

NOTE TO THE READER:

Download all of these Novels FREE at:

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

ALSO, PLEASE VISIT OUR FACEBOOK PAGE AT:

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!*

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT

Africa's Snow White, The Queen's Proposal (The 5th novel in this series)

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

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

"I've enjoyed reading these novels - whilst vacationing in a remote mountain retreat inside a National park in South America. Pleasant as that was, I was most intrigued to meet Elizabeth and enjoy many happy times there with her family! It made this story spring to life. And there, beside a shady, natural swimming pool of that pristine river, below her home, surrounded by beautiful waterfalls, in the heart of the jungle, are two hearts carved in stone. One is engraved with the initials of my true love and I - the other is engraved with those of Elizabeth and her true love. How did these hearts get there - all the way from Africa and Canada? Well, I have the answer to that, but you will still need to read quite a few of these novels to discover the answer to that mystery."
—Dr. Sylvie Raymond, English Lecturer, UAE University.

"As a real-life counterpart to a character in these novels, I'm truly amazed at how Jonathan makes the characters, and this story, come to life—again. I can assure you of this: It may be tough to endure the wild, long roller-coaster ride in the pages of his books... but think of what it was like for those of us in real life. I'm reliving this story, as I read, and I'm greatly relieved to have the benefit of knowing how it all turned out— even so, I find myself getting anxious from the deeply-ingrained memories that will live in me, forever. I still have nightmares in which I repeatedly lose the love of my life. Only when I am fully awake, do I realize I'm living my original, beautiful dream - that the nightmare's over now. Dreams come true, if you steadfastly believe, and wishes are the seeds of dreams. Against all odds, my dreams came true, as did 3 out of 4 of my own wishes, so far, and I know of 3 wishes that came true for someone else too - just one more to go! Mind you, Jonathan does not even know what the 7th wish is, as it hasn't come true yet, so neither will you. No point jinxing it." —Safely Anonymous.

Vol-5: The Queen's Proposal

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

PDF Download 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**

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



Summer Vacation at the seaside: Oh what it felt like to be 17 ... to be in love and return together to their "Secret place" – a place where love could grow, completely undisturbed, far away from the adult world's problems. Little did they know what evil plots and schemes were already afoot to lay traps for them - to destroy their young love, forever, and so they blindly walked right into them.

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 who have attended St. Andrew's School; all the girls who attended St. Michael's; all of the boys and girls who attended Huguenote High School; 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 to all the many victims of life's villains. It's also dedicated to all of those young people, fresh out of high-school, who found themselves being drafted into wars not of their choosing, then dutifully acquiesced, risking their lives to satisfy the whims of politicians who never seem to risk their own lives with anything more than ordering sumptuous meals at tax-payers expense.

Lastly, it's dedicated to the memory of two beautiful, young graduates of high school; way back in the mid-1970's in faraway Africa ... the "Betty" and "Veronica" of this story.



Denise and Elizabeth: So in the end Betty wins and Veronica loses? Well let's just wait and see, shall we. Either way true, caring, unselfish friendship wins. But as for the villains, their long, unbroken string of victories is about to come to a welcome end! It's time for them to feel some of the pain they so callously willed onto others ... in real-life and in these books. It's time for a little justice to be handed down. So sit back, read and be patient. It's coming!

One last try ... Before



Elizabeth's Wedding.

Chapter 1

Her life would never be the same again.

Elizabeth had awoken early to the sound of the alarm clock buzzing in her ears. Her eyes had shot open as if loaded with springs, and she'd slapped the alarm clock to shut it off. Vacation was over. It was time to go back to school. She'd wanted to sleep in, to somehow erase the revelation that her mother had been subtly manipulating her all this time. Just last night Charles had revealed why he'd broken his promise to stay away while Nicholas was visiting. Her mother had led him to believe that Nicholas had something less than honorable intentions toward her—but nothing could be further from the truth! Which meant that her mother had not only lied, but she had lied in order to manipulate her, Elizabeth. It was a shocking discovery, one which suddenly cast a lot of doubt on her mother's other actions.

How could Elizabeth ever trust her mother again?

This morning she'd considered that question while taking a shower. She had still been turning it over in her mind as she'd subsequently made herself a cup of tea in the kitchen. Now, as she sat outside on the back porch, sipping her tea and eying the distant range of mountains soaring up against the pale gray sky, she still had no answers for herself. The air was still cold from the night, the lawn fresh with the dew. Birds were chirping cheerfully, diving low over the swimming pool, touching the water briefly, and then taking off again—like float planes coming in for a landing and then rethinking it. Elizabeth sat on the swing bench, warming her hands around her cup of tea, watching all of this and thinking.

Her mother wasn't up yet, which was strange, since she was usually the first to rise. Elizabeth was wondering what to say to her mother when she finally did rouse herself from sleep. *How could you? What makes you think you have the right to manipulate me? What do you have against Nicholas anyway? What is wrong with you?*

Elizabeth fumed over the steaming rim of her tea cup, her eyes

narrowing thoughtfully on that last question. What *was* wrong with her mother? She'd changed in the last year, become somehow even colder and more calculating than she'd been before. At first it had been easy to explain the transformation; Lawrence's death had cast a shadow over her whole family. But now, after so much time had passed . . . was her mother still having trouble getting over it? She hadn't been sleeping well, that was for sure, though this morning appeared to be an exception to the rule. . . .

Elizabeth heard the sliding glass doors swish open behind her as someone stepped out onto the porch. She turned to look over her shoulder.

"Good morning, Elizabeth."

Speaking of the Devil, she thought, turning back to the view with a frown. Elizabeth gave her mother no reply, but Constance stopped right in front of her, blocking the view and making herself impossible to ignore.

"Good morning," Elizabeth replied.

Constance was also holding a cup of tea. Elizabeth watched her mother take a sip and then frown. "Are you ready to explain your rude behavior last night?"

Elizabeth took a deep breath. "You first."

Constance arched an eyebrow. "Excuse me? What was that?"

Elizabeth let her breath out in a sigh. "I'm not the only one who owes an explanation."

Constance's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Charles told me what you said to him."

Constance cocked her head curiously, as if she didn't know what they were talking about. "Oh?"

"About Nicholas's intentions. You led Charles to believe that Nicholas is someone he's not, and that's why Charles wouldn't leave us alone. He was trying to protect me. To think I got mad at *him*, when really, I should have been mad at you! What makes you think you have the right to interfere like that?"

Constance was frowning deeply now. "Elizabeth."

"Yes?"

Constance took a deep breath and then sat down on the swing bench beside her daughter. She took a moment to admire the view whilst sipping her tea. Elizabeth watched her mother suspiciously.

"You do know that you're a very ungrateful daughter, don't

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

you?" Constance turned to her then, and Elizabeth's eyebrows shot up; she felt her pulse accelerate and her hands begin to tremble. "Here I am trying to *help* you," Constance explained, "and all you do is turn on me!"

"Mother . . ."

"No, let me finish. I did tell Charles that I wasn't sure about Nicholas's intentions, and that maybe he should keep an eye on you two because of that." Elizabeth's mouth dropped open and she looked ready to say something, but Constance held up her hand to forestall argument. "But, all of that was true. How should I know Nicholas's intentions toward you? He's never so much as stated them. He's a summer fling, Elizabeth. Just a bit of *fun*. And now that he's older, 'fun' could so easily take a different turn. You may choose to be naïve, but I know what men are like."

"Nicholas isn't like that."

"Isn't he? Has he ever displayed any *serious* interest in you? Am I wrong in thinking that all this time he's been seeing you, he's also had a girlfriend at home? You're his diversion, Elizabeth, nothing more."

Elizabeth was shaking her head. "He has displayed serious interest."

Constance snorted. "Really? How?"

"Really. He wrote me a poem."

"Just another part of his plan to seduce you, my dear."

"He said he loves me."

"Nothing but words! Where's the proof?"

Elizabeth let out an exasperated sigh. "Mother! He gave me the poem just before he left for the air force. He said he loves me in there. He couldn't have been trying to seduce me, if he were, he would have found a way to say all of that while he was still here, with me, while he still had a chance to take advantage of the effect his words may have had."

"Hmmm," Constance said, taking another sip of her tea. "Be that as it may, Elizabeth, it does not excuse your behavior towards me. You cannot turn on me every time you *think* I've done something you decide you don't like. Have some respect for your parents."

Elizabeth frowned, her ire fading enough to let her see things from her mother's point of view. "I'm sorry if I offended you, but—"

"If?" Constance shook her head. "There's no *if* about it."

“Well, then I'm sorry, but you should have spoken to *me* about Nicholas, not Charles.”

“Would you have listened?”

Elizabeth hesitated before replying. “No.”

Constance rose from the swing bench with a wry smile. “Well, then you see I was right.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath, watching as her mother walked back to the sliding doors. Constance turned from the entrance to the house. “You can come back inside when you're ready to apologize without any *but's*.” With that, Constance opened the door and went inside. She slid the door shut behind her, and then there came a soft *click*. Elizabeth watched her mother's smile become thin and petty. Suddenly understanding, Elizabeth stood up from the swing bench and walked up to the door. She tried to tug it open, but it wouldn't budge. Constance just smiled back at her through the glass. Elizabeth knocked furiously on the glass, but Constance just shook her head and walked away.

“Let me in!” Elizabeth yelled, still knocking on the door, but her mother showed no sign of having heard. After a few minutes of knocking loudly, Elizabeth's knuckles were red and smarting. She lowered her fist and took a deep, calming breath.

“Unbelievable! She locked me out!” Elizabeth gave an involuntary shiver as the previously refreshing morning air turned suddenly *cold*, reminding her of how awful it was to be stuck outside.

* * *

Nicholas awoke with a jolt to the sound of steam hissing and a train whistle blowing loudly in his ears. He was slumped against the window, his arms wrapped around his bag. Now he sat up, blinking slowly. For a moment, he didn't know where he was. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and watched the rail car attendant enter their car and call out an announcement in a loud voice. Nicholas heard Pretoria mentioned and suddenly he remembered where he was and why. This was his stop. The last one on the way to Valhalla, the air force academy.

Rising sleepily from his seat, Nicholas made his way into the aisle and shuffled off the train with the rest of the passengers. It was still early morning, and every ounce of his being was demanding that he go back to sleep. He stopped and stood on the train platform, not ten steps from the train, looking and feeling small amidst the bustling crowds. Every now and then someone

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

bumped into him, twisting him this way and that. He pulled his call-up papers out of his pocket and checked them for instructions. There weren't any, but Nicholas happened to notice again the date that he was required to report for duty. July 3rd. His birthday. Nicholas smirked at that. He'd almost forgotten his own birthday. *Some birthday. Welcome to the air force, sonny boy!* He folded the papers back into his pocket and looked around, his gaze searching for anyone who might point the way to where he should go next.

He soon spotted a man in military uniform, one of many scattered across the platform. This one seemed to hold some degree of rank, and he was holding a clipboard and pen. Nicholas walked up to him.

"Excuse me," he said. The man raised thick, black eyebrows from his clipboard. "I'm on my way to Valhalla to report for duty. Where do I—"

"Back of the station," the man pointed.

"Thank you," Nicholas replied, saluting as he hurried off in that direction. Along the way he joined a crowd of young men, all apparently there for the same reason. Once he reached the line of waiting troop transports, he made his way through the milling crowds to ask one of the uniformed soldiers which transport would take him to Valhalla.

"Right over there," the corporal said, pointing. "There's just the one."

Nicholas nodded and walked down the line to the appropriate transport. The air was cold and lively with excitement, soldiers shouting orders, and diesel engines rumbling and roaring as waiting transports pulled out of the train station.

Nicholas reached his transport and climbed into the back along with a handful of other young men. They sat there a few minutes on hard benches in the back of the transport, minding their own business, a few of them trading jokes and introductions. Nicholas struck up a brief conversation with the young man beside him, but it quickly became apparent that the young man didn't want to talk, so he waited the rest of the time in silence. A moment later, a corporal jumped into the back of the transport and it began moving. The corporal sat down at the end of the bench opposite Nicholas and began taking names and writing them down on an attendance sheet.

The trip to the academy was about fifteen minutes. It ended

with a sharp stop and screech of breaks. The corporal hopped out of the transport, gesturing impatiently for the others to follow.

“Come on you *bliksems!* Move it, move it! Fall in, fall in!”

Nicholas filed sleepily out of the transport and made a line with the rest of the recruits, whereupon the corporal went on shouting, spitting in each of their faces in turn. When the corporal stopped to yell and spit in Nicholas’s face, he raised his eyebrows and didn't quite manage to keep the smile from his face.

The corporal's eyes narrowed sharply at that. “Something funny, soldier?”

“No.” Nicholas shook his head and quickly forced a serious expression.

“Drop and give me twenty!” the corporal pointed to the ground at his feet.

Nicholas just stood there, looking confused.

“I said drop!” the corporal pushed down on his shoulder with surprising force and Nicholas fell to his knees. “Come on!”

Nicholas set his bag down and quickly assumed the correct posture for a pushup.

“One!” the corporal yelled as Nicholas completed the first pushup. “Two!” as he completed the second. The corporal went on adding helpful comments like, “Faster! . . . All the way to the ground! I want to see you kiss it! . . . Come on!” And so on, all the way up to twenty. By the end of it, Nicholas's arms were shaking. He stood up and swayed dizzily. He hadn't even eaten breakfast yet. What a way to wake up!

The corporal went on yelling at the rest of the recruits. When he'd expended all the available air and spittle he had at his disposal, he ordered them to march, and they fell into line behind him on their way to the barracks—a group of long, gray rectangular buildings standing near the tarmac where the transport had dropped them. Nicholas heard the transport rumble off as they marched.

When they reached the barracks, Nicholas noticed that each building was numbered. The Corporal called out names and then building numbers in quick succession, seemingly at random.

“Nicholas Strauss—barrack eleven!”

“Cory Petersen—barrack twelve!”

“Warren . . .”

Nicholas walked down the line of buildings until he reached the one numbered 11. He opened the steel door and stepped

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

inside. The barrack was in a state of organized chaos, steel bunk beds and lockers lined the walls in two facing rows. Young men were busy unpacking their things into the lockers, trading jokes and well-meaning insults, making about as much noise as humanly possible. Nicholas smiled and thought, *just like home*. Not much had changed since boarding school.

He picked an empty bunk and started toward it. Along the way someone grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around. Nicholas tensed, ready for some type of hazing.

“Beaver! I knew it was you!”

Nicholas's eyes went suddenly wide. “Shorty?”

Jamie Beckett just grinned back at him. “In the flesh!” he said, patting his bulging stomach. “Small world. Wow, it's been a while! How are you?”

Nicholas just shook his head. “Better now. Nice to see a friendly face around here.”

Shorty nodded. “I know just what you mean, makes a sad day just a bit brighter. Hey—isn't it your birthday today?”

Nicholas nodded. “Speaking of sad days . . .”

Shorty slapped him on the back. “Well, I hope it's a happy, merry, jolly one! But something tells me we might have to celebrate later.”

“Yeah,” Nicholas said, looking around the barracks. “So, anyone else here we know?”

Shorty grinned. “Yeah, Billie's here, too. We managed to get our barrack assignments shuffled around. These blokes aren't so bad—hey, Muffy, look who I found!”

A moment later Shorty's older brother appeared and slapped Nicholas on the back. “Man, it's good to see you, Beaver!”

“Likewise. So—” Nicholas gestured to their barrack. “—looks like we're boarders again. Kind of feels like home.”

“Tell me about it. I hope the food here is better,” Jamie said.

Nicholas snorted. “Well, good or bad, the food at Saints' didn't stop you from eating for two.”

Jamie grinned. “Hey, I'm a growing boy!”

Nicholas shook his head. “Yeah when are you going to stop growing?”

Shorty shrugged. “Hopefully never. Wouldn't want to have to curb my appetite.”

Nicholas snorted. “So, where are you two bunking?”

Shorty pointed. “Over there. Hey, the bunk next to us is free,

come on, you better grab it before someone else does.” Shorty turned and led the way.

Nicholas followed with a smile. “What makes you think I want to bunk next to you? You snore like a jackhammer.”

Jamie let loose an evil laugh, and his brother, Billie did a double take and said, “Hey, that’s right! I never should have switched barracks.”

“Don’t worry,” Nicholas said. “I’m sure someone will stuff a sock in his mouth before long.”

Nicholas unpacked his things into the locker beside the Becketts’ while trading a friendly banter of insults with them. He was also briefly introduced to his bunkmate, a shy boy who was built like a tank. For the most he tried to keep his distance from, but Nicholas made an effort to talk to him anyway. The boy’s name was Fritz, but he didn’t volunteer much else about himself.

By the time he was done packing his things away, Nicholas just had enough time to sit down and rest his legs for a few seconds before an officer burst into their barracks and began shouting at them once more.

“Fall in, soldiers! Come on, make a line!”

They fell in behind the officer and marched out and through the camp until they reached a large cement building. After winding through the drab gray corridors for a few minutes, they came to a halt and joined a long line of waiting recruits. The ones peeling off from the front of the line and marching back the other way were walking away with stacks of uniforms and equipment, among which Nicholas noted rifles and bayonets. He raised his eyebrows at that. He hadn’t thought they’d receive weapons training in the *air force*, but apparently that was standard training across all branches of the armed forces.

When it was finally Nicholas’s turn, he was handed a rifle with attached bayonet which he slung over his shoulder like the other recruits, followed by a stack of clothes, a blanket, and finally, a silver pan with various compartments for food, which was apparently called a *pigpan*. From there the officer in charge of their group marched them off once more, to another section of the same building. They stopped and stood in line once more. As they came closer to the front of the line, the air came alive with the buzzing of razors. Suddenly, Nicholas realized what that meant.

Haircuts.

Nicholas grimaced. His hair was perfect the way it was.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Fashionably long and scruffy. His dad was always nagging him to cut it. *Looks like you're finally going to get your wish, Dad.* The recruits peeling away from the front of the line were shaved all but bald and dressed in uniform, looking almost identical, like toy soldiers coming off an assembly line.

When it was Nicholas's turn, he closed his eyes and waited for it to be over. He didn't want to see himself in the mirror, but unfortunately he caught an accidental glimpse in a standing mirror not far from the butchers who'd mauled his head. His head looked like a fuzzy egg.

It wasn't a second later that their sergeant came up behind him barking orders. "Get dressed! Put on that uniform!"

Nicholas leaned his rifle against the wall and stripped down to his underwear, quickly dressing in his uniform and then slinging the rifle back over his shoulder. His neck itched maddeningly with residual hairs from the haircut, but he stood at attention with the rest of the men from his barrack, waiting as the sergeant inspected their uniforms.

