeared from sight that he realized he'd been holding his breath. He let it out in a long sigh.

Did Constance have no feelings at all? *What was her damned hurry, anyway?*

After a moment of nursing his anger, Nicholas let it out in another sigh and stared absently down at his feet, thinking. He hadn't had a chance to tell Elizabeth how he felt about her, but maybe that was for the best. It was becoming increasingly clear to him that Elizabeth was already lost to him. Whether to Charles and all his father's money, or to his own long, unbroken absence, she was quickly passing out of his life.

And he was powerless to stop her.

Yet, Elizabeth had invited him to visit her in Wellington. That was something—but whether good or bad, he wasn't sure. His eyes drifted out of focus as he remembered her last-second invitation. . . . And the fact that he'd accepted it.

Nicholas frowned. What had he been thinking? He would have to travel all the way across the country to visit her. *With what money? And for what? What chance do we have?*

Constance's words echoed painfully through his mind: *"I'm afraid she won't be here two years from now. . . . We're not coming back."*

Nicholas shook his head. *She won't even be coming back to Siesta!* The next opportunity he would have to see her would be at the University of Cape Town. Nicholas grimaced. It would be kinder to both of them just to forget and be forgotten.

He blinked, snapping his eyes back into focus. It was then that he spotted another small, white flower growing in the grass at his feet. It was the same flower he'd tucked into Elizabeth's hair. Inexplicably drawn to the little flower, he

reached down and picked it from the grass. A bitter smile touched his lips as he sat there, studying it, his elbows propped on his knees.

Nicholas sighed and stood up from the bench, starting the long walk back to his campsite. He took the flower with him. Even if he never saw Elizabeth again, at least he'd have something to remember her by.

* * *

Elizabeth withdrew her arm from her mother's as soon as they left Nicholas and the Siestuary behind. She would go with her mother—because she had no choice—but she would not be led back to camp like a disobedient child! For the first few minutes they walked in silence, Elizabeth too infuriated by her mother's behavior to even speak, and Constance apparently having nothing further to say.

But it was Constance who eventually broke the silence. "You shouldn't have invited him to Wellington, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth bit back an angry reply and turned her head away from her mother.

Constance went on, "You'd be better off just forgetting about him. You've got Charles. It's time to grow past these trivial, childhood romances. It's time for you to get serious." After a long silence, she glanced sideways to Elizabeth and ended up staring at the back of her daughter's head. She frowned and looked away, deciding not to make an issue of it.

In spite of Elizabeth's annoyance, her mother's words did prompt her to wonder: why *had* she invited Nicholas to visit her? It had been a sudden, desperate act. She hadn't planned to invite him; it had just sort of happened.

She thought back, trying to understand her motivation. . . . The thought that she wouldn't see Nicholas for another two years, combined with her mother's sudden revelation that they weren't coming back to Siesta, had fired her with a desperate urge to do whatever she could to shorten the time that she and Nicholas would be apart—whatever she could to keep Nicholas in her life. She'd said the first thing that had sprung to her mind—

"Visit me, Nicholas, in Wellington, before you go to the air force."

—And he'd accepted her invitation!

There was just one problem: she hadn't had time to consider

the consequences. If Nicholas came to visit her in Wellington, Charles would be there, too.

Elizabeth winced.

She was about to get a taste of what it would be like when the three of them were at university together.

* * *

Sitting in the back of the car next to Hattie, Elizabeth stared out the window, unmoving, rarely even blinking, trying to find solitude in the view out the window. All she could see was a mottled green and blue blur, intermittently shot through with golden lances of light from the rapidly-sinking sun.

Elizabeth felt ill. Her stomach felt queasy, her chest was hurting, her mouth was dry, and her throat felt tight with a lump in it that moved up and down every time she swallowed. She wanted to cry.

Elizabeth tried desperately to picture Nicholas in her mind's eye, but all that did was to conjure up the image of the shocked, helpless look on his face when her mother had dashed any hopes he'd had that one day they'd see each other in Siesta again—that one day he'd find her sitting on their bench and waiting for him as she always did. Hopeless tears welled up in her eyes. As the first tear spilled over onto her cheek, she turned, pretending to look out the side window to hide her tears. She looked just in time to see their car cross a bridge and a waterfall cascading down a cliff beside the road into a leafy green pool. . . . In an instant she was transported back to their waterfall, and it was Christmas Eve again. A weak smile crept onto her face as she remembered.