The man was barely middle-aged, but his hair was already fully silver. He prowled down the line of about thirty men with a dissatisfied sneer, here and there straightening a cap, or correcting a man's posture. When he was done nitpicking, he made them fall in once more and march back through the building. Once outside, the sergeant led them back to their barrack to leave their weapons, blankets, and civilian clothes, but they were told to keep their pigpans with them. From there they were marched off to the mess hall where they stood in line *again*. This time they were waiting for kitchen workers to ladle spoonfuls of food onto their stainless steel trays.

The food was surprisingly good, but the hall was bigger than that of Saints' and noisier than it had been, even on a bad day, but the officers kept everyone in line. Nicholas was sitting down at the end of a long table with the Becketts, eating quietly and minding his own business when someone called out.

"Beaver? Hey—Shorty, Muffy! Man, it's good to see you bliksems!"

Nicholas looked up from his food to see another familiar face. He grinned broadly as Grant (Bakkies) Baker sat down with them. "Hey, long time no see, Bakkies."

"What have you all been up to?" Grant flashed a familiar grin and began tucking into his food.

“Well, let's see,” Nicholas said. “Got my heart broken, left home—*again*—got conscripted, and now I'm about to go AWOL so I can celebrate my birthday properly, and you?”

“Hey, that's right, I almost forgot—happy birthday, Beaver!” Grant said, slapping him on the back. With that, he stood up from the table and called out above the chatter in the hall. “Hey, it's this bloke's birthday today, you *bliksems!*” And then he started singing Happy Birthday, while mimicking a conductor with his hands.

A few nearby recruits joined him in singing until the sergeant at their table stood up and called out: “That's enough chatter! Can it, and eat your food!”

The other recruits quieted down, while the sergeant walked around the table, straight up to Bakkies. Grant had his hands raised in a placating gesture. “Hey, man, we're just trying to make an old friend feel a bit appreciated on his birthday.”

The sergeant stopped in front of Grant with a scowl. “Drop and give me ten, soldier.”

“What?” Grant echoed incredulously.

“That's fifteen now. Come on!”

Grant sunk to the dirty floor with a grimace and began doing pushups. When the sergeant's count reached 15 he turned and walked away. Grant climbed stiffly to his feet and sat back down at the table with a frown. “*Jislaaik*, these blokes are strict!” he whispered.

“Sorry,” Nicholas whispered back. “It was a nice gesture. I appreciate it.”

They spent the rest of lunch catching up on each other's lives, trading stories, but the exchange was notably more subdued after Grant's run in with the drill sergeant.

After washing their pigpans and dropping their cutlery in bins, they were all marched out of the mess hall and across a grassy field to yet another building and yet another lineup. From the stories coming back down the line from passing recruits, Nicholas discovered that they were waiting in line to get their shots. One of the recruits who passed them after getting his was rubbing his arm and was muttering about tetanus shots. Nicholas grimaced. *Great*, Nicholas mused to himself while absently patting his head to determine the source of the draft he felt on his scalp. Feeling the short stubble they'd left on his head, Nicholas grimaced. His birthday just kept getting better. . . . *What next?*

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

When Nicholas was done wincing through his shots, a kindly man standing to one side with a pen and pad asked him his name. Nicholas gave it to him.

Then the man asked, "So, Nicholas, what church have you been attending lately—if any?"

Nicholas blinked, suddenly realizing that he was talking to the base chaplain. "Oh, uh . . . well . . ." He had to think about it for a moment. He recalled the time he'd spent working for Denise's family and going to church with them. "Actually," he said, "I've been attending a 7th Day Adventist church."

The man made a note on his pad. "Really? 7th day Adventist, huh? Well, aren't you the lucky one. Means you can't eat any pork, so you'll get steak, and you'll get Saturdays off instead of Sundays. Do you have any objections to carrying a rifle?"

Nicholas had to think about that for a moment. It seemed like a trick question. If he said he did have a problem with it, did that mean they wouldn't assign him to any dangerous postings? He was tempted to lie and say yes, but then he might get stuck peeling potatoes. . . .

He decided to risk it, and he shook his head no.

"Well, they'll like you in basic training. The conscientious objectors have to carry a pack with bricks in it to make up the weight while they're drilling." The chaplain made some final notes on his pad and then looked up with a smile. "God bless you, son."

Nicholas nodded and returned the chaplain's sentiment. With that, he was on his way and whistling as he went. At least there was some good news—he was going to get Saturdays off, and better yet, they were going to feed him steak! The food was definitely going to be better than boarding school. That was something at least.

* * *

Constance heard the mailman drop off the letters. She had let Elizabeth go to school without breakfast this morning—*it will do her good; she ought to learn to respect her mother!* Constance thought as she went to get the mail. Then walking back to the kitchen, she started sorting through the mail. Bingo! There it was—the first letter from Nicholas to Elizabeth since his visit. Constance held onto it, placing the other letter down, then picked up the letter opener and neatly slit open the envelope. It was a short letter, basically just telling her that he'd arrived at the air force academy, thanking her for his recent visit, and asking her to

extend his thanks to her parents. He gave her his new address and promised to write with more news soon, as well as confirmation of his plans to accompany her to the matric farewell in September. No mention of any poems or anything as serious as Elizabeth had alluded to. *Strange*, she thought. Nevertheless, she was determined that this letter would never be read by Elizabeth. Constance crumpled it up, went over to the garbage bin, stepped on the foot lever to open it, and tossed the letter in.

“Soon to be covered with potato peelings and thrown out with the other trash, Nicholas,” she said, smiling as she turned to go and look at the rest of the mail.

* * *

Now that school holidays were over, Elizabeth found herself back at school, sitting across the lunch table from her best friend, Dilly. It was a familiar setting, loud, busy, filled with familiar faces. It was hard to imagine that in just six months she'd be putting it all behind her forever. She took a bite of her unappetizing sandwich, made more appetizing by the fact that she'd missed breakfast whilst her mother had kept her locked out of the house. Dilly was chatting on about some girl who was gossiping about her behind her back, venting her hatred of the girl. After a few moments, Elizabeth grew aware of a sudden pause in Dilly's monologue, and she looked up from her lunch to see what had caused it.

“You're not even listening to me, are you?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I was.”

“No, you weren't. You were thinking about some boy instead of listening to your best friend complain about her boring life.”

Elizabeth smiled at that. “Your life's not boring.”

“It is compared to yours! Speaking of which, how is your Prince Charming?”

“He's fine.”

“Oh come on, Lizzie—give me some details! I'm starved to hear about a real romance. High school boys are so immature. What did you and Charles do over the holiday?”

“Well, actually, Nicholas came to visit me during the holidays.”

“Nicholas?” Dilly sputtered incredulously.

Elizabeth frowned and took another bite of her sandwich. She hadn't wanted to tell Dilly about his visit for exactly this reason.

“Elizabeth are you crazy? You let Nicholas come visit you in Wellington? Are you *trying* to chase Charles off?”

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

"No, he just . . . never mind. It's complicated."

"When is it not complicated with you? Look, Elizabeth, Nicholas is what, a thousand miles away? Forget about him! You're dating a guy who's every girl's dream! Don't mess it up, or I swear I'll never speak to you again!"

Elizabeth laughed at her. "You sound like my mother."

"She must be a smart lady."

Elizabeth snorted softly at that. "I don't know. It felt right to invite him at the time."

"It *felt* right? Since when have you been so sentimental? Use your head, Lizzie!"

Elizabeth looked up from her half-eaten sandwich. "What if my head is confused?"

Dilly sighed. "Then for goodness sake listen to your friends! Or your mother at least. We're only looking out for your best interests."

Elizabeth nodded slowly. "I know. . . ." She hesitated before taking the next bite. "I invited him to take me to the dance."

Dilly's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Who to which dance?"

Elizabeth winced in anticipation of Dilly's reaction. "Nicholas, to the Matric Farewell."

Dilly's cheeks bulged. "Please tell me you're joking!"

Elizabeth just shook her head while she ate.

"No! Lizzie, call him and tell him it was a mistake."

"I can't, I don't have a way to reach him."

"Does Charles know about this?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"And he's still with you?"

"He got mad."

"You really are a crazy girl, you know that? Charles is handsome, rich, charming . . . what more do you want?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I don't know what I want. I think I'm too young to know."

"You're almost 18, Elizabeth! You're Not a little girl anymore."

"It's not just that. There's something about Nicholas. . . ."

Dilly buried her head in her arms on the table and just sat there for a long moment, rocking her head back and forth. Elizabeth watched with a burgeoning smile. She reached out and patted Dilly on the shoulder. "There, there."

Dilly looked up with a frown. "I don't get you, Elizabeth."

"What's to get?"

"You should have yourself committed. Nicholas is gone now. You won't see him again."

Elizabeth's brow furrowed at that. Dilly's words had struck a nerve. "What makes you say that?"

"He's what, eighteen now?"

"Yes."

"And he's already graduated."

Elizabeth nodded.

"And he's going to the military."

"He's already there."

Dilly sighed. "That's two years, Lizzie! You're not going to see him again, and even if you do, it'll be too late. It's too much time. How long will you have been dating Charles by then?"

Elizabeth frowned. "About three years."

"If you're not married to him by then, it'll be because he got tired of waiting for you. Don't be stupid."

Elizabeth sighed. "You think I should forget about Nicholas?"

"Yes! Haven't you been listening to me?"

Elizabeth nodded. "I have. It's just not that easy, you know?"

Dilly's expression softened. "You really had feelings for him, didn't you? Well, just keep reminding yourself that he's gone. He's not coming back. Those last few days you had with him were to say goodbye. Don't let your past prevent you from having a future. You can't live life in reverse."

Elizabeth sighed and put the remainder of her sandwich down, suddenly having lost her appetite. "You're right. I know you're right. I just wish someone could tell my heart that. It's not easy to be in love with two people at the same time, Dilly."

Dilly snorted. "Are the princess's diamond slippers too tight?"

Elizabeth smiled wryly. "I must sound awfully ungrateful."

Dilly made a gap of a few centimeters between her fingers. "Just a little."

Elizabeth smiled and nodded to her friend's lunch. "Are you done?"

"Yes, why?"

Elizabeth stood from the table, gathering her lunch bag and leftover sandwich. "Let's go walk around the schoolyard until lunch is over, and you can tell me about *your* depressing love life."

Dilly laughed at that and stood up to follow Elizabeth. "Okay, that sounds fair."

Chapter 2

The week went by in a blur for Elizabeth. Now it was Friday evening, and she was walking down the Sea Point promenade with Charles. The streetlights were glittering upon the water as the waves rushed in and crashed against the stone walls of the promenade. It was high tide, and whole sections of the beach had disappeared. Off to their left lay a dark, grassy stretch of park, and beyond that, apartments and houses rose ever higher upon the mountainside, the light from their windows shining warmly down on them. Charles's dad's apartment was there, too. Elizabeth admired the scenery and the tranquil atmosphere. This was one of the wealthier districts of Cape Town, yet another reminder to her of what kind of man she was dating. Dilly was right; he did have everything going for him.

But money isn't everything, she thought, sending Charles a curious look. Just a few days ago he'd proven just how heartless he could be by making Nicholas pay for an expensive meal at a nearby French restaurant—a meal which was supposed to have been his treat.

Charles caught her studying him and flashed her a wry grin. “I know I'm handsome, Princess, but you shouldn't look at me like that all the time. I'll get a big head.”

Elizabeth snorted. “Too late for that.”

He grinned. “No, let's be serious; what's on your mind?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

“I don't believe you.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“Not precisely.”

Elizabeth frowned. “Well, something's on my mind, I guess. I was thinking about last weekend—when Nicholas was visiting.”

That wiped the smile off Charles's face. “What about it?”

“Well . . . you managed to explain your behavior, and I suppose I understand why you did what you did, but please, in future, if my mother confides something in you that has to do with me, don't keep it a secret, okay? Don't let her manipulate you, or me,

or *us* like that ever again. I don't like it when she interferes.”

“Hmmm . . .” Charles mused.

“What?”

“Well, of course I understand how you feel. I hope you'll forgive me for my part in that whole mess, but you must understand I was only acting in your best interests.”

Elizabeth sighed. “That's what my mother says, too. It's a convenient excuse.”

“Convenient, perhaps, but it's not an excuse; it's the truth.”

“Well, I'd appreciate it if people let me look out for my own best interests for a change.”

“Very well,” Charles nodded. “I'll keep that in mind for the future.”

“Thank you.”

“But what about Nicholas?”

Elizabeth was confused. “What about him?” She turned to study Charles. His jaw was set, his eyes hard.

“Have you awoken from your dream world yet?” he asked.

Elizabeth felt a flash of anger at his patronizing tone. “What's that supposed to mean?”

Charles sighed and stepped in front of her, forcing them both to stop walking. “Elizabeth,” he said, his voice dripping with strained patience. “He can't take you to the dance. You know he can't. Let the boy off the hook. Don't make him feel bad for having to turn down your invitation. Give him an easy way out. I think you owe him that much.”

“What are you saying?”

“I'm saying, that for both your sakes—and mine while we're at it—you need to write and tell Nick it's over. He's in the military now; he's got bigger problems than figuring out how to escort an old summer love to her Matric Farewell for one last, heart-wrenching goodbye—because that's what it'll be. You *know* that. Better to say goodbye now, while you have the luxury of distance. It's going to be much more painful in person.”

Elizabeth chewed her bottom lip. “We've been apart before. We've only ever seen each other once a year. Now it'll just be a little longer. Another six months longer.”

Charles clenched his jaw, the muscles bulging noticeably. “Fine,” he said, and turned to continue walking down the promenade. “Have it your way.”

“Charles . . .” Elizabeth reached out to place a hand on his

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

arm. "I'm not saying I don't want to go out with you. I'm still your girlfriend."

He rounded on her quickly. "Are you? Really?" He took her in his arms and kissed her, roughly. Elizabeth resisted, trying to push him away, shocked by his abruptness. He let her go with a thin smile. "That's what I thought." And with that, he turned and continued walking on down the promenade.

Elizabeth just stood there a moment, shocked by his behavior. What was happening? Why was he acting like this? Suddenly it hit her, and she realized what it was.

He was jealous.

She caught up to him and confronted him with that revelation.

He snorted. "Jealous? You must have me confused with someone else, Princess."

"Then why are you so concerned that Nicholas not take me to my Matric Farewell?"

He shot her a sidelong look as he strode down the promenade. "Why am I concerned that you be protected from a lot of pain and heartache that you could easily avoid? Hmmm, that is a tough one. I suppose I should be more heartless, care a little less, possibly throw you to the wolves now and then."

Elizabeth sighed. "This isn't just about protecting me, and besides, I already told you: I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself."

"If you say so, Princess."

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes at his sarcastic tone. He was still upset, his stride a little too fast, as if he were trying to get away from her. Thanks to her heels he was almost succeeding. She spied a bench coming up on their left and gestured to it. "Charles, let's sit a while, please? My feet are starting to hurt."

He flashed her a wry smile that seemed more like a smirk, but he nodded and crossed over to the bench. They sat down together and Elizabeth leaned her head on his shoulder. He didn't respond. She sat up straight and turned to him, hoping to clear the air with what she said next.

"Charles . . ."

He turned belatedly from looking out over the water. "Yes?"

"You know how I look at all of this?"

"No, I haven't the faintest clue."

"God has someone in mind for me and someone in mind for you. He has someone in mind for everyone." Charles was frowning

and looking like he wanted to say something. "What?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, go on."

"I can't allow myself to shut down all my other options until I'm very sure I've found the man I'm supposed to marry. You understand?"

Charles frowned and looked away. "*Supposed* to marry? I didn't realize you were so superstitious."

"It's not superstition, Charles."

"No, it is, it really is. There is no God, no destiny, no fate—nothing—just us on this little green and blue ball called Earth. All we have are the choices we make for ourselves, and those are based on what we want—not what we're *supposed* to do." Charles turned back to her. "So the real question is, what do you want, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth's eyebrows were raised in shock. "I—" She shook her head. "I had no idea you were such a cynic."

"I'm not a cynic."

She frowned and imitated his accent: "No, you are, you really are." She turned away, annoyed with him without really knowing why. "We're very different, you and I, aren't we?"

Sitting beside her, Charles nodded and quietly said, "Vive la différence."

* * *

Charles's chauffeur, James, was waiting by the car, the end of his cigarette glowing brightly in the dark. He dragged a deep lungful of smoke and held it. A moment later he let it out in a soothing rush. Just as he was about to tap the ash off the end of his cigarette, someone walked up to him and flicked it out of his hand. It landed with a flash of dying orange embers.

James rounded on the man, ready for a fight. When he saw who it was, he let out a sigh and swallowed his ire.

"You should quit," Charles said.

James took that comment another way and simply smiled. "I'd love to, but then how would I support my bad habits?"

Charles gave him a funny look. "Don't get cheeky with me."

"Something the matter, sir?"

"No, no, nothing. I'm just tired. Let's go."

James nodded. "As you wish, sir." He opened the back door and waited for first Elizabeth, then Charles to climb in the back. He shut the door behind them just a tad too violently.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

As he climbed into the driver's seat, he heard Elizabeth whispering to Charles.

“. . . shouldn't treat your driver like that.”

Not even taking the courtesy to whisper his reply, Charles said, “Why? He's just the help.”

James smiled thinly and pretended not to hear. He was very sick of that young man's spoiled attitude, but he had to keep that to himself for now.

“We're going to my father's apartment for a night cap, James. Make a left up ahead.”

Apparently the boy also thought he needed instructions on how to do his job. Charles's arrogance knew no bounds. Nevertheless, James did as he was told without comment. Meanwhile, he considered his options. In just a year he would be retiring. He hoped that Charles didn't decide to go back to England before then. James was looking very much forward to the day when he could put the boy in his place.

One day, James thought. One day soon . . .

Chapter 3

The morning bugle call sounded out with all the subtlety of a stampede of elephants, waking Nicholas and all the other recruits instantly. Nicholas's heart rate was up and pounding in seconds. He sat up and quickly made his bed.

After just a few days of basic training he was already getting close to the edge of his endurance. Swallowing hurt, so he tried not to. He felt weak and very tired. He was sick. Dead tired. Physically sore. Mentally stretched. The others weren't faring much better, some of them worse. There were boys here who'd never been away from home for more than a week in their lives. They were the weepers. One could hear them crying softly to themselves at night, or just watch them burst into tears at the slightest provocation from the drill sergeants.

For Nicholas it was old hat to be living in close quarters with a bunch of other guys in a regimented institution, but his body wasn't conditioned for running drills and marching all day long—and all of that on very little sleep. Now, even on the weekend, they were still up at the crack of dawn for training. Apparently there was no such thing as a break in basic training. Nicholas wasn't sure what he'd expected, but constantly feeling like he was either going to die or throw up was definitely at the worst end of his expectations. Others, such a Shorty and his brother, Billie, who represented the utterly unconditioned end of the spectrum, simply couldn't hack it. They got the brunt of the drill sergeants' ire. With such a varied degree of fitness amongst the recruits, Nicholas had imagined that the military would be more understanding, but instead everyone had the same pace of training. Nicholas had been managing to keep up, just barely, until he'd gotten sick. Now everything was an effort.

He stood in line with the rest of the recruits, dressed and at attention, waiting for their drill sergeant to enter the barracks. It was the same thing every morning. Get up—fast! Make your bed—fast! Get dressed—fast! Be standing in an orderly line and ready for inspection in five minutes or you had dish duty, or

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

pushups, or a forced march around the Academy.

Nicholas cast a quick glance down the line to Shorty and caught a half-hearted grin from his friend. It faded quickly, replaced by a tired, broken look. Jamie was also sick—sicker than Nicholas, by the sound of Jamie's coughing at night. The drill sergeants didn't seem to care, told them to suck it up and act like men. It was all Nicholas could do sometimes not to talk back. He wanted to insist that some of their number be sent to the infirmary and be given proper rest. . . . but no one had dropped dead - Yet.

It seemed to Nicholas that their superiors wouldn't much care if a few of their recruits did die during the training, like maybe that was one of the goals.

The drill sergeant entered their barracks and gave them all a sullen look. One of the recruits was just hurrying to join the line as the sergeant came in. Sergeant Dieter eyed the young man with the full brunt of his contempt, shaking his head.

"You're the sorriest bunch of recruits I've ever met! You know that? You're bloody useless, the lot of you! Drop and give me ten, now! Everyone!"

In belated synchrony they all dropped down and did pushups. From pushups they were marched off to do morning exercises, as usual, whereupon they would return to get cleaned up and eat breakfast. Then there would be marching, followed by lunch, more marching . . . and then death. Or supper. Whichever came first.

Nicholas grimaced as he stood before an obstacle course, waiting to run through it at top speed with the rest of the men from his barracks. His throat still felt cut, but now he had a pounding headache to add to his troubles. He felt slightly dizzy and weak, and he still had a full day of training ahead of him.

He traded a wan smile with Jamie Beckett who was standing beside him, looking equally cowed before the obstacle course. Nicholas nodded to his friend. "It's okay. Just another day. We'll get through it." Talking hurt his throat, but Shorty looked like he needed a bit of encouragement.

"Yeah, not so bad," Shorty said, his voice sounding nasal. He sniffled and then wiped his nose.

Nicholas grinned. "With luck we'll be dead before sunset."

Shorty snorted. "I think we're already dead - we're in hell!"

The sergeant blew a loud whistle, which was their cue to run.

As Nicholas ran through old tires, crawled on his belly through mud under low nests of barbed wire and then climbed up over high wooden walls, with his every muscle aching, his head pounding, and his body insisting he go back to sleep—he decided that Shorty was right.

They were dead and this was hell.

* * *

Edwin walked into the boardroom, taking a seat at the long, polished mahogany table, set his briefcase down, and waited for all the board members to arrive. When everyone was seated, the Chairman, William Gaines, called the meeting to order.

“Okay, first on the agenda for today, is a proposal to take over Sharp Electronics. For now we’re just weighing the pros and cons. You may need to each do some private research and bring your findings to our next meeting, but meanwhile . . .” The chairman popped the clasps on his briefcase and handed a pile of folders down to the man on his right, saying, “Pass these along, please.” Now addressing everyone once more, he said, “You’ll find I’ve already done much of the research for you. All of the financials are in there along with press releases and some articles from independent news sources.”

Once Edwin received his folder, he opened it, looking over the assembled information with a frown. He was against the idea. Why would they take over an electronics company? Their company dealt with leather! He was about to point that out when the chairman raised his hands for attention.

“Please hold your thoughts for now; this is just a proposal. My own analysis is included in each of your folders. I’ll expect to see an analysis from each of you at our next meeting. I want to make sure we’re all on board with this. If you have reasonable objections, you’ll get to voice them then.”

Edwin shook his head. “Why an electronics company?”

The chairman smiled. “Good question, Mr. Smythe; I’m glad you asked. Electronics are the future gentlemen. We’re standing at a unique point in time, about to witness a new, digital age. It’s already happening. Everything is going digital. We can either be a part of it or get left behind.”

Edwin pushed back. “But why us?”

“One word—diversification. With two such disparate fields of interest and investment we’ll be unlikely to find ourselves in a situation where both endeavors are doing poorly. It’s a way to

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

hedge our bets and keep this company turning a profit even if we're having trouble competing in one of our chosen fields."

"Ah . . ." Edwin trailed off and went back to studying the contents of the folder. It still made no sense to him. If the chairman wanted to diversify, why not get into textiles? Something remotely related to their business would be nice. If they went into electronics, even the company's name would make no sense: Western Leathers International. Would they change it to Western Leathers and Electronics? It was preposterous. Edwin intended to show the folly of such a takeover with his own analysis of the proposal. Surely it would be easy to point out what must be obvious to everyone here.

"Are there any other comments?" Mr. Gaines asked.

There were a few. Echoes of Edwin's own objections, but only about half of the board members seemed to object. The others kept quiet. Edwin frowned at that, wondering if their silence was a tacit approval of the idea, or if they were simply waiting to learn more before they voiced their opinions.

"There's no hurry on this gentlemen. We'll study it over the course of several meetings. I don't expect we'll vote on it for at least six months. Now, on to the next item of our agenda. . . ."

Edwin wasn't paying attention. He was scanning the financials of Sharp Electronics. The company was barely profitable, and in serious danger of being overwhelmed by its liabilities. Such a takeover could easily suck up what profitability the company already had rather than provide a new stream of income. It could take them down as easily as it could buoy them up. Edwin shook his head and closed the folder. He called for the Chairman's attention. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but if we could go back to our prior item on the agenda for just a moment."

The chairman smiled thinly. "Of course."

"I was just looking at the financials of Sharp Electronics, and . . . I'm curious to know why you think they're a good target for a takeover? What I see is a company in danger of going bankrupt, not one which would be an asset to us."

"Ah, but it's for exactly that reason that they're a good target for takeover. Surely you don't expect us to take over a company while it's in its prime? No one is that foolish, Mr. Smythe."

"Aha. Yes, well, I suppose I'll have to do my homework."

"As will we all. As will we all. Now, if there are no further objections . . . ?" The chairman glanced around to check, but

none of the other board members spoke up. "Good. Back to business, then."

Edwin forced a smile and paid a facsimile of attention while he wondered if he were the only one who saw how dangerous such a takeover could be. Hopefully the board wouldn't be stupid enough to vote in favor. . . .

* * *

Constance was busy preparing supper when the phone rang. Her hands were bloody with ground beef, so she called out to Edwin in the living room, "Can you get that?"

A minute later she heard him pick up the phone. "Hello? Yes, just a moment—it's for you, dear!"

Constance scowled and hurried to wash and dry her hands. Walking out into the living room, she took the phone from him, and whispered, "Who is it?"

He shrugged. "She said it's your friend from the hair salon."

Constance's eyes widened by a fraction of a degree. "Ah, I see." She placed the phone to her ear very slowly and deliberately, as though it might bite her, and then she said, "Constance Smythe, speaking."

"Hello, Connie," came a smooth, cultured voice on the other end. "I see you haven't done your homework."

She sent a quick glance to Edwin, who was just now disappearing into the kitchen out of earshot, but whispered into the receiver anyway. "I thought I told you not to call me at this time? If you desire my help, you must be more careful."

The voice on the other end laughed. "My dear Connie, you're in no place to give *me* orders. Now, listen carefully, because I fear you were not listening the last time I called. Edwin, as predicted, is coming out against my proposal to take over Sharp Electronics. He's too conservative to take such a risk. I need him to vote with me, so he must give a favorable report. If he doesn't, his views and objections may sway the other board members. Do you understand? He will be working on his analysis of the proposal over the next few weeks. I need you to influence his thinking on the matter, as I'm sure you're already accustomed to doing."

Constance snorted. "You overestimate my influence. He won't listen to me."

"Of course he will. And if he doesn't, it really isn't my problem, but it most certainly will be yours."

Constance ground her teeth at that, but Edwin reentered the

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

living room, so she had to swallow the reply she had in mind. "Yes, I think I see what you mean," she said in an overly pleasant voice.

"I'm glad we could come to an agreement."

"Of course."

"Enjoy the rest of your evening, Connie."

"The same to you," she said, while flashing Edwin a smile and rolling her eyes. "Goodbye."

Edwin sat down on the couch with a cup of tea and a newspaper. "Everything fine, then, dear?"

"Oh, more than fine."

"And how is your friend?"

"She's . . . she's fine. She was inquiring about my next visit to the salon. I told her the last time I was there that I'd like to try something different with my hair. She was telling me about the various options."

"Ah," Edwin said, nodding as he sipped his tea and read the headlines of his paper. "Well, that's nice, dear."

"Yes. Dinner should be ready soon."

"Take your time. No rush."

Constance went back to work in the kitchen, her mind turning over her options while she cooked. She knew what type of man Mr. Gaines was. He would never let her go now that he had her where he wanted her. For him it was a power thing. More than whatever he might gain out of manipulating her was the endless amusement it gave him. He would be pulling her strings forever, and she would be forever jumping up and dancing to his tune. There had to be some way out. For now it might be easy enough to placate him, but his demands would grow over time, and eventually he would ask something of her that she could not provide. For all she knew, he was already doing that. Then her secret would be out; Edwin would know what she'd done; and everything would be lost.

No! she thought, shaking her head violently. She could never allow that to happen. There had to be another way.

* * *

Constance awoke in a cold sweat, her heart racing, her mind whirling with confusion and desperate fear. Where was she? What was happening? She felt like she was a split second from utterly losing control and doing something horrible, like she might kill herself or someone else at any moment. The world was dark and

confusing. Her attention was drawn to one side by a steady rhythm of snoring. She eyed Edwin angrily, willing him to shut up.

The fading glimmers of her nightmare were bright, vivid streaks in her mind's eye, like colorful streamers fluttering through the air. Whispers of *his* words echoed in her thoughts.

"You're going to lose it all, Connie. Every last penny you stole from me."

She shuddered and shook her head, shutting her eyes tightly and massaging her temples to make the words go away, but the harder she tried to forget, the easier it was to remember, and the worse her anxiety became.

She stood abruptly from the bed. Edwin's snoring interrupted for half a second, and then he rolled over and began breathing more softly on his side. She cast a disinterested glance his way and then found her slippers and left the room.

It had been some time since she'd had a panic attack and an equally long time since she'd had a nightmare like this one. Lawrence had been all but forgotten, and that was exactly how she wanted it to stay, but apparently her subconscious had other ideas.

What had triggered it?

But, of course, she knew. The chairman's call must have renewed all her old fears surrounding Lawrence's death. It had been an unpleasant reminder that she still wasn't free from the past. She shook her head and forced her thoughts onto something else.

It was just a dream, she told herself, now sitting in the living room with a magazine and a cup of tea. *Just a bad dream . . .*

Chapter 4

After a month of basic training, Nicholas was finally getting into a routine. His body had adapted and it was already starting to get easy. Not fun, but easy enough: exercise, marching, firing range, eating, sleeping, waking up and doing it all over again. The other recruits were faring pretty well, too, although there had been a few who'd gone AWOL. They were usually either the weepers or the rebels. Neither the weak nor the particularly independent had fared well with military life, but it didn't matter, because no one escaped for long. The military police (MP's) went out and rounded them up, usually catching them at the train station, and then they were brought back and taken to detention barracks where they were drilled and exercised so relentlessly that it broke their spirits. Then they were filtered back into the general population and allowed to carry on with the rest of the recruits. Not one of them had tried to escape twice.

Today they were all supposed to go for aptitude tests to see where the air force could best use them. It was going to determine how they'd spend the rest of their tour of duty, so in that respect it was pivotal. Nicholas felt anxious about what the results would be. Since joining the air force, he'd learned that it wasn't as safe as he'd thought. Several divisions had been deployed to air bases along the frontlines, and those bases saw plenty of action.

Nicholas ate lunch with the Becketts and Grant Baker as usual. He hadn't formed close ties with any of the other recruits. Chances were they wouldn't have much time together anyway before being shipped out to different air force bases. Basic training was going to last three months, with two left to complete, which brought Nicholas to another concern—one which had been nagging at him for some time. He wouldn't quite be finished with basic training by September 19th, when Elizabeth had her matric farewell. Fortunately, because he supposedly attended a 7th Day Adventist church, he got from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday off, so he could get off base Friday evening and return again . . . Sunday morning? He would have to be AWOL for a

minimum of 12 hours. It was that or turn down Elizabeth's invitation. And there was still the matter of arranging transport from Pretoria to Wellington and back again—a distance of almost 1000 miles.

After lunch they filed straight off to the testing rooms. The hallways were already crowded with recruits. There were some officers heading to and fro as well, no doubt test instructors. Nicholas eyed one of the taller ones walking toward them, standing out almost head and shoulders above the others. As he drew near, Nicholas's brow wrinkled and he felt a vague sense of déjà vu. The officer looked strangely familiar. He made eye contact with Nicholas as they passed, and suddenly his eyes widened and he reached out to grab Nicholas by the arm.

"Beaver?" the officer asked in a very unusual breach of military discipline.

Nicholas turned to study the man more carefully now. He was definitely familiar. Nicholas watched as he removed his hat, revealing a head of familiar, coarse blonde hair—that, combined with his broad, strong jaw, his blue eyes, and above-average height . . . there was no doubt about who he was.

"Mighty?" Nicholas asked. He hadn't seen Adrian (Mighty) Graves in over three years. Back then, the boy had just graduated from Saints. He'd been Nicholas's prefect.

Mighty shook his head. "Fancy meeting you here, Beaver."

The Becketts approached from either side of Nicholas, with matching grins. "Well, well," Jamie said. "You look just like an old friend of ours, mind you he was a taller and better looking."

"Man—and you two as well! Small world. I've missed you *blokes!* What have you been up to?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Same old. Hey, listen we're going to be late for our tests. You going to be on base a while longer?"

"I'm across the road at AFB Swartkop for a couple of days—a personnel training course. It's a nice break between flying."

"You're a pilot?" Nicholas asked, incredulous.

"Yeah. A Mirage fighter pilot," Mighty explained. Then, as an afterthought, he added, "I'm stationed at AFB Waterkloof, nearby. It's not a bad deal, Beaver; you should think about it. It'd be even easier for you to join. They usually don't accept applicants as tall as I am, but you're about the perfect height. The shorter you are, the easier it is to handle the g-force."

"So you mean I could apply?" Shorty asked, thoughtfully.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Mighty gave him a quick, appraising look, his eyes lingering on Short's paunch. "Yeah, I guess . . . why not?"

"Well," Nicholas said, "for now we'll just have to see what the aptitude tests say. Speaking of which, we better get going, but man, we need to catch up, Mighty. You free tonight?"

"Yeah should be. I'll find you lot in the mess hall later."

"Great! See you later, then."

They traded sloppy salutes and then hurried off to their assigned testing room. They were greeted with a scowl from the instructor when they entered.

"I just took attendance. I suppose you three are my missing recruits. Where were you?"

"Sorry, sir!" Nicholas said, stopping to stand at attention and salute the instructor. "We just ran into an officer along the way, sir!" Nicholas said.

"And?"

"He ordered us to help him with something, sir!"

The instructor returned his salute, trading his scowl for a frown. "At ease. Take your seats. We're about to begin."

Nicholas found an empty desk and sat down. While waiting for the test to begin, he began connecting the scattered pieces of a plan. He'd just been thinking how impossible it would be to make it to Elizabeth's Matric Farewell. It was simply too far away to make it in less than a full day's travel, but technically, there might just be a way. The real trick would be getting Mighty's help, but all old Andreans were honor-bound to do everything possible to help each other in times of dire need, so Nicholas knew he could count on them.

* * *

After the aptitude tests, Nicholas filed into line at one of the payphone call boxes on base. He pulled a handful of change out of his pocket and began counting through it. He had just enough to put a long distance call through to Wellington and talk for a few minutes. Fortunately, Elizabeth had given him her number along with the invitation to take her to the dance. It would be expensive, but faster than mail.

When he got to the front of the line, he dropped a pile of change into the phone and began placing a call through to Wellington. After talking with various operators to have his call routed through the switchboards along the way, Nicholas finally heard the phone ringing on the other end of the line.

His heart began pounding in his chest and he broke out in a sudden sweat. Then someone picked up the phone.

“Constance Smythe, with whom am I speaking?”

“Ah . . . hello, this is Nicholas Strauss. Is Elizabeth there?”

There came a long pause on the other end of the line, which left Nicholas listening to nothing but the sound of his own heartbeat. “Hello?” he repeated.

“Yes, I'm sorry, Nicholas, but she isn't here right now.”

“Oh . . . okay, but since I have not heard back from Lizzie yet, could you please pass on a message to her from me?”

“Of course.”

“Tell her I've found a way to take her to the dance. I'll be there at 7:00 pm on the 20th,” Nicholas said.

“Oh? What dance is that?” She asked, acting surprised.

“Her matric farewell.” The phone went quiet once more, and he frowned. “I'm sorry, we must have a bad line; you keep cutting in and out,” he said, beginning to worry a little.

“I'm a little confused, Nicholas. What exactly makes you think Elizabeth wants you to take her to her matric farewell?”

“She invited me just before we said goodbye at the station in July. I have the invitation here with me. Didn't she tell you?”

He heard Constance sigh on the other end. “No, I know nothing about it. Did she write you to confirm that invitation?”

“No, not yet, but it's probably only been a couple of weeks since my letter with my address here in Pretoria arrived there,” Nicholas replied.

“Shall I assume that you are coming to stay with us again for the occasion?”

“Well, no, I'll just be there for the night of the dance. I'll be leaving again straight after the dance, so not to worry.”

“Oh, that is a pity. It would have been nice to have you.”

“Maybe another time. You will pass on my message?”

“I will speak with Elizabeth as soon as I can.”

“Thank you Mrs. Smythe,” Nicholas said through a frown. “May I ask where she is at the moment?”

“Oh, probably on a date with Charles.”

“Aha. Well—” The operator cut in and informed Nicholas that he needed to insert more money or the call would end. “I'm sorry, Mrs. Smythe, I have to go; this is an expensive call.”