She conjured up the images and feelings of what it had felt like to be there, hiding in the reeds, watching Nicholas standing on the large flat rock next to the waterfall, by the side of their pool, looking forlornly for his lady love and wondering if she was there to meet him again for yet another blissful summer spent together. In her daydream she swam out from among the reeds, just as she'd done then, and out into the center of the pool. She playfully frolicked in the water, beckoning for him to join her there.

Nicholas's idea of play-acting, of using fictional romantic characters as their proxies, had allowed both of them to freely express their feelings for the first time. She'd done so with wild abandon, and so had he. She'd also instinctively seized this

rare opportunity to interview him on all matters near and dear to her heart—even the more distant future ones!

Lizzie smiled. He'd clearly not been expecting that! The privacy of their secret place always helped them be candid with one another, but this time, with both of them caught up in the fantasy Nicholas had imagined, she'd combined all her feminine charms with the beauty of their surroundings and the soft hues of the setting sun to blur the lines between their fantasy and their reality. In a matter of minutes she'd finessed him into confessing his true feelings for her, but better yet, she'd got all the confirmation she needed on what life would be like for her and Nicholas—a privileged peek into their future. She not only knew exactly what kind of a person Nicholas was, but equally importantly, she knew what kind of person he would be!

No, Nicholas was a lot more than her friend, and clearly he wanted to stay in her life, too, but how could that ever happen now?

The smile disappeared from Elizabeth's face again. She wanted desperately to be alone, but in the close confines of the car, there was no chance of that. At least everyone in the car was silent. No one was trying to engage her in conversation.

"Hey, Lizzie, what's that in your hair?" Hattie asked.

So much for that, Elizabeth thought. "There's nothing in my hair," Elizabeth replied, not turning from the window.

"Yes, there is. It looks like a flower."

Elizabeth froze. Of course—the flower Nicholas had tucked into her hair. She'd never removed it, and apparently . . . She reached up to her head and felt around for it . . .

It hadn't fallen out either. She withdrew the flower from her hair and brought it down to look at it. Every petal was still intact.

"How did it get there?" Hattie asked.

Elizabeth gave no reply, but a faint smile touched her lips at the memory of Nicholas's goodbye kiss. Struck by a sudden urge to save the memento, Elizabeth reached into the leather pocket in the back of the driver's seat, withdrew the book she was reading, opened it halfway through, and pressed the flower carefully between the pages.

PRINCE CHARMING

Constance watched Elizabeth carefully from the front seat. Neither of her daughters noticed her turn around to look when Hattie pointed out the flower in Elizabeth's hair. Constance watched just long enough to see Elizabeth press the small white flower between the pages of a book she was reading before turning to face forward again. The flower was obviously a treasured memento of her summer romance with Nicholas. Constance found herself tempted to comment, but resisted the urge to say anything. Telling Elizabeth not to be so foolish and sentimental would accomplish nothing, perhaps it would even accomplish the opposite of what she wished to have happen. As always, she was going to have to intervene in her daughter's best interests. Nicholas couldn't be allowed to distract Elizabeth from Charles anymore.

Constance began nodding to herself, and her gaze flicked up to watch Elizabeth in the rearview mirror. *The time for childish things is over, my girl. You're going to have to grow up now— you're almost 18, and the time for adult decisions is a lot closer than you think!*

Elizabeth and Nicholas, Dec 1973—Their Last Summer Together



THE STORY CONTINUES

In real-life, and these novels, Elizabeth's and Nicholas's childhood summer romances were now at an end. Circumstances beyond their control had done part of the damage, but trusted figures intent on abusing that trust steered the course of their lives away from one another onto carefully chosen paths. There was but one small hope left— Elizabeth 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 connection that existed between them. Fate, it turned out, conceded as much— granting Nicholas one last-minute chance by placing before him an opportunity to win the game with a "Hail Mary" pass - but with a crowd of only one cheering him on, and Elizabeth eagerly awaiting his pass, he'd stood there paralyzed by fear, holding onto the ball.