“I understand. You take care of yourself, Nicholas.”

“I will, than—”

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

At that precise moment the line went dead, and Nicholas hung up the phone. He felt somehow less decided and certain about his course of action than he had before making the call. Here he was going to a lot of trouble and risk to take Elizabeth to her dance and now he hadn't even been able to confirm with Elizabeth that he was coming. Not to mention she was out with Charles when he tried to call to let her know! But at least he *had* managed to speak with her mother, and she said that she would pass on the message. That was probably good enough.

But just in case, he thought, I'll write her another letter as well. He'd written her a short letter three weeks ago with his address in Valhalla, but he'd not heard back yet. He hadn't confirmed that he was going to be able to take her to the dance, just that he'd try his best, that he remained hopeful and he'd let her know, either way, with time to spare. Now he'd done that.

* * *

Elizabeth walked into the living room just as her mother was setting down the phone. Constance looked up with a smile, and Elizabeth yawned.

"Who was that?"

"So curious. I would tell you if you needed to know, my girl."

Elizabeth met that answer with a frown. "Okay . . ."

"Did you have a nice nap?"

"Yes, thanks – but I still feel tired. Is lunch almost ready?"

"Not quite. I'll be sure to ring the bell when it is."

"You don't need any help?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you, dear. Go and enjoy your weekend."

"Okay," Elizabeth replied, watching as Constance disappeared into the kitchen. Elizabeth looked around absently, feeling bored. Charles was busy playing golf with his father. Her father was also out playing golf, but with his boss, and Hattie was at a friend's house, leaving Elizabeth with nothing to do. She decided to go out onto the porch and get some fresh air. She needed to think, to clear her head. Charles had been acting cold and distant ever since she'd revealed her intention to follow through with her plan to go to the matric farewell with Nicholas. But she still hadn't heard from Nicholas. He'd made no effort to contact her in well over a month now – and that after his solemn promise that he'd never ever do that to her! Apparently words were cheap.

Elizabeth frowned. Suddenly it felt like she was making a big mistake. Here she was alienating Charles for Nicholas, and he

didn't even have the courtesy to write to her! Maybe Charles was right; she should compose a letter telling Nicholas that it was over between them—that would be kinder. He obviously wasn't as serious about her as she'd thought. How could she have been so wrong? Was everything she and Nicholas had shared just make-believe? Something wasn't quite adding up.

A cool breeze blew in off the pool, stirring the clear, sky blue water into scurrying ripples. Winter in Wellington wasn't freezing, but it sure wasn't warm. Looking at that pool gave her no sense of longing, only a vague sense of dread at how cold the water would be now. But the cool air did serve to clear her fuzzy, sleep-clouded head. She had pined away after Nicholas long enough, but she couldn't write Nicholas to tell him it was over; she didn't even have his address—because he still hadn't written to her as he'd promised to do when he'd left! They were right—her mother, Dilly, Charles . . . they were all right. She should have listened to them sooner. Why was she so stupid? So stubborn? She shook her head. Tonight, she'd call Charles and ask him to take her out somewhere. She'd have a long, serious talk with him and reassure him that it was over between her and Nicholas. He deserved at least that much. Unlike Nicholas, his interest had been nothing but serious, and nothing but constant. He didn't send her on wild roller coaster rides of idealistic romantic dreams quickly followed by haunting uncertainty and torturous free-falls. *Will there be a letter for me today? Will he call? Why isn't he writing? Why isn't he calling? Doesn't he care? Was his poem and love letter really from his heart, or were all his pretty words used to gain my confidence, designed to keep me interested, and to keep his options open? Probably just words . . .* she sighed, nodding slowly to herself. It was finally time to silence all those doubts.

Time to get off the roller coaster.

Elizabeth went back inside, joining her mother in the kitchen. She pulled out a bar stool and sat down at the counter. Her mother turned from the stove with a friendly smile. "Hello, Elizabeth."

"I've been thinking, Mom—I've made an important decision."

"Oh? And what might that be, dear?" Constance asked while stirring a pot on the stove.

"I'm finally done with Nicholas. I can't take it anymore."

"Really?" Constance turned away from the stove with a broad grin; the ladle she held was dripping tomato sauce onto the floor.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

She didn't seem to notice or care. "It's about time! I'm so glad to hear you've finally come to your senses!"

"It still hurts. I really thought he loved me. I really thought I loved him! Now I'm sure it was all just my imagination."

"I know, dear—it happens to all us women, sooner or later."

"But it's really hard to let go of him!"

"Yes, but it's necessary. The pain will pass," Constance replied reassuringly, noticing the tears in her daughter's eyes.

Elizabeth sighed, shaking her head. "Why hasn't he even tried to contact me? It's been way more than a month! A letter should have arrived by now. He promised me he'd never do this to me, ever! I made him promise. He looked and sounded so sincere."

Constance shook her head. "Maybe he wants you to move on, Elizabeth, and this is his way of saying that. Some people prefer to break up by distancing themselves. Sometimes it's easier to just gently drift apart than to say a final goodbye."

"But I'd rather he just be honest with me, Mom. He promised me he would!" Elizabeth reiterated, her voice mirroring the sad, soulful expression clearly visible on her face and in her eyes.

Constance walked over to Elizabeth and laid a hand on her shoulder. "He's a weak boy, Lizzie. He doesn't have the guts to tell you the truth, so he's found a cowardly way to avoid it."

"Then it's over! I'm done waiting. I'm going to tell Charles tonight that I want *him* to take me to my prom instead."

"That's very wise of you, dear." Constance said, giving Elizabeth's shoulder a squeeze. "You'll not regret your decision."

"Charles deserves better from me."

"Yes, he does, my girl, but it's never too late to make amends."

Elizabeth sighed. "I hope so. I hope I get that chance."

Chapter 5

Constance waited until the following day, Sunday, and only after she'd shooed Elizabeth out of the house to place the call to the person she had in mind to speak with. Edwin was in the living room when she placed the call, but she paid him no heed. He wouldn't question her.

The phone rang twice before someone picked up.

"Atherton residence." The voice was feminine, but matronly. Constance pictured a buxom Black maid.

"Yes, it's Constance Smythe. I'd like to speak with Charles Atherton if I may."

"One moment please, Madam."

She spent a long time waiting, but that wasn't unusual. The Atherton residence was sprawling, and it couldn't be easy to find Charles in all of those echoing rooms.

"Hello?" Now the voice was masculine, youthful, and distinctly British.

"Charles, I have something very important to tell you."

"Oh, and what might that be?"

"Am I correct in thinking that Elizabeth just last night told you she wished to go with you to the matric farewell?"

There came a brief pause on the other end. "Yes, how did you know?"

"My daughter still confides in me from time to time."

"Aha."

"There remains a problem, however. Nicholas is not the type of boy to take no for an answer."

"Oh? Surely you don't mean to suggest that he's planning to come?"

"He is."

Charles snorted. "Even after Elizabeth told him not to?"

"Not exactly."

"How's that again?"

"She didn't tell him, because she couldn't. He wrote her a letter with his address, but I threw it away. Then he phoned her to say

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

he'd found a way to take her to the dance, but I answered the phone. He asked if he could speak to Elizabeth and I told him she wasn't here right then, even though she was. So he asked that I pass on his message to her."

"I see," Charles interrupted. "Shall I take it that you never passed on his message either? Perhaps, if Elizabeth knew all this, she'd still rather go with him instead of me?"

"Charles. She'd far rather go with *you*. The only reason she would have gone with Nicholas was out of a misplaced sense of duty. After impulsively giving him that invitation, she felt that she couldn't retract it. I've merely removed the moral conundrum for her, and now she's finally ready to move on."

"Then what's the problem?"

"He's still coming."

"Oh . . ." Charles hesitated. "I see."

"And if Elizabeth knew he was coming, we'd all be back where we started—she feeling obliged to go with him instead of you."

"That is a problem. Then you must find some way to tell Nicholas that he's not welcome."

"I can't! I have no way to contact him, and anyway, he'd want to hear it from Elizabeth, not me."

"Hmmm."

"Besides, Charles, surely you can see the value in having him travel all the way here, go to such great expense and inconvenience, only to face rejection at the end. It will surely be the last we ever see of him."

Charles sighed. "Yes, you are right about that. So why are you calling me?"

"I wanted to keep you in the loop."

"I appreciate that."

"Of course, you mustn't tell Elizabeth any of this, not like the last time. . . ."

"Yes, about that—your insinuations about Nicholas and his intentions, well-grounded or not, and all of your subsequent plotting in that regard, got me into a lot of trouble."

"I cannot help that my daughter is unbecomingly naive! That's why I cannot be as open with her as I am with you. But you're different. You've not lived such a sheltered life. You know how the world works, and how one must be in order to succeed."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Nicholas will be coming at seven o'clock on the day of

Elizabeth's matric farewell. I imagine he will be fairly punctual as always. You must arrive at six to be sure that Elizabeth and he do not meet."

"I'm sure that can be arranged."

"Good! Then when Nicholas arrives I'll tell him that Elizabeth went with you instead."

Charles laughed at her plan. "Mrs. Smythe, you really don't play fair, do you?"

"I play to win, Charles. The only games one can afford to lose are those one does not wish to play, and in real life we do not have the luxury of forfeiture."

"Well, I admire your attitude, Mrs. Smythe."

"Then you'll be here at six?"

"Of course, I wouldn't want to be a loser, now would I?"

She smiled. "I'm glad to hear you say that, Charles."

* * *

Nicholas was in the recreation hall on Sunday playing pool with some of the guys. Mighty was there, too. Nicholas was losing horribly, but his mind was elsewhere. Mighty would be leaving the academy tomorrow, and Nicholas needed an opportunity to get his old prefect alone if he were to have a chance to propose his plan. If another officer overheard, they'd both get into a lot of trouble, so it would have to be off base. With that in mind, Nicholas threw the game to make it end.

"Hey, Beaver, looks like you could use a pair of glasses," Jamie Beckett said, waving a hand in front of Nicholas's face.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Rematch?" Mighty said.

"No, I think we'd better let some of the other guys have a go," Nicholas nodded to the recruits who'd been watching the game, then walked up to one of them and handed him a pool cue. The man nodded and thanked him. Turning back to Adrian, Nicholas said, "How about we get off base for a while? There's a nice café just a few blocks down the road."

"Sure, sounds good, Beaver. I wouldn't mind getting a good, old-fashioned hamburger."

They reached the café scarcely twenty minutes later. It was a sunny day, but not overly hot due to the time of year. Nicholas regretted that the Becketts had insisted on coming along, but that couldn't be helped now. Once they'd all placed their orders and the Becketts had just finished tripping over their tongues to flirt

with their waitress, Nicholas launched into it.

"Mighty, I have a favor to ask."

"Sure, what's up?"

"Don't agree yet. This isn't any ordinary favor."

"Oh?"

"You're stationed at AFB Waterkloof, right?"

Adrian was frowning now. "That's right."

"What would be the chances of you flying me down to Cape Town some day?"

"Uhh, I think it could be arranged."

"On a Friday."

Mighty hesitated, his mouth half open to give a reply. The Becketts and Grant had gone deadly quiet. "After you're done basic training, of course?"

Nicholas hesitated. "Ah, well . . . almost."

"You're planning to go AWOL? Nicholas, you can't do that. I can't help you do that."

"No," Nicholas shook his head. "It's not like that. I'm planning to come back. I get from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday off anyway; this will just be an extra few hours or so and then I'll be back. I'm not planning on going AWOL permanently."

"Oh really? Then why do you want to fly to *Cape Town*?"

"It's a long story."

"Always is."

"Beaver, Beaver," Jamie said, patting Nicholas on the back. "It's not so bad here. The food's good—no need to run away."

Nicholas shook his head. "You don't understand. I'll explain."

"Okay," Adrian sat back and crossed his arms. "I'm listening."

"It's about a girl."

At this Adrian cocked his head and raised his eyebrows. A hint of a smile appeared on his face. "Go on."

Nicholas explained everything in great detail, about his summer romance with Elizabeth over the course of three years, about her inviting him to Wellington, all about Charles, and about her invitation to her matric farewell. At the end of his story, he'd managed to win some sympathy from his audience, but Adrian was frowning deeply. At last, he shook his head.

"Nicholas, can I be honest?"

"Of course."

"You don't stand much of a chance, as you're gone too long."

"I know, but I'm forced to do this, so I'm invoking our pact."

“I kind of thought you might,” Mighty said. “Let’s see . . . we’re always flying between here and Cape Town, several times each day, and we often pull strings to help our friends in the air force visit family in times of dire need—though that’s usually reserved for sickness and other emergencies, not dances. We’d have to make something up, so think about who’s died,” Mighty suggested with a wink.

Nicholas thought for a moment and then asked, “How about I say my granny died ... would that do it?”

“Yep that would do it,” Mighty replied.

Nicholas explained “Technically it won’t be a lie, she really did die, albeit a few years ago. I’m sure they won’t ask for too many details. I’ll just act like I’m still mourning.”

Mighty smiled, adding, “You’d have to sign a waiver, in case anything goes wrong, but that’s standard practice.”

Nicholas grinned, “Consider it done, Mighty!”

Mighty continued, “I’d have to prepare my squadron leader to agree to let you fly with me, but he and I get along very well, so that’s probably not an issue. He’d not even think to ask if you had leave, since he knows I’d never assist you going AWOL, so we’d just have to get you onto the air base. Tell you what—I’ll wait for you about 200 meters north of the main gate of Valhalla. I don’t want to be seen by the guards in case anything goes wrong. Walk up the road and join me there.”

“Great! I’ll call to confirm on Thursday.” Nicholas looked hopeful. The plan was coming together nicely now.

“But, remember, the timing’s tight. You guys usually get off at 3:00 on Fridays, but it’s been my experience that sometimes the officers and NCO’s all want to start their weekends a little earlier, and let everyone off by 2:30, so try to get off as early as possible. I’ll be waiting for you there by 2:30 and it’s a short drive to AFB Waterkloof from Valhalla. We’d probably be there by 3:00, be airborne by 4 pm, and I’ll land at AFB Ysterplaat in Cape Town by 5:00. Then you’ll have two hours to catch the train from there to Wellington, which should really take about an hour or less, since it’s not far away.”

“Would that get you there in time, Beaver?” Mighty asked.

“Definitely! But only one hour of flying time from here to Cape Town . . . is that realistic?” Nicholas asked. “Commercial passenger planes take almost two hours.”

“You’re forgetting I fly a Mirage, Beaver, and over the desert we

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

often reach mach two, though it can reach mach two point two,” Mighty said, puffing out his chest, making the most of the awed looks appearing on the faces of his old school friends.

“Wow, Mighty!” Shorty exclaimed, then smiled and asked, “Any chance of taking me up in one of those birds, too, one day?”

“Maybe, but one thing at a time Shorty, we have to help our buddy, Beaver, here first. It's his last chance!” Mighty replied.

Grant exhaled, whistling softly through his front teeth for effect, and then shaking his head, he added “I must say this is all a little bit too exciting for me – but we're rooting for you, Beaver!”

Mighty continued, “Okay, I'll start planning my flight, then, but what happens if you get caught by MP's between Cape Town and Wellington? Have you thought that through yet, Beaver?”

Everyone present held their breath, waiting for his reply.

“I have to risk it, Mighty. I'll take along a small bag of civvies.”

Adrian pursed his lips. “But if you get caught, remember, you're on your own! You'd better not tell them how you got there. They'd court-martial me. Do I have your word on that?”

Nicholas grimaced. “You're right Mighty, I don't want you to get into trouble. Never mind, I'll have to find some other way.”

“No, Nicholas, you won't,” Mighty replied. “The MP's guard the major city train stations like hawks. If you go AWOL and try and get there by train, well, it's a long way from here to Wellington. They'll notice you're missing long before you ever reach Cape Town, and they'll tip off all the MP's patrolling the main stations en-route. The MP's will be looking for you. You'll never make it. Your best bet is to fly over them all—with me.”

Nicholas looked relieved, “So you'll do it?”

Mighty slapped him on the back. “I'll do it, Beaver. What choice do I have. You invoked our old Andean pact. You're a brother in need, and I know you'd all do the same for me.”

It seemed everyone present suddenly breathed out in unison. Nicholas looked relieved and happy.

“Well then, we still have a few loose ends to tie up in this plan,” Grant chimed in. “When you leave camp on Friday, you'll need to be cagey with the guards about where you're headed.”

“I'll say I'm going to overnight with family in Pretoria. They won't start looking for me until Sunday morning. By then I'll be back here. With luck I'll even be back before the morning roll call, but if not, it will only be a few hours later and I'll say that I tried, but I couldn't make it back on time. They've had that kind of

thing happen before. I'll just have to take my lumps."

Their lunches arrived then—four giant hamburgers, dripping with grease.

As the waitress left, Jamie Beckett added his two cents to the conversation, his eyes still watching the waitress as she left. "I hope Elizabeth appreciates exactly what you're risking for her, Beaver. If this plan fails, they're going to put you in detention barracks and drill you every day till you drop from sheer exhaustion! They're brutal there. I hope this girl's worth it!"

"She is, and she risked a lot for me by inviting me, so I can't chicken out now. Charles and her mother couldn't have been happy! Besides, think of what you risked for those little rabbits, rescuing them from the zoo."

Shorty winced. "Yes, you have a point. Now it's your turn—but if you remind me of that again, I may just march you over to the MPs' and the detention barracks myself!" Shorty joked.

With that, they all set about eating their meals, laughing and joking about all the antics they'd been a part of back in their old childhood home, Saint Andrews. It all seemed so far away and so long ago now. Mighty was right—they were family. They'd always be family, and families help each other in times of need.

Chapter 6

Constance went out to check the mailbox as she'd become accustomed to doing each morning after breakfast for more than two months now—ever since she had learned that Elizabeth had invited Nicholas to her Matric Farewell. If she wanted to keep Elizabeth from finding out that Nicholas was coming, she had to cover all the angles.

Constance padded down the walkway to the mailbox in her slippers. She was already dressed, of course—it wouldn't do to be seen outside in her nightgown—but she couldn't imagine anyone would object to her slippers.

It was chilly outside so she hurried back in before she began checking through the mail. Elizabeth and Hattie were just on their way out as Constance reentered the house.

“Any mail for me?” Elizabeth asked Constance.

Constance shrugged. “I don't know yet. I'll let you know when you get home from school; now hurry on.”

Constance shut the door behind them and began flipping through the stack of envelopes on her way to the kitchen. Halfway through the pile, she froze, her eyes checking and rechecking the address on one particular envelope.

It was another letter from Nicholas, from Valhalla, Pretoria.

“After so much time has passed, you still keep writing?” Constance's tone held an incredulous, mocking note.

“Who decided to write?” Edwin asked from where he was straightening his tie in front of a mirror in the living room.

“Oh, just another letter for Elizabeth from Nicholas, dear.”

“Nicholas? Hasn't he moved on by now?”

“I'm afraid not.”

Edwin turned from the mirror with a frown. “Well, are you going to tell Elizabeth?”

“Do you take me for a fool? No, I wouldn't tell her that. The poor girl would just confuse herself. I'll handle the matter more discretely. It will be easier for her that way.”

Edwin sighed and crossed the living room with his briefcase in

hand. "If you say so, dear."

He leaned in to kiss her goodbye, and she leaned away from him, her brow knitted. "I *do* say so."

"There's no need to get upset. I wasn't questioning you."

"That's not how it sounded. You must trust me on this."

"Sorry, dear," Edwin said.

She smiled and stopped leaning away. He landed a quick kiss on her lips, and she said, "Have a nice day at work, you handsome devil."

He grinned at her, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "A pity I have to go to work. . . ."

"Yes, it is a pity," Constance said. "Today you're going to the board meeting in Cape Town?"

Edwin nodded.

"And you're to present your report?"

"Yes . . ." Edwin hesitated. Constance had shown an unusual amount of interest in his work lately. She'd been questioning him incessantly about it and providing unhelpful suggestions at every turn. Maybe she was bored.

"What will you recommend?"

He shrugged. "I've made my analysis. I'll tell them that the cons and potential risks of taking over Sharp Electronics outweigh all of the benefits."

Constance snorted. "Of course you would say that."

Edwin frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing, dear," she said, already turning to continue on for the kitchen. She was back to studying the mail, her attention no longer on her husband, as if she'd lost interest in the conversation. Almost as an afterthought she added, "Very few men have the guts to take the necessary risks to succeed in business," she said.

He frowned, but she didn't catch the look he sent her. He shook his head and continued on his way, but her words echoed through his thoughts, making him less and less certain of the report he was about to deliver.

What if she were right? What if the company needed to take such a risk in order to succeed?

* * *

Edwin walked into the board room with a frown and sat quietly at one end of the table to go over his report. The room was almost empty; he'd made a point to arrive early so he could get his

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

thoughts in order before the meeting. He was so absorbed in the details of his report and his now conflicting thoughts on the subject that he didn't even notice as the chairman came in and sat down at the head of the table. Suddenly Edwin grew aware of the silence, and he looked up.

"Mr. Smythe?" the chairman inquired.

"Yes? Sorry, I was just preoccupied with my report."

"No, not at all. We prize diligence here. It's good to see you taking your responsibility seriously."

Edwin nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"Speaking of those reports, shall we get to them now? I'd very much like to hear each of your findings."

They went around the table in clockwise order. Edwin listened carefully to the varied analyses presented. Some of them were optimistic while others were pessimistic. The findings were all familiar to him by now. Sharp Electronics had a good history of profitability but for a variety of reasons their balance sheet wasn't looking good at present. Their products were mostly still competitive, but costs of labor and production had risen over the years, and a few recently failed product lines were dragging the company down with unsold inventory. It wasn't a bad target for a takeover, if one's company and management already knew what to do with an electronics company. The trouble was their management team had no such experience.

When it was Edwin's turn to present his findings, he hesitated before reading the summary off the page before him.

"Mr. Smythe?"

He shuffled the papers on the table before him into a neat pile and set them down carefully. "After a careful study of the facts, I've come to the conclusion that a takeover of Sharp Electronics would not be good for our company." Edwin looked around to judge reactions. The chairman didn't look happy!

"Would you like to elaborate?" the chairman asked.

"Of course . . ." His eyes dipped to the summary of his report for inspiration. *Few men have the guts to take the necessary risks to succeed.* Constance's words echoed inside his head, and Edwin frowned once more. Having lost his train of thought, he read the rest of his summary verbatim. After neatly outlining all of the risks involved with such a takeover, he concluded with a restatement of his original opinion, that it would be a foolish move for them to take over Sharp Electronics. Edwin looked up

from reading his report to gauge the reactions of the other board members. Some of them were pensive, even some of those who had come out in favor of the proposal were now sitting back in their chairs with furrowed brows. His findings had certainly had an effect. The Chairman was sitting forward, as if keenly interested, his elbows propped on the long mahogany table.

“Well, that is interesting, Mr. Smythe. Of course, if we never take any risks we'll never have any gains either.”

Edwin felt those words pierce him somewhere sensitive and he spoke up. “Yes, I was just thinking that.”

“Oh?”

“Despite my many reservations, it occurs to me that risk is often proportional to gain, and thus, should we decide to accept this proposal, it may pay off rather brilliantly later on.”

The chairman nodded. “I'm pleased to hear you say that. It's a rare man who can put aside his fears long enough to conquer them.” Turning his gaze to address the entire board, William Gaines said, “Business is nothing if not risk, gentlemen.”

They took turns, around the table, until they reached the man seated directly to the right of Mr. Gaines. The board members seemed almost evenly divided in their opinions of the takeover, which gave Edwin some solace. He felt less conflicted than before. The board wasn't ignoring the risks, but they were weighing them with due consideration. And there were always risks associated with doing business. He felt reassured to know that those risks wouldn't be his alone to bear. The entire board would have the responsibility of voting for this proposal.

What would his one little vote matter in the end?

* * *

Constance was just sitting down to relax in the living room when the phone rang. She got up from her favorite chair with a sigh, set her tea down, and went over to the phone.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Smythe?” the voice was a woman's and unfamiliar.

“Yes? To whom am I speaking?”

“One moment please.”

Now a man's voice came on the line. “Hello, Connie.”

Constance knew that voice.

“What do you want?” she asked, pouring as much venom into her words as she could in order to hide her growing fear. Edwin had left this morning with the intention of coming out against the

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

chairman's proposal. Mr. Gaines had specifically told her to make sure her husband came out in favor.

"You almost disappointed me today."

Almost. Constance held back a sigh of relief. "Oh?"

"Make sure he votes in favor at the next board meeting."

"Suppose I do, then what?"

There came a soft chuckle which made Constance's eyes narrow dangerously. "Then what, my dear?"

"Then will you leave us alone?"

"Of course," the chairman purred. "Just make sure you keep me happy, and I'll leave you alone."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Now his voice turned hard: "Don't disappoint me, Connie!"

"Click" The line went dead. Constance set the phone down with a shaking hand. She grimaced. *This had to end.*

* * *

It was Thursday night and most of the recruits were at the recreation hall. Nicholas sat alone on the bunk in his barracks, thinking. He'd just called Mighty, at the officer's club in AFB Waterkloof, and he'd confirmed that it was "all systems go" for their plan. Tomorrow afternoon he would slip off base, with his usual permission slip from the base chaplain to attend a Seventh Day Adventist Church in Pretoria and spend the Sabbath at a friend's house. Officially, he was to be back on base after sundown Saturday, when the Sabbath ended, but he wouldn't actually be back until later Sunday morning. That would be when most everyone else was going to their churches, some early, some later, then returning to Valhalla. There would be an endless stream of cadets coming and going through the front gate on Sunday morning. With a bit of luck, no one would realize he was gone until he was safely back on base, ready to resume basic training on Monday.

Mighty had, as promised, managed to get an assignment flying training sorties with the Navy around Cape Town on Saturday, which meant he could leave on Friday and return on Sunday. Nicholas would join Mighty as his sanctioned passenger—a mercy flight. Nicholas smiled and looked up to the ceiling. *Sorry, granny, I know you'd understand.*

It was a little white lie, but it was also a genuine mission of mercy! He'd not be in this predicament if it weren't for his compulsory military service. They owed him one!

There might be some difficulty in getting from AFB Ysterplaat to Wellington, but it was not an air force base filled with cadets. So as long as an officer—Mighty in this case—arranged with their front gate to let Nicholas out and then in again later, he'd be free to travel to Wellington. His plan wasn't likely to go awry, at least not until it was too late for them to catch him, but there *was* one little problem—

He hadn't heard a word from Elizabeth. Not one word!

It had been over a month since he'd sent her the first letter, and two weeks since he called her home and had written to her again. Nicholas supposed it wasn't reasonable to expect a reply in so little time, but it was a bit unnerving to think he hadn't received confirmation directly from her. He was tempted to call her home again, but he needed what little money he had left for trains, and his plan was already in motion. He couldn't stop and change his mind now. Besides, Constance had promised to pass on his message. In all likelihood, Elizabeth's answering letter was on its way to him right now. . . .

* * *

Elizabeth stared into Charles's honey-brown eyes. He smiled roguishly back at her, and her heart gave a little flutter. She never grew tired of that grin. It was an exciting, lively grin—like he was hiding a world of secrets and mysteries she would never fully unravel. It hinted to a darker side of him she'd never really seen. That sometimes scared her, making her wonder what exactly he was hiding behind his good looks and charm.

"Elizabeth . . ."

She raised one eyebrow. "Yes?"

"What are you thinking about?"

She smiled. "Nothing."

He laughed at that. "Really?"

"Mhmm." She reached out to stroke his cheek. He smiled, and she bit her lip. He looked skeptical. After eyeing her suspiciously for a moment, he turned his head and kissed the hand that was stroking his cheek. She smiled again. "Fine! You caught me. I was thinking about tomorrow, about the dance."

"Ah, yes," he said, now stroking her hair. "It will be an unforgettable night."

"And, I was also thinking about you."

"Oh?"

"I was thinking that you're too good to be true. You must be

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

hiding something. You must have a flaw.”

He cocked his head and his smile flickered. “What makes you think that? Are you saying you don't trust me?”

“No . . . is there a reason I shouldn't?”

Charles sighed and looked away, clearly annoyed. Elizabeth frowned and her hand fell away from his cheek. “What is it?”

“We've been dating for more than a year now, and you still don't trust me?”

“I didn't say that, Charles.”

“No?” he looked her in the eyes, leaning close, his gaze boring into hers. “Maybe not, but you implied it.”

Elizabeth sighed and scooted closer to him on the park bench. She lifted his arm. It was like a dead thing in her hands, limp and heavy; he wasn't helping one bit. She ignored his frostiness and wrapped his arm around her shoulders; she leaned against him and grabbed his hand in hers. “Charles.”

“Yes?”

“I *do* trust you.”

“Good.” He didn't sound convinced.

“Haven't you ever had something so good that you were afraid to lose it?” she explained. Her thoughts drifted involuntarily to Nicholas, but she quickly suppressed any feelings of sadness.

Charles's rigid posture grew more accommodating as he relaxed against her. “Yes.”

“Then you understand exactly what I meant.”

“Elizabeth.” She looked up at him. “I might seem confident, perhaps overconfident at times, but the truth is you scare me, too Princess. I don't want to ever lose you.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Good.” She tightened her grip on his hand. “Because I wouldn't want to be lost.”

He grinned his usual roguish grin once more and leaned in to kiss her beckoning lips. “Then stick with me, Princess,” he whispered as his lips hovered close to hers. As her eyes fluttered closed, they sealed their pact with a long, soulful kiss.

Chapter 7

Nicholas walked up to the front gate of Valhalla, a small knapsack over his one shoulder. One of the guards on duty at the gate looked familiar.

“Hey, Beaver,” Grant said, walking out a few steps toward a surprised Nicholas. He winked and held one finger up to his mouth. “Shhh! It’s all right, I swapped with one of the guards on duty here tonight, and Shorty’s done the same for the Sunday morning shift. Just make sure you’re back before noon Sunday, okay? If all goes well, we’ll have you covered. Figure you need all the help you can get,” Grant said with a shrug.

Nicholas looked relieved. “You guys are the best!”

“You sure about this?” Grant whispered. “Last chance to back out!”

Nicholas nodded and passed his leave papers through the open window. “Too late to have second thoughts now.”

Grant took the papers from Nicholas, studied them briefly, looked up and gave a brief nod before passing them back through the window. “Everything looks in order soldier—you’re due back by midnight tomorrow! Enjoy yourself!” he said with a wink.

“Thanks,” Nicholas breathed a sigh of relief, giving a sudden shiver, as he walked up the road to meet with Mighty. As he rounded the corner, he saw a jeep parked under a tree next to the road. Mighty was there! Nicholas gave a thumbs up, and Mighty started the jeep as Nicholas broke into a sprint. He reached the waiting vehicle and jumped into the passenger side, putting his knapsack down between his legs. “Good to see you, Mighty. Let’s go!”

“No problems, Beaver. The wheels of our master plan are in motion!” Mighty joked as he hastily looked over his shoulder before putting the jeep into gear. That done he drove out onto the road on the way to AFB Waterkloof. It was a short drive. It seemed like Nicholas had barely had time to blink and he was there. The jeep rolled to a stop before the gates and Nicholas watched as one of the guards recognized Mighty and opened the

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

boom. They traded salutes and then Mighty drove down the tree-lined road to the base. They drove through a maze of side roads between the giant hangers, then parked in front of one of them with a sign on it that said, "Hangar 19" in big, bold white letters.

"C'mon Beaver," Mighty said. "We're early, but you still need to sign the waiver. Remember to look sad when you do—you know, your granny," Mighty said with a wink. "Then slip into a flight suit and helmet which I've got waiting for you, while I do my flight checks and speak with the ground crew."

Nicholas looked bewildered, but followed Mighty's lead, letting him do all the talking and signing of the papers put in front of him. They said their goodbyes and cut a brisk line across the tarmac to the crew bustling around three waiting Mirage IIDZ's—two-seater jet fighters which were used for training missions. The jets were standing in front of the giant concrete bunker.

Adrian stopped to speak with the ground support technicians, while Nicholas stood back, awed by the fighter jet looming over them. It was much larger than he'd expected, easily longer than a school bus, with a wingspan of nearly the same. Nicholas became aware of eyes on him and he looked around. Adrian had turned from his conversation with the ground crew and flashed Nicholas a crooked grin. "She's a beaut' isn't she?"

Nicholas tried but failed to keep the grin from his face. He was going to fly in the rear cockpit, in a Mirage! The ground crew helped him up the ladder, warning him to step only on the areas marked for feet on the wing, then helped him into the cockpit and strapped him in. They adjusted his helmet, and gave him a briefing on how to talk with the pilot in the front cockpit during flight, and what to expect when they took off and landed. Mighty was much more relaxed, chatting to a member of the ground crew doing some final preparations. This was business as usual for him. Nicholas was impressed! He watched as Mighty saluted the two crew members, turned and climbed up into the cockpit in front of Nicholas. Within seconds Mighty was strapped in and showed a thumbs up to the ground crew—then the cockpit covers slowly moved down and locked into place, and the headset speakers in Nicholas's helmet crackled with Mighty's voice. "Ready, Nick?" he asked.

"Yes sir!" Nicholas replied, the tension coming out as beads of sweat on his brow.

"Okay then, just sit back quietly. Watch and listen while I fire

up the engine and they guide us out onto the runway,” Mighty instructed. “Relax, Beaver—I’ve done this all before!”

Nicholas smiled. His heart was racing. This was stressful, but also exciting! Nicholas heard the engine starting, the sound building to a high-pitched whistle. He felt the plane lurch forward as the ground crew removed the block under the front wheel, then as the ground crew waved their signals to Mighty, the Mirage lurched forward and made its way to the runway. They taxied for a short while. Nicholas listened as Mighty spoke to the control tower. Everyone seemed so relaxed, as if they’d done this hundreds of times before.

They had. Nicholas smiled. The Mirage turned onto the main runway, and then came to a sudden stop. He heard the control tower giving Mighty permission to take off, and Mighty saying “Roger, over and out!” Then he felt a sudden surge in power, and the Mirage started gaining speed fast. Mighty came on the intercom and Nicholas heard him say, “Hold on tight, Nicholas! Enjoy the takeoff. It’s one of my favorite times of any flight.” Nicholas watched as the runway whirred by under the Mirage, and then suddenly, they were airborne, shooting upwards with such force, that Nicholas was pushed back into his seat, almost unable to move. Mighty continued the climb, turning in a long gentle arc to head in the opposite direction to their takeoff. Before long, they were passing through the clouds and all Nicholas could see was cottony white all around them.

Mighty maneuvered them deftly through the gaps, climbing ever higher until they were way above the clouds. Then the Mirage finally leveled out and Nicholas heard Mighty talking to him on the intercom. “How you doing back there, Beaver?”

Nicholas’s eyes were wide open. “This is great stuff Mighty - You’ve got the best job in the world!”

Mighty just laughed “Yes, Nick, it may seem that way, but I have to allow for the possibility that one day maybe I’ll be flying this bird into battle, and then it will feel very different. I kind of hope that day doesn’t come too soon. I’m enjoying training missions way too much!”

“How could that ever happen, Mighty? Our enemies live out in the bush and don’t have any air force.”

“Yep, Beaver. Let’s just hope it stays that way. Never is a long time.” Changing the subject, he said, “We’ve been up in the air long enough to be away from the major cities now, so we will have

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

no problem with people complaining about sonic booms—why not let's put on some speed, hey Beaver?"

"Go for it!" Nicholas replied, feeling the acceleration push him back into his seat again, but this time not as much as it had at takeoff when they were climbing steeply.

"Brace yourself for mach one! You'll feel what seems like a little turbulence as we break the sound barrier," Mighty announced.

The plane shuddered, and then all was smooth and quiet again. "Wow, that was easy! So what happens now?" Nicholas asked.

"We accelerate to mach two, but this time you won't feel anything much except the acceleration," Mighty replied.

Nicholas was having fun going AWOL for a girl, but she wasn't just any girl. She was *Elizabeth*. All the adrenaline of organizing this clandestine meeting with her, coupled with the most exciting joy ride of his entire life just added to the elation he felt knowing that soon Lizzie would be in his arms again, at least for a brief few hours, and then he'd be able to judge her reactions to his poem and letter, to his declaration of love. It wouldn't hurt that she'd see him in his air force uniform, and that he'd be wearing it to her matric dance! Suddenly he felt acutely aware of being part of the adult world.

Adrian burst through his daydream on the intercom, asking him about Elizabeth, and about the outcome he was hoping for from this trip. Nicholas assured Mighty that he would try to be realistic. He agreed that it was a long shot and that he knew she already had another serious boyfriend. All he wanted to accomplish by going to her Matric Farewell was to make it a little harder for her to forget about him, to make her realize how much he was willing to risk for her and for their love. He wanted to make her realize that even though she had Charles, in some way she still had him, too—if only she could wait for him to return to her world, just a little while longer, then they'd be together at UCT.

"So," Adrian said, "what you're saying is you want her to know you're still very much in the running."