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

Africa's Snow White

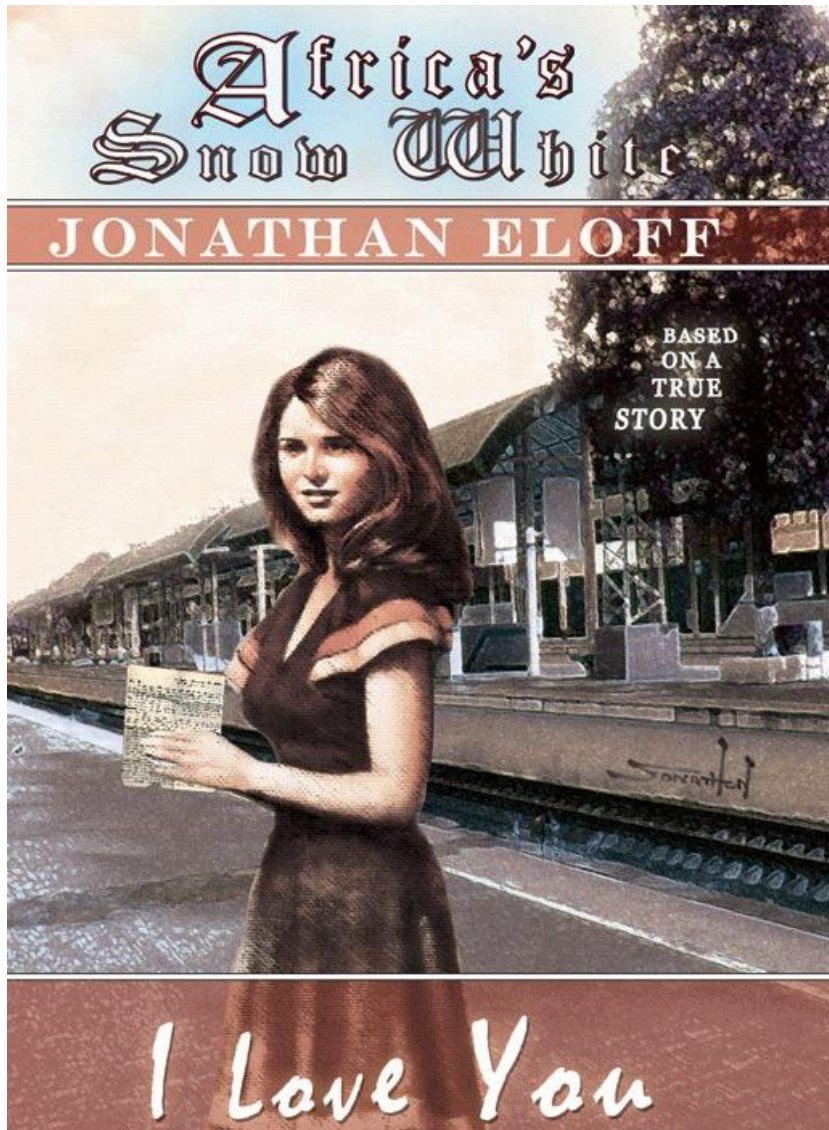
"PS. I Love You!"

By: JONATHAN ELOFF

(Some 2nd Ed. Scenes co-written by Nicholas Strauss)

"In the next two novels we encounter healthy 18/19/20 year olds, who really have to struggle to keep their hot-blooded passions under control - a common problem for many young suitors. You'll no doubt smile at how this is achieved. We're about to see Constance's covert control of Elizabeth's personal life intensify—with sad consequences looming for Nicholas and Lizzie, but maybe she's not as in control of the world as she'd like to be? Maybe a Force far stronger was manipulating her, even getting her to inadvertently introduce them in the first place? Some things are meant to be. If we really believe, dream, wish, hope and pray, though it may take many years, the results could well surprise us! In this series of novels, as it did in real-life, evil 's plots and schemes are going to triumph, and true love is going to be dealt a fatal blow – but do look for miracles, as then even 'fatal' does not always mean 'final'. Do believe in the power of love. 7 years, 7 months and 7 days after they first met and fell in love ... well, let's rather just read about it, shall we, no point speculating now. What happens next ... really happened." -**Safely Anonymous.**

Click on the cover below to download e-Book PDF for "PS. I Love you!"



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

Download the novels FREE at:

<https://amongfriends.us/downloads.php>

WEBSITE: www.Snow-White.us

EMAIL: Eureka.Publishing@Gmail.com

www.Facebook.com/AfricasSnowWhite