"Exactly. And also that she can count on me. Even when everything seems to be set against us and it looks like there's no hope. I want her to know that I'll do everything I can to be there for her. I think she should get the message from what I'm doing now for her, don't you?"

“Yeah, I’d say you’re sending that message pretty much loud and clear. You know there’s a good chance—” Mighty paused to measure his words carefully, not wanting to rain on Nicholas’s parade. “There’s a good chance that you could get caught on Sunday morning when you return, and that they’ll send you to the detention barracks for going AWOL.”

Nicholas grimaced. “I’ve thought about that.”

Mighty raised his eyebrows and inquired, “Still worth it?”

“Without a doubt!”

“Then it’s a good choice. I hope it works out for you, Beaver.”

“Me, too, Mighty. Me too,” Nicholas replied, aware that they were slowing down now and beginning to descend.

“AFB Ysterplaat is now only minutes away, Nicholas. When I break cloud cover, take a look at the mountains—I’ll make sure to fly right over Wellington, especially for you.”

“Thanks Mighty! Do you know Wellington at all?” he asked.

“Yep, been to watch Boland play Rugby at the stadium there,” Mighty replied. Then a sneaky grin appeared on his face. “Say, Nicholas, Where exactly is Elizabeth’s home?”

“Right next to the stadium is her high school, the only one in Wellington, and her home is the second one from the front gate of the school, barely 100 meters away from it . . . why?”

“Because us air force pilots like to give the taxpayers a little show from time to time—it’s a morale booster,” Mighty replied, “Do you think you’d recognize her house from the air?” he inquired.

“Probably, Mighty. What have you got in mind?” Nicholas asked.

“You be my navigator. I’m slowing this bird down to just above stall and dropping to 1,000 feet. Wellington is appearing fast. Look on the port side—that’s your left, by the way. I’ll look for the Rugby Stadium, and you look for the school and her home.”

“There it is! I see the school campus and buildings clearly, to the left—a bit in front of the stadium,” Nicholas said.

“Okay, I see it now. I’m going to fly in a tight arc around the area above the school, Beaver. See if you can point out her home.”

“I see it, Mighty—there it is, the L-shaped home on the corner, with a grey slate roof. It’s the second one up from the main road in front of the school, the one with the pool off to the side,” Nicholas explained, doing his best to guide Mighty right to it.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

“Okay, I see it, Beaver—watch this!” Mighty said. “Hang on tight!” With that, Mighty turned the Mirage in a long, slow arc to Port.

Below them, unaware of the significance, Elizabeth sat talking next to her dad on the swing bench of their veranda.

Edwin interrupted her suddenly and pointed at the sky. “Wow, Lizzie, look at that jet fighter! I wonder what it’s doing putting on a show over Wellington? They usually fly right on by us. Let’s go and stand out on the lawn and see if we can get a better look!” Edwin said.

Lizzie and Edwin walked out onto the lawn, shielding their eyes as they followed the course of the Mirage. It looked as if it were returning for another fly over.

“Dropping to 500 feet, Beaver. I see the house dead ahead! I can make out two people on the lawn close to the pool—see them?”

“Yep, Mighty—can’t quite make out who, but I see them, too!”

“Okay, then, let’s imagine it’s Elizabeth and Charles, shall we? Let’s give them a taste of what us air force boys are made of!”

Mighty expertly guided the fighter as if they were on a bombing run, and dipped the wings of the Mirage a few times. Nicholas strained to see the people on the lawn. It sure looked to him to be a woman with long brown hair, standing next to a man, waving up at them. Then, in an instant, they were past.

“Once more, Mighty, please?” Nicholas begged “That was fun!”

“Okay, Beaver, only one. Then we’ll have to go!” Mighty chuckled.

Mighty steered the Mirage in a wide loop to port, back toward the mountains before returning for the final run. Lizzie and Edwin were chattering excitedly, hands shielding their eyes, pointing at the plane when Constance appeared in her apron, along with Hattie, to see what all the fuss was about. They pointed to the Mirage just as it turned to make another run.

“Well Beaver, watch this!” Mighty said. “Hold onto your lunch!”

Nicholas could see four people out on the lawn now. Three women and a man. *It must be Lizzie’s family*, he thought. *Who else?*

Dipping his wings in a final salute, Mighty placed the Mirage into a series of rapid rolls, then accelerated into a steep climb, shooting loudly up, like a rocket. Nicholas felt his head spin and his stomach lurch as he was pushed back into the seat. The

plane rocketed up to 10,000 feet before leveling out, and then they were flying onward to Cape Town, leaving Wellington fast receding behind them. Nicholas struggled to regain composure. “Hey Mighty, thanks man! That was awesome! But I almost lost it there,” Nicholas remarked, feeling a little worse for wear.

Mighty laughed aloud at Beaver’s discomfort.

“That was some show, hey Lizzie?” Edwin remarked. Before Elizabeth could reply, Constance did. “What a show off! Don’t they have anything better to do than make a noise?!”

“Well it sure looked like fun to me,” Hattie chimed in.

Elizabeth looked stunned.[†] That air force plane had brought all the memories of Nicholas flooding back into her mind. Of all days on which that should happen, tonight was the night he was meant to have taken her to the dance. Just like the steam train blowing its whistle for them last summer as they canoed toward the train bridge, this too felt like an omen. Suddenly Elizabeth felt tears welling up in her eyes. She turned silently and ran into the house, heading straight for her room.

Elizabeth buried her face in her pillow, the tears now streaming out of her eyes, fast wetting it. Her body was racked with sobs. “*Why, Nicholas? Why couldn’t you at least have written me, like you promised you would—like I begged you to do at our waterfall? Why just disappear forever?*” Elizabeth felt like her heart was tearing in two. Her body shaking with sobs, tears just kept flowing as Elizabeth buried her face in the pillow.

She didn’t notice that Constance was standing watching her from the open door. Constance wondered whether she should go and sit down next to Elizabeth, to try and comfort her. *No*, she decided. *Let her grieve. It’s the final stage of saying goodbye.*

Constance turned, closing the door quietly behind her so as to not betray her presence. *It’s all for the best. Lizzie is better off with Charles. One day she’ll thank me!*

* * *

Mighty walked with Nicholas and introduced himself to the guards at the front gate of AFB Ysterplaat. “This is Private Nicholas Strauss. He will be heading for Wellington from the

[†] Elizabeth had no way of knowing that Nicholas and his air force pilot-friend were the ones doing acrobatic maneuvers directly above her standing on the front-lawn. At the point of closest approach, Nicholas was barely 500yards away from Elizabeth. A real-life case of: “So near and yet so far!” Yet, as you read, she felt his presence.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

station over there, but returning later tonight. Please let him in and direct him over to the officer's quarters where I'll be staying," Mighty instructed, watching as they made a note in their log book. Then he walked a short distance with Nicholas, toward the station, "Well, Beaver, I've done my bit. Now it's all up to you!" he said, grasping Nicholas's shoulder.

"Thanks, Mighty! See you later," Nicholas replied, turning to give Mighty a salute. As a Private, it was his duty to salute a superior officer, but this time it was not just a duty, but rather an immense show of gratitude.

Chapter 8

Charles had everything planned. He'd arrive at six to take Elizabeth up to the Du Toitskloof Pass where they would drink champagne and watch the sun set over the Cape before the dance. Nicholas was scheduled to arrive at seven, so by then they'd be long gone. Charles sat in the back of his dad's Mercedes, watching the vineyards flicker past the car window in a dark green blur as James drove them from Paarl to Wellington. He couldn't imagine how Nicholas had managed to beg or bargain leave from his commanding officers, much less how he'd managed to arrange transport all the way from Pretoria to Wellington, but his tenacity was admirable.

Fortunately, I'm not the only one who doesn't want him around Elizabeth, Charles thought. Constance, for obvious reasons, was determined that her daughter end up with the best possible match, which Nicholas certainly was not. *Pity for you, Nicko*. Charles chuckled softly to himself, remembering how Elizabeth had tried to catch up to Nicholas at the train station in Worcester a few months ago, only to find the road blocked at the Du Toitskloof Pass due to an overturned truck.

It seemed somehow fitting that Nicholas and Elizabeth's childish romance be foiled once more at the very same place. By the time he and Elizabeth were raising a toast with the setting sun spreading a golden blanket over the winelands far below, Nicholas would just be arriving to take Elizabeth to the dance. Except that he would arrive to find her already gone. After this, he'd be gone for good. No man could suffer such a blow to his pride and still maintain any degree of feeling for the one who'd delivered it. He would assume the worst about Elizabeth, and that would be the last they'd ever see of him.

Charles laughed once more.

"May I ask what is so funny, young master Atherton?"

Charles frowned. "No, James, my thoughts are not available for your scrutiny. Just drive, please."

"Of course, sir."

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

James was frowning into the rearview mirror, but Charles missed the look. He was gazing absently out the window, thinking how tiresome it was to constantly be making small talk with the help—and not only his driver. The maid stayed to chat with him every morning when she brought him his breakfast and coffee in bed, despite repeated admonitions that he liked *quiet* mornings. Similarly, James insisted on making small talk while driving him to and fro. It was exhausting.

The car wandered slightly from the road while James's attention was on Charles, and hit gravel on the curb. The car skidded as James applied the brakes, then bumped through a giant pothole. Charles's head slammed into the seat in front of him; then James had the car back under control and all was forgotten but for Charles's smarting forehead.

"Watch where you're going, please, would you, James?" Charles's voice was dripping with ire and condescension. "I'm planning to spend tonight at the dance with Elizabeth, not in hospital with you praying to your little god that I wake up from my coma before my dad has you fired."

"Yes, sir."

"Really!"

"I'm sorry, sir. I wasn't—"

"Of course, you weren't!" Charles head appeared in the window between the two front seats. "But look, there's the road, okay? It's the long flat thing we're driving on. All you have to do is make sure we stay on it. Not that hard, is it?" Charles snorted and sat back with a disgusted look.

"Sorry, sir," James said again.

Charles's only reply was to raise the tinted privacy window which separated the back from the front of the car. He didn't know why his dad didn't hire a new driver. James had always been trouble. Charles shook his head and let his breath out in a sigh. It was so hard to get good help.

After a few minutes, Charles felt the car slowing down. Frowning anew he lowered the privacy window to ask James about it. "What now?"

"The car is riding rough, sir."

"What do you mean, rough? It's probably riding rough because you're so rough with it!"

James sighed as the car came to a stop. He climbed out with the engine still running. Charles opened the back door and

stepped out as well. This was just what he needed. Some car trouble to delay him now, when time was so crucial!

"And?" Charles demanded, coming alongside his driver.

James was staring at the front left wheel of the car with a mournful look. Charles noticed how the tire was bulging and he sighed again. "Well done, old chap!" Charles said, slapping James hard on the back. "You've managed to give us a flat."

"It must have been that pothole . . ." James said, still staring at the bulging tire.

"Yes, yes, it must have been the pothole's fault. Not the driver, no, of course not. What are you still standing there for?" Charles clapped his hands. "Get to it! Change that tire before we're late!"

"Yes, sir." James went to shut off the rumbling engine; then he retrieved the spare wheel from the trunk. Charles glanced at his watch and grimaced. It was already five to six. He hoped Nicholas didn't arrive early.

"Hurry up, James!"

* * *

It had been a long day for Nicholas. It had started with him flying copilot and navigator for Adrian, in a Mirage III Fighter Jet on a quick one-hour flight to Cape Town. Now at the station he'd purchased his ticket and sat down to wait on the platform with the rest of the travelers. He'd had about fifteen minutes to rest his aching feet, then he was shuffling aboard with the other passengers. There were a few military personnel scattered around the platform, but none of them paid any attention to him, thinking he was probably just going home from the nearby air base. Nicholas sat slumped against the window, drifting in and out of sleep as the train rushed down the tracks to Wellington. He spent the time dreaming of Elizabeth, trying to imagine her face, her reaction when she saw him again. . . . and how he'd tell her he'd seen her first!

* * *

James was down on his haunches, his brow dripping with sweat as he hurried to change the car's flat tire. Meanwhile, Charles was pacing around the car and muttering to himself. James grimaced. He knew he was going to get in trouble this time; Charles was in a particularly foul mood and it was unlikely that he'd let the incident go.

Charles stopped pacing, and James felt the boy's gaze burning a hole in the back of his head. "Are you still fumbling with that

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

tire? Shall I do it for you?"

"I'm almost done, sir," James said.

"Yes, you said that fifteen minutes ago!"

Fed up, James rounded on him. "What would you have me do sir? I'm working as fast as I can! What's the rush anyway?"

"You damn fool, of course you don't understand. If I don't get to Elizabeth's house before seven, Nicholas is going to arrive and take her instead!"

James shook his head. "What? Nicholas?"

"Yes, he's on his way at this very instant! Now hurry up and change that tire before you ruin everything!"

James turned back to his task with a deeply furrowed brow. *Nicholas?* he wondered. He felt like he was missing something. What was Nicholas doing back in Wellington?

* * *

The whistle blew, and Nicholas felt the train begin to slow. The conductor called out Wellington as the next stop, and Nicholas sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

By the time he stepped off the train, it was 6:02 pm. He was early, but not by much considering how far he'd come. Now the question was, should he wait a little longer, showing up on Lizzie's doorstep at exactly 7:00 as promised, or should he go there early, and wait at her house for her to finish getting ready? He considered the question for just a moment, before realizing that he couldn't wait any longer to see her.

Nicholas shuffled behind the other passengers and stepped off the train. Then he started down the platform, intending to walk from the station to Elizabeth's house when someone called out his name in a familiar, gravelly voice. He turned to look, finding himself eye-to-eye with the old stationmaster.

"Mr. Gee!"

The old man cocked an eyebrow at him. "Nicholas! Weren't you supposed to be in the military?"

"I was—I mean I am. I'm just, ah, taking a short break to escort Elizabeth to her Matric Farewell."

"A short break?"

Nicholas hesitated for a moment before deciding that he could trust Mr. Gee, and then he explained everything. Mr. Gee nodded all through Nicholas's hurried explanation. When it was over, his only comment was, "Smart boy."

"Smart? You think going AWOL to see a girl is smart?" Nicholas

had his own doubts about the smartness of it by now. He was due back at AFB Waterkloof tomorrow night, and he would never make it. He also felt guilty. He'd involved too many people in his plans, forced them to risk too much for him. He was starting to feel very foolish.

"Well, no . . ." the stationmaster admitted. "That wouldn't be smart. I hope you wouldn't go to all that trouble for just a girl. She would have to be a very special girl."

"Well of course she's special, Mr. Gee—very special!"

"Good," Mister Gee said, smiling. "In that case, I approve!"

Nicholas glanced worriedly behind him and checked his watch. It was now 6:15. He needed to go. "Hey, I really have to go. We can talk about how it went when I get back tonight. I'm supposed to pick Elizabeth up for the dance at 7:00."

"Well, what are we standing here for? Let me drive you."

"But what about the train station?"

Mr. Gee shook his head. "After this next train, there won't be another train coming in for at least a couple of hours. It's only five minutes or so to the Smythes' home. I'll just put the 'Back Shortly' sign in the window, and they'll think I've gone to the *loo*. Wait here a minute while I go and lock up the office."

"No problem, Mr. Gee—thanks!" Nicholas replied, watching as he disappeared into the old sandstone building.

While he was watching another familiar voice called out: "Master Nicholas, is that you?"

Nicholas turned to see who had addressed him.

"It's me, Thandiwe, the maid for the Smythe family."

"Oh, sorry, Thandi, yes, of course, I remember!" Nicholas smiled.

"Are you here in Wellington to see Miss Elizabeth?"

He grinned. "Yes, I'm here to take her to her Matric Farewell. She invited me when I visited her in June," Nicholas replied.

She smiled warmly at him. "You look so handsome, so grown up in your uniform. I'm sure Miss Elizabeth will swoon."

Nicholas smiled. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Thandi."

"Well before I left, I noticed a lot of activity in Miss Elizabeth's room. I'd guess she was making herself pretty for you," Thandiwe said with another smile and a wink.

Elizabeth was getting ready to go to the dance with him. That was good news! He forced himself back to the present and asked, "So why are you here at the station tonight, Thandi?"

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

"I have the weekend off, and I'm going to visit my family in Cape Town," Thandiwe replied.

Mr. Gee reappeared at that moment, keys jingling in his hand.

"Ready to go?" he asked. "Here's the 6:20 train"

"Yeah, sorry, Thandi; I have to go now!"

"Me too, here comes my train. Bye, Master Nicholas. Enjoy the dance! I'll be sure to ask Miss Elizabeth on Monday how she enjoyed the dance with you," Thandi said with a grin.

Nicholas smiled at her and waved, turning to follow Mr. Gee.

"That was the Smythe family's maid," Nicholas explained as they were walking to the parking lot behind the station.

"Ah, I see," Mr. Gee said, nodding.

A minute later they reached Mr. Gee's car, an old red station wagon, and they climbed in. Nicholas smiled and thanked the stationmaster again for his help and support.

"Oh, don't mention it Nicholas. Not everyone gets to witness true love, much less to help it on its way. It's my pleasure!"

Nicholas considered that as Mr. Gee started the engine and pulled out of the train station. Was what he and Elizabeth had *true love*? He knew exactly how *he* felt about her, but how did she feel about him? She'd never said—never so much as even replied to the poem he'd written for her last year to express his feelings, and here he was going to all this trouble to see her. He hoped it wouldn't turn out to be a mistake. He sighed. One way or the other, by the end of tonight, he'd know what their future held. He'd done his part. He'd taken her up on her invitation and honored his parting words to her, standing at the end of the platform, having just caught his letter, panting as she watched his train leave—"Until we meet again, Lizzie!" he'd shouted to her over the clanking and chugging of the train. Two and a half months later, they were about to meet again.

Chapter 9

Hurry up, Elizabeth! You're going to be late!" Constance was fuming. Charles had arrived late. Elizabeth was dawdling. It was getting close to seven o'clock! Was fate fighting against her? She cast an accusing glance skyward. Nothing but a few twinkling stars stared back. She was standing outside on the doorstep with Charles. The door to the house was open and waiting for Elizabeth.

"I'm sorry, Charles," Constance shook her head. "If he arrives . . ."

Charles glanced at his watch. "It's a long way for him to come. Maybe he won't. Maybe he'll be late?"

"Maybe *who* will be late?" Elizabeth asked, now standing at the end of the hall in her finest evening gown, a shimmering blue dress.

Charles grinned and held out his hand to her. She crossed the distance and took his hand. "Hmmm?" Elizabeth insisted. "Who will be late?"

"You, you silly girl," Constance said. "Now hurry off before you miss the dance!"

"It doesn't start for half an hour. We'll be early."

"Better early than late," Constance chided, closing the door behind them. She stayed on the doorstep to watch them go.

Charles was already leading Elizabeth down the walkway to his car. "You look stunning—more than ever like the princess you are," he whispered in her ear.

"Thank you," she said through a smile. "And I suppose that would make you my prince?"

"You have to ask? Don't I look the part?" he puffed out his chest with mock indignation.

"No, I—"

"Relax, I'm pulling your leg," he laughed. They reached the car and climbed in. James shut the door behind them. "You're so easy to tease," Charles said.

She smiled.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Abruptly Charles looked away and called out, "James, hurry up would you?"

"Of course, sir," James replied, only just climbing into the front seat and shutting the door behind him. Charles was frowning heavily as his chauffeur dawdled with his seatbelt and then with adjusting the rearview mirror.

"*Really*, James?" Charles asked, leaning forward to poke his head through the open privacy window. "We are in a bit of a hurry, you know. . . ."

Elizabeth grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back. "Relax, Charles! We're not in a hurry. Why are you so mean to your driver? I'm sorry, James," Elizabeth said for him.

"Not at all, miss. Charles is very good to me."

"You're bloody right I am! Good enough to let you keep your job. Assuming you'd be so kind as to drive off right now, like you're supposed to. . . ."

"Yes, sir," James said, putting his foot to the accelerator and slowly pulling out into the street.

Charles gave a long-suffering sigh. He caught Elizabeth's disapproving gaze and answered it with a smile. "I'm sorry. I suppose I'm a bit rattled. We just had a flat on the way over here. I didn't want to be late."

"Oh, I see, but you weren't late. . . ."

"No, but I had hoped to take you out for a picnic before the dance. . . ."

Elizabeth clucked her tongue and tugged at her evening gown. "In that case, it's probably just as well you arrived later. I'm not exactly dressed for a picnic."

"I suppose. . . ." Charles sighed again. He watched through the front window as a red station wagon turned onto their street. Elizabeth followed his gaze. "I think that's Mr. Gee. . . ." she said.

"Mr. Gee?" Charles asked.

"Yes, he's our stationmaster in Wellington. I wonder what he's doing out here?"

Charles began to make out the features of the station wagon's driver, and then of the young man sitting beside him. That young man seemed somehow familiar. . . . Suddenly Charles had a bad feeling he knew exactly who it was. He quickly raised the tinted privacy window and turned to Elizabeth. She was still following that station wagon with her gaze, her brow furrowed in bemusement, so Charles reached out and turned her head toward

him, kissing her firmly on the lips.

He felt Elizabeth begin to resist, but he just held her tighter, kissing her until the car was past. Finally he let her go, and Elizabeth gave him a befuddled look.

“What was *that* about?”

Charles grinned. “Sorry, I just couldn't resist you any longer.”

Elizabeth raised one eyebrow slightly above the other and a smile began tugging at the corners of her mouth. “You are a strange man sometimes, Charles.”

Charles laughed. “In only the very best of ways, I hope.”

* * *

Nicholas watched a familiar-looking black Mercedes sedan roll down the street toward them. He followed the car with his gaze as it passed them. The windows were darkly tinted and shining with reflected street light, making it impossible to see in, but he felt sure that car was the same one Charles's chauffeur had driven when Charles had taken them all out to dinner a few months ago. Nicholas kept watching the car suspiciously until it turned a corner and drove out of sight.

“Which house are we stopping at?” Mr. Gee asked.

It *couldn't* have been Charles. What would he be doing driving down Elizabeth's street? A horrible sinking feeling crept into his gut, leaving his palms sweating. He had a bad feeling he knew the answer.

“Hey, Nick?”

“Yeah, sorry,” Nicholas said, shaking his head, pointing down the street. “The big white L-shaped house on the corner, at the end of 1st Avenue – with the wooden shutters and a gray roof.”

Mr. Gee rolled up in front of the house and Nicholas hopped out. His bad feeling only grew worse as he walked up to Elizabeth's doorstep. The front door was gilded in shadows. He knocked twice on the door. After a full minute of waiting, he raised his fist to knock again. Just then a light snapped on above the doorstep, and the door swung open.

“Nicholas?” Constance's face was painted in shock. “What are you doing here?”

Nicholas felt his heart freeze in his chest and he struggled to speak through a suddenly dry mouth. *She should know why I'm here. . . .* “I'm here to take Elizabeth to her Matric Farewell. . . .” he said. Feeling stupid and sick with a dawning realization that something was wrong, he produced Elizabeth's invitation from his

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

jacket pocket and handed it to her mother.

Constance scanned the invitation and then looked up with a frown. "I'm sorry, Nicholas; she just left with Charles. Didn't she tell you she was planning to go with him?"

Nicholas was silent for a long, dreadful moment. Suddenly he remembered the black Mercedes they'd passed on the way to Elizabeth's house, and he understood that it really had been Charles's car, but he still couldn't believe it. Deep down he'd known something like this was going to happen, but he just hadn't believed Elizabeth capable of breaking off her invitation to him without a word of explanation or an apology.

"Didn't you pass on my message to her?" he asked.

"Your message? What mess—oh, your phone call. Of course, Nicholas, I passed it on, but she had already decided to go with Charles. Surely she must have found a way to tell you that?"

He shook his head slowly as if he still didn't understand.

"But what about my letters?"

"Letters? What letters?"

"I sent her a letter seven weeks ago and another after I called, just two weeks ago. Didn't they arrive?"

"I don't recall any letters . . . but perhaps she received them without telling me?"

"Ah, yes . . . possibly, I suppose," Nicholas said, nodding. He was numb, distracted, and unable to focus properly on her words.

"How ever did you manage to come all this way?"

"Ah, I, uh . . ."

"Shame, you poor boy."

Nicholas grinned with false humor. "It wasn't easy, Mrs. Smythe. I can assure you of that. It was one of the toughest things I've done to date in my life."

"I'm sure it wasn't easy. . . . would you like to come in for a cup of tea, at least? Rest for a while?"

"No, no, I don't want to trouble you, and I really have to go."

"Oh, all right, then. You have a nice evening, Nicholas. I'm sorry about Elizabeth. She should have better manners than that. A mother tries her best to instill such values, but one doesn't always succeed, I suppose."

"Yes, I suppose so, but it doesn't seem like her to do it this way. . . ." Nicholas said. "Well . . . it was nice seeing you again."

"Of course and a pleasure to see you as well! Send your parents my regards."

"I will."

Nicholas walked woodenly back down the pathway to Mr. Gee's waiting car, his heart was pounding in his chest, his head fuzzy with confusion, and his throat felt cut with sorrow. *Well, at least I have my answer now*, Nicholas thought. *Clearly I cared a lot more about Elizabeth than she did about me.*

He opened the door and climbed into Mr. Gee's car just as he heard the door to the Smythe's home click shut.

"So, Nicko, what's the word? She just about ready?"

"Ah . . ." Nicholas's eyes were unfocused, and he was staring numbly out the window.

"What's the matter?"

"She, uh . . . went with someone else."

"She went with someone *else*?" Mr. Gee parroted his words incredulously. The words echoed inside his head, and he argued silently with them. It couldn't be true. "I don't understand it Nick . . . this doesn't sound like the girl I met."

Nicholas let out a short bitter laugh and grinned once more. "Neither do I, Mr. Gee. Neither do I . . . I really misjudged her!"

"But who else would she go with?"

"Charles."

"That dandy? I thought he was just a friend! This doesn't make any sense at all! She seemed so crazy about you the last time I saw her!"

Nicholas turned to him with a shrug. "*Seemed.*" He shook his head. "Appearances can be deceiving, I guess. Let's just go."

"Hold on a minute, you can't come all this way for nothing!"

Nicholas shook his head. "I didn't Mr. Gee. I finally found out how she feels about me. I don't like it, but I have to accept it."

Mr. Gee fell silent. He stared sullenly out into the night, the wheels turning in his head. After a long moment, Mr. Gee sighed and pulled out into the street. He remembered how Elizabeth had tried to catch up with Nicholas at Worcester only a few months ago to tell him how she felt about him, and now here she was going to her Matric Farewell with someone else. Maybe true love didn't exist after all. Maybe it was all just a lot of wishful thinking—a lot of nonsense.

"I could take you to the dance," he suggested. "You could talk to her. Maybe there's another explanation?"

Nicholas shook his head "No Mr. Gee, that's superfluous now."

"Why not? You can't let Charles get away with this! Find him at

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

the dance, and as jy 'n kans kry, donner hom goed!" *If you get the chance, thump him real good!*

Nicholas gave a bitter laugh. "No, Mr. Gee – tempting, but I'm on a tight schedule, so I'd better just go. She's made her choice; I'm not going to argue with it or cause a scene."

Mr. Gee drove off silently, his expression thoughtful. "What's going to happen to you when you get back to Pretoria?"

"Oh, If they catch me, they'll probably put me in a little cell and have me run drills until I die." He laughed again. "I feel like such a fool. I should've been more careful before I came."

Mr. Gee sighed. "Love is never careful Nick; that's why it hurts so much. If you don't feel like you're falling and flying at the same time, then it's not really love."

"Who said that?"

Mr. Gee smiled wanly. "I did. Listen, Nicko, what's just happened to you isn't nice, but don't let it jade you. You've a long road ahead. Don't let one bad experience make you cold."

"Thanks, but I'm beginning to think I'm better off alone."

Mr. Gee sighed. "That's what *I* thought, and look at me now." He turned to Nicholas with his bushy silver eyebrows raised. "I got my wish Nick, and let me assure you – I'm sorry I did."

* * *

Elizabeth was slow-dancing with Charles, feeling warm and happy in his arms. She hadn't originally planned to go to the dance with him, but now she was glad that she had.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, whispering in his ear.

"Oh, I'm just thinking about life's little ironies."

"Such as?"

"Sometimes one never really realizes how close we come to disaster, and it's left to others to see all those narrow escapes."

Elizabeth withdrew to look Charles in the eyes. Her brow was furrowed in bemusement. "What are you talking about?"

He shook his head and smiled. "No, never mind, Princess, it's nothing. Maybe I'll tell you some day."

"Some day?" she asked, frowning.

He grinned and lifted a hand to cup her cheek. "You can't know everything I'm thinking, my dear. You women aren't telepathic – and for good reason!"

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow at that. "Oh? How so?"

"If you knew how us men think, you'd rule the world."

Elizabeth cracked a smile at that. "And what makes you think

we don't already Charles?"

Thinking back to Constance – to her plotting and scheming – her adeptness at manipulating the world around her, Charles began nodding. "You make a good point Princess."

Then they went back to shuffling silently around the dance floor, in each other's arms, among all the other young couples. Elizabeth's thoughts turned briefly elsewhere. *This could have been you here with me in your arms tonight, Nicholas, she thought with a touch of bitter anger. For so long I wanted that – I dreamed about us ... but you showed me how little you really care, and now I'm glad ... I'm better off being here with Charles.*

And with that, she forced her thoughts elsewhere. She didn't want to ruin her evening by getting angry with Nicholas all over again. She'd given him her invitation, her phone number, and he already had her address. He'd promised to write to her, but he never did. Apparently that poem and all his pretty words, his declaration of love had just been a waste of paper.

She made up her mind. As soon as I get home, I'm going to burn it. I never want to relive our "Summer Love" - ever again! It's over. You never really loved me ... But Charles does!

Elizabeth smiled bitterly, her head resting against Charles' chest. She let herself become lost in the music and the slow, twirling dance. Charles was different. He'd never let her down.

Chapter 10

Nicholas reached the train station in time to catch the last train from Wellington to Cape Town. Mr. Gee told him that he was in luck. Had he gone to the dance he would have had to wait until morning for the next train. Maybe it was for the best. When the 8:20 train arrived, Nicholas thanked Mr. Gee for everything he'd done, gave him a warm hug and said goodbye. Mr. Gee looked morose. Nicholas felt sure he looked worse!

Now, as he sat slumped sleepily against the window on the train, he wondered what was waiting for him back in Valhalla. Maybe Shorty would be able to help him sneak by unnoticed. He would follow the plan. Fly back with Mighty at the first opportunity tomorrow morning, get a ride back with him from AFB Waterkloof to Valhalla, and, if need be, turn himself in at the very place he'd disappeared. Maybe he could make up a story about having gone for a walk in the woods and getting lost . . . for a whole day . . . No, that wouldn't work. He'd scored very well in his survival training. He'd have to admit he went AWOL for a girl and then endure the eternal ribbing he'd get from his fellow recruits. At least he'd only have a month to endure it. Basic training was almost over now. They were all already beginning to specialize: Grant had his vicious guard dog; the Becketts were training to be helicopter door gunners; and Nicholas was training to be a radar operator.

Maybe that was what he should focus on now: a career in the military. He wouldn't have to worry about girls, and he was already used to military life thanks to boarding school. It would be a nice easy out from the uncertainties of his future. He'd have friends, purpose, and money, everything he needed. . . .

The train arrived back near AFB Ysterplaat just after 9:00 pm. Nicholas walked in the dark all the way from the station back to air base, just like before, but this time at least the air was cool and refreshing. He had plenty of time to think along the way; although, being alone with his thoughts right now wasn't proving to be a very happy experience. He needed company. The air force

base was lit up brilliantly, even from a distance. He approached the gates in his military uniform.

At the gate Nicholas stopped and stood at attention while one of the guards walked over to find out who he was. The guard frowned at him, his eyes scanning Nicholas's uniform for any sign of rank. Finding none, the guard's eyes returned to Nicholas's face with a heavy frown. "What are you doing off base at this hour, private?"

Nicholas frowned and pointed to the logbook. "My name's in there. I'm with Captain Graves. I'm supposed to find him at the officer's club soon," he said, tapping his watch.

The guard held Nicholas's gaze for a long moment, and then looked through the logbook. "Aah, yes, okay, I see an entry here for that. "You are Nicholas Strauss?"

"Yes, that's me," Nicholas replied.

"All right then, proceed private Strauss. The officers club is there, on the left, with all the cars parked in front of it," he said, pointing, and then turned to open the gates. Nicholas breathed a sigh of relief. At least he was officially back on air force soil, albeit as far away from Valhalla as one could get in South Africa. But, now everything else would be easier. He'd just have to find Mighty and wait—all of tonight, all of tomorrow, and all of Saturday night—and then fly back with him early on Sunday morning. With luck he'd be back at Valhalla ready to face the music before noon on Sunday. If he was to be caught out, he'd only have been AWOL for half a day. He hoped that would make his sentence lighter.

Nicholas came to the door of the officers club. From the sounds of laughter inside, a lot of men were enjoying their Friday night. The officers club was behind the secure gates of an air force base—men only, drinks were cheap, dart boards, dominoes, cards and snooker tables were evident everywhere. Nicholas spotted Mighty standing with a beer mug, chatting and laughing, playing darts. He looked up, his eyes going wide with surprise, and then he nodded and said, "Hey Beaver, come over here—what the heck are you doing back so early?" He asked, taking a sip from his beer mug.

"I don't really want to talk about it too much, Mighty, but I just found out that Elizabeth chose, and as you've guessed by now, it wasn't me. She went off to the dance with Charles and I'm left feeling like the world's first prize idiot," Nicholas sighed.

Mighty slapped him on the back and took another swig of beer.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Suddenly looking wise, he paused for effect, then said, "Nicholas, take a look around you. Almost none of these men are married, or even going out with girls tonight. I'll guarantee that everyone here, myself included, has had his heart broken by a girl—many of us several times! Girls want something guys like us can't give them right now. By the time the 1,200 recruits in Valhalla have been in the air force for 6 months, barely 100 of them will still have serious girlfriends. By the time their first year is over, that number will be close to zero. What you tried to do with Elizabeth was noble and courageous, but idealistic—just not realistic at all. We had to support you, even though we knew that.

"Beaver, old chap, it's time you accept your fate and join us men in doing our duty for our country. Out there, beyond those guard towers and electric fences, is a world that's not ours anymore. All of that security is designed to keep them out of our lives, not to keep us in here as captives. Our top brass knows we need no distractions, that we need to focus on defending our country's interests. C'mon let me buy you a beer—you look bloody awful!" Mighty said, interrupting his speech and taking Nicholas over to the bar counter to order him a beer. They just stood there, amongst all the sounds of laughing, drinking men, Nicholas subdued, and Mighty doing most of the talking—beer mugs in hand.

* * *

Constance sat on the back porch listening to the birds chirping a silly tune as they flitted through the fresh morning air. She watched, sipping her tea, as the birds flew low over the swimming pool, skimming the surface to bathe themselves in the water. She'd been up since 4:30, had watched the sunrise with heavily-lidded eyes. She wanted to sleep, but she dared not let herself. The nightmares had become incessant by now; there was no cure for them but to stay awake. Lawrence would crawl up out of his grave at least once every night to taunt her, and worst of all, his dire predictions couldn't all be false. She was in a very precarious situation with Edwin's boss, William Gaines, the chairman of Western Leathers International. It wasn't that she suspected he would eventually tell Edwin what he knew about her part in Lawrence's death - she *knew* he would. Sooner or later her usefulness to the chairman would wane, and then what reason would he have to keep quiet?

Now, already, she feared she was coming to the end of her

usefulness to him. He'd asked her to make sure her husband voted for his proposal at the board meeting tomorrow, and Edwin was still waffling over his vote like a spineless fool. . . . Constance began biting her already stubby nails. But she knew what effect her words could have on her husband. He would vote as she wanted him to—as the chairman wanted him to. The trouble was what would be next? There were only two possible outcomes. She would either be endlessly enslaved to the chairman's every whim, or she would someday refuse to do what he asked, and then he would tell Edwin the truth about why his best friend committed suicide.

She needed to get away. She needed to get her family away. *It wouldn't hurt to get out of this miserable home, too*, she thought, glancing around nervously. Somehow, Lawrence had managed to imbue the very walls of his old home with his presence. Constance glanced around nervously, as if expecting to find him hiding behind a bush in the backyard, watching as she sipped her tea out on the porch.

He'd ruined it for her. Everything had been perfect, and then the bloody fool had decided to kill himself in *her* home—his old home—and he'd ruined everything. Ever since then, she'd felt watched. And though she never saw him in the light of day, she couldn't stop seeing him in her nightmares. Maybe there were such things as ghosts. . . . Maybe his still lingered here and that was why he haunted her.

Suddenly, a stiff breeze blew in, and Constance shivered.

It isn't fair! I didn't steal your job or your home, Lawrence! she thought angrily. *You lost them through your own foolishness. Just as you lost your wife.*

There was no reply. She felt a cold, watchful gaze upon her.

"Lawrence?" she called out, her voice barely a whisper. "You are not welcome here." A tremor had entered her voice. She steadied it and tried to sound more commanding. "Go away! I'm not responsible for your misfortunes. Do you hear me?"

Another gust of wind blew, stronger than before, and Constance squinted her eyes against the gale. She resisted the urge to scream in terror, and instead stood as calmly and deliberately as she could. "Fine," she said, her voice trembling again. "You can stay, but I'm leaving."

It was a miserable home anyway, and Wellington was a miserable little town—a small place for small-minded people.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Edwin had already reached the top of his ladder. He'd need a new one if he were ever to climb any higher. Of course, he was more than content to stay where he was. He always had been.

Constance sighed as she opened the sliding glass doors and walked inside. "It looks like I'll have to do it all for you again."

"Do what all for whom?"

Constance jumped and spun toward the voice, startled to be addressed by someone she hadn't known was there. Edwin emerged from the hallway in his pajamas, covering a yawn with one hand. "What are you doing up so early?" she asked.

"I noticed you'd left and went to see if you were okay," he said, crossing the living room to greet her.

"Of course I'm okay!"

He stopped and smiled sympathetically. "Are you sure?"

She scowled at his tone. "I'm not a child, Edwin. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite," she said, turning away from him to deposit her empty tea cup in the kitchen sink.

* * *

Edwin watched her go, shaking his head, his sympathy still radiating outward. She wasn't fine. He knew that better than anyone, but he was at a loss for what he could do about it. She was too proud to confide any weakness in him. Far too strong to admit to it and ask for help. The most he could do was stand by and watch her suffer silently with whatever was troubling her. He suspected the nightmares she'd been having were back again. He could hardly blame her after all that had happened, and all that she had witnessed. To watch someone kill himself right in front of her, in her bedroom . . . He couldn't imagine how hard that must have been, how hard it must *be* still.

He'd even gone so far as to call a psychiatrist in Cape Town and make an appointment for her. He'd taken her there on the pretense of going to lunch together, but when she'd realized the truth, she'd demanded that he take her home at once. After that, she hadn't talked to him for the better part of a week. He wouldn't dare try something like that again.

So now what? he thought. He felt helpless. She needed help.

Constance emerged from the kitchen to find him still standing there, in exactly the same place. She frowned and fixed him with a scathing look. "I told you it's nothing. Why are you still standing there looking worried? I'm fine, Edwin. Really! If you want to be

useful, help me make breakfast.”

“Okay,” he said quietly, following her into the kitchen.

* * *

Nicholas listened to the roar of the fighter's engine. With the glass of the bubble-shaped cockpit all around him, he had a stunning view. High wisps of cirrus clouds were long, ghostly ribbons against an otherwise dark sky. A few stars still winked through the lightening blue dome overhead, and the moon was a pale crescent sinking ever nearer to the horizon. Nicholas felt sure he'd never forget this flight as long as he lived. On the flight to Cape Town it had been daylight and he was still filled with hope. The elation he'd felt at being a part of Mighty's aerial display over Wellington—over Elizabeth's home—had made him feel like nothing could go wrong. Nothing could have been further from reality. Now this feeling of freedom, of soaring through space . . . it was enough to briefly lift his spirits, heavy as they were. Maybe Mighty was right. Maybe he should apply to become a fighter pilot.

“This is amazing.” Nicholas quipped over the intercom.

“Glad you like it, Beaver.”

“I hope I don't get you into any trouble when we get back.”

“Don't worry, if you get caught, just tell the MP's you were hiding out at a friend's place in Pretoria, and they'll never find out. They won't investigate further – what would be the point?”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense – but thanks again.”

“Don't forget, you owe me one!” Mighty added.

Nicholas laughed. “Any time, day or night, Mighty.”

“I'll make sure it's as inconvenient as possible, don't worry.”

Nicholas laughed once more. After a moment, Mighty's voice sounded again in the helmet speakers, but now in a more serious tone: “Sorry things didn't work out for you, Nick.”

“Yeah, me too, Mighty” Nicholas said with a frown. “Me too . . .” he whispered softly to himself.

Wellington was now far away behind him, firmly in his past, and along with it—Lizzie.

Chapter 11

Nicholas made it back to the gates of Valhalla on Sunday morning, finding Shorty Becket on duty, as promised. As they had arranged, Shorty ushered him in without a fuss. Shorty asked the other guard on duty to cover for him for a minute, whilst he took Nicholas aside and asked for all the details, but he stopped asking when he realized that things hadn't gone well, and that Nicholas was in no mood to elaborate.

"Beaver, old chap," Shorty said, putting his hand on Nicholas's shoulder. "Let's face facts—it was a long shot to begin with. It's time to stop all your dreaming and join the rest of us with our humdrum, unromantic lives—welcome back to earth."

Nicholas managed a weak smile before replying in a subdued voice, "I guess you're right. It was a lovely dream while it lasted, but the dream's over, and I'm waking up now. . . ." Nicholas shook his head wearily. "See you at lunch."

They said goodbye, and Nicholas walked off.

* * *

Edwin had been careful to keep his thoughts to himself around his wife, but now as he drove to Cape Town, he allowed a worried frown to betray his concerns. He knew better than anyone that Constance could get very firm ideas about things without even having the slightest clue about them. What did she know about running companies? No, he would need to keep his own council in this matter. He had to. The takeover of Sharp Electronics had become a contentious issue with the board. They were neatly divided over it. The more sycophantic among them sided with the chairman in favor, while the more independently-minded members came out against. Edwin wasn't sure which way to vote. He was perfectly conflicted, and it was starting to look like his vote could make all the difference. Due to the potential cause for conflict, the vote would be secret – so that there could be no peer pressure, no hard feelings, but Edwin felt pressured all the same.

Nearly an hour later, Edwin walked into the board room and took his seat. The other board members arrived one after another

and in quick succession. Edwin found himself watching each man as he came in. He tried to remember each one's leanings on the takeover, and whether they had come out for or against in prior meetings.

The chairman entered the board room last of all. He walked to the head of the table and sat down, making no apologies for his lateness. The first and most important item on the agenda was the vote, as Edwin had already known it would be. He pressed his lips into a determined line. Better to get it over with he supposed. When the man sitting directly to his right handed him his ballot, Edwin placed it before him and took his pen out of his briefcase in readiness. As soon as everyone had their ballots, the chairman spoke.

"Consider your votes carefully, gentlemen," the chairman said, his eyes on Edwin. "You'll be shaping the future of this company with the stroke of your pen. You have ten minutes to consider your decision."

Each man looked at the paper before him with a thoughtful frown. Edwin picked up a pen in a shaking hand, then cupped his hands around the ballot sheet as he considered his choice. The takeover was a risky endeavor for their company. It could either be very good for Western Leathers or very bad, but apart from that, there were also the politics of the situation to consider. He'd already made whatever enemies he was bound to by voicing his objections to the proposal in his initial report. Given that, he should vote against it. Otherwise, if it ever came out which way he'd voted, the ones who'd been pro takeover would wonder why he'd battled them all along the way, and the one's who'd been against would wonder why he'd betrayed them at the last minute. No one would trust him after that.

But no one had to know which way he voted now. That was the whole point of the secret ballot, wasn't it? He had to follow his instincts. He would vote against the proposal. That choice would be consistent with his conclusions and reasoning so far, and he wouldn't make any new enemies on the board if someone found out how he'd voted.

There was just one problem. Constance had made her opinions on the topic well-known. He'd lose some measure of her respect if he didn't follow her advice now. Edwin chewed his lower lip worriedly. He could lie to his wife. He could tell her that he'd voted for the takeover when he'd really voted against. . . . but

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

she'd know. Somehow, she always knew when he was lying. It was almost as though she could read his mind.

On the other hand, he could vote for the proposal, and not lose his wife's esteem. It wouldn't make much of a difference anyway. What were the odds that it would come to a tie vote?

"Mr. Smythe?" It was the chairman's voice.

Edwin looked up from his ballot sheet. Everyone was looking at him. He felt a trickle of sweat make his scalp itch maddeningly. "Time's up. Are you finished with your ballot?"

"Ah . . ." Edwin hesitated, then smiled. He made a quick tick-mark on the ballot and then folded it over so that no one could see his choice. "I am now." He handed the ballot to the man next to him, and it was slowly passed around the table. Edwin watched carefully to make sure no one snuck a glance at his ballot to see how he'd voted, but no one did. Then his ballot reached the chairman, and Edwin watched Mr. Gaines carefully as his hand engulfed the little sheet of paper. He made a move to stuff it into the ballot box sitting in front of him, and Edwin almost sighed with relief—

But then he noticed something. There was little edge of white paper peeking out of the chairman's fist. He hadn't placed Edwin's ballot in the box! Edwin's heart began pounding double-time. He opened his mouth to object, but the words froze in his throat. He'd definitely make an enemy of the chairman if he pointed out the deception.

But why would he keep my ballot separate? Edwin wondered, his brow wrinkling with a frown.

Edwin watched Mr. Gaines pick up the box and shake it. Then he offered the board members a solemn look as he opened the top of the box and reached inside with the hand that was still holding Edwin's ballot. His fist emerged from the box, holding the ballot he'd had in his hand all along. He unfolded it carefully, and Edwin's heart froze in his chest as the chairman read his vote. Why would the chairman single him out? His mind was blank with shock.

William Gaines looked up from the ballot with a thin smile, his steely blue gaze finding Edwin and lingering there uncomfortably before he turned to address his secretary.

"Let the record show . . ."

* * *

Constance walked into the kitchen where Thandiwe was busily

washing the dishes from breakfast.

“When you’re finished with those, I have some washing I need you to do, Thandi,” Constance instructed.

“Yes, madam,” Thandiwe replied. “Oh, I almost forgot to ask! How did Miss Elizabeth enjoy her Matric Farewell on Friday night with Master Nicholas? I’ll get to ask her for all the details when she and Miss Hattie return from school, but I just can’t wait to know!” Thandiwe said with a grin.

Constance froze in horror. “How do you know that Nicholas was in Wellington on Friday, Thandi?” Constance inquired.

“I saw him at the station when I was waiting for my train to Cape Town, madam,” Thandiwe said. “We chatted for a while.”

“Oh my goodness. . . .” The words rushed out of her mouth before she could stop them.

“What is it, madam? Is there a problem? Can I help?” Thandiwe asked, looking up from a pan she was busy drying.

“I just remembered I have an important meeting this afternoon. Hurry up, Thandi, and I’ll drive you to the station. You can have the afternoon off,” Constance replied.

“Oh, okay, Madam,” Thandiwe replied. “I’m almost done. Shall I do the washing on Thursday, then?”

But Constance had already left the kitchen without a reply, and Thandiwe was left wondering what type of meeting Constance could have which would give her the afternoon off. She wasn’t aware that Constance even had meetings. But rather than worry herself with details that didn’t matter and weren’t any of her business, she finished washing the last few dishes and untied her apron.

“Madam?” she called out as she was leaving the kitchen. “Where—”

“I’m over here!” Constance called back from the front door. “Come quickly.” Thandiwe stood at the end of the hallway, blinking in confusion. Constance was already halfway out the door. *She must have a very urgent meeting. Well, she thought, at least it was a short day.*

Chapter 12

“One vote in favor,” the chairman said.

Edwin shifted uncomfortably in his chair. This was no secret ballot vote, at least not for him. For whatever reason the chairman had kept Edwin's vote aside and read it. *What was that about?* Edwin wondered. Given that the proposal had been made by the Chairman, Edwin was now very glad he'd taken his wife's advice at the last second by voting in favor.

The chairman continued pulling ballots out of the box and reading them. Edwin kept a mental tally. So far there were four in favor and four against. There were only two left to be read. The chairman pulled them out simultaneously and read them.

“One more vote in favor. . . . One more against.” The chairman looked up from reading and turned to his secretary. “Mrs. Adames, would you read the final count for us, please?”

She cleared her throat and said. “Five in favor, five against.”

Edwin's eyes widened in realization and horror. He'd voted in favor of the takeover simply to keep his wife happy, not because he actually believed in the proposal. He'd justified his choice to himself by thinking that it would never come down to a difference of only one vote anyway. Apparently, he'd been wrong about that.

“Well, gentlemen, it seems we have a tie vote. As your chairman, I have the power and responsibility to cast the deciding vote. Since it was my proposal in the first place, I'm sure you all know which way I'm going to vote.” He turned to the secretary. “Let the record show one more vote in favor.”

The room seemed to take a collective sigh. Half of the board members sat back with worried frowns while the other half worked to hide their triumphant smiles. Edwin joined those frowning. He should have voted with his conscience.

After the board meeting, just as Edwin was getting ready to leave, the chairman came up to him and slapped him on the back. “Edwin, how are you?”

“I'm fine, thanks,” Edwin said.

“Good, good,” the chairman said, grinning. “Are you going to

join us for a round of golf?"

Edwin smiled. "Of course."

"Excellent. Has your game improved since we last played?"

Edwin sighed. "I'm afraid I haven't been practicing much."

"Ah, that's a shame, but I admire your dedication to your career. You're a very conscientious, intelligent man, Edwin."

"Thank you, sir, though I'm not sure I deserve such high praise," Edwin said as he left the board room.

The chairman followed him out. "Nonsense! You're one of our best, Eddie boy, and don't you forget it. I feel like you're someone I can rely upon."

"Thank you, sir."

They were walking outside to their cars when Edwin thought to bring up his concerns, but the chairman spoke first. "I have a confession to make, Edwin."

"Oh?" Edwin asked, squinting against the blinding brightness of the midday sun.

"Yes, I snuck a peak at your ballot."

Edwin allowed himself to grin. "I did notice that."

"Did you? I thought I was quite discreet."

"Oh, you were," Edwin assured him. "I doubt if anyone else was paying as much attention as I was."

"Well, I'm sure they'd have said something if they had seen."

"Perhaps . . ."

They stopped by the trunk of Edwin's car and the chairman asked, "You want to know why I looked at your ballot?"

Edwin frowned. "I do wonder why you'd single me out?"

"It's simple, Eddie boy. I wanted to see what kind of man you are. Are you the sort to always play it safe, never daring to be great, or the sort of man I can count on to lead a charge."

"And what did my vote tell you?"

"That you don't take your responsibility lightly—that much was obvious from the thorough analysis you gave in your report—but that you're a bit of a daredevil, like me."

Edwin grinned. "I suppose I am."

"That's good. We need that, Eddie. We need people who aren't afraid to take a risk. You saw how the board was today—deadlocked, overrun by cowardice. They're scared to make any decision. That's why I'm so glad to have found you, Eddie. Someone who can lead those cowardly contrarians. From here on, you're going to be my right hand man, Eddie boy. You know that

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

they think they have you on their side, right?"

Edwin's eyebrows lifted and he cocked his head. "I wasn't aware that there were sides. . . ."

Mr. Gaines laughed. "Of course there are, and they think they have you! Little do those sorry sheep know, a jackal has slipped into their midst. You're going to eat the lot of them for breakfast!" he said, laughing more raucously now.

"I'm not sure I possess the influence you credit me with."

Mr. Gaines smiled. "Just keep doing what you're doing, Eddie boy, and watch them play follow the leader." The chairman winked. "I'll see you on the course."

Edwin nodded. "See you soon." He watched with a frown as the chairman walked with a bouncing stride to his silver convertible and climbed in. Edwin considered once more what a good thing it was that he'd decided to vote as he had. Now, as a result, he'd made a friend of the chairman. He couldn't imagine how that would be bad.

* * *

"Where's Thandi?" Elizabeth asked as she filled her glass with cold water from the jug in the fridge.

"Thandi's not coming back to us, Elizabeth. She asked me to drive her to the station this morning, saying she had a family emergency, but once we got there, she told me that regrettably she would not be able to work for us any longer."

Elizabeth stopped, looking confused. "What? But why?"

Constance shook her head. "She didn't say, dear. Perhaps something to do with that family emergency of hers."

"But Thandi's been with us for so long now! Besides, I thought she needed this job! She has a family to support. She always seemed so grateful for the work. . . ."

"Elizabeth, you don't have to know why. It's her life."

"But she didn't even wait to say goodbye to us!"

"Oh yes, she did ask me to say goodbye to you for her. I almost forgot," Constance said.

"Well, that's just terrible! What are we going to do now?" Elizabeth asked, having forgotten her water on the counter.

"We'll all just have to pitch in from now on, Elizabeth. Maybe we'll find another maid, but until then, it's about time you and Hattie started learning how to do more of the housework." With that her mother turned and left the kitchen.

Elizabeth watched with a furrowed brow as her mother left,

thinking, *Thandi's gone?* Whatever had caused Thandi to leave her job, Elizabeth hoped she'd be okay. *This has been a strange week, she thought. First she'd had to deal with Nicholas disappearing out of her life forever, and now Thandi—what next?* Elizabeth walked off to her room, in shock. Closing the door, she placed her book bag next to the desk, opened a drawer and looked through its contents until she found it—an envelope with a letter inside. She knew what she had to do. She went to sit on her bed, taking the letter out, she resolved to read it one last time . . . before destroying it.

Summer love . . .

As Elizabeth read the poem, tears welled up in her eyes. She sat there, remembering and thinking to herself, why couldn't life be as simple and sweet as their summer love had been? Coming to the end of the poem, she paused to wipe away a tear that had spilled over onto her cheek, and continued to read.

Elizabeth ... I love you! I always have, and I always will. Whatever happens, please remember that. I can't be there for you right now, but I will be back. I promise I will! Somehow, sometime, some way, somewhere . . . I'll be back. Life is short, Elizabeth, and true love is hard to find—but we found it! So please, Lizzie, hold me close in your heart, even while I'm so very far away and all seems so very hopeless.

With all my love, Nicholas.

Elizabeth lay down now, grasping the open letter with both hands, holding it over her heart, and then the tears came. Great big drops that spilled out of the corners of her eyes, wetting her cheeks before disappearing onto her pillow.

I don't think I can do this anymore Nicholas—I have to let you go now. Thank you for three wonderful summers. Thank you for letting me share a wonderful dream with you. I'll never forget you . . . I love you too, Nicholas, and I forgive you. Please forgive me for giving up, for not believing. Please God, forgive me, and bless Nicholas. Let him always believe in true love, let him be happy - but let him never forget me, or think badly of me and the love we've shared. And thank you too, God, for that love. Amen.

Life goes on



Denise ... the beautiful, fun "Girl next door" - whose mom adored Nicholas.

Chapter 13

Three months later Elizabeth was assembled with her parents and Charles in the front row of a temporary auditorium which had been set up outside the school. Elizabeth was dressed in a blue gown and cap. It was graduation day. Elizabeth could hardly contain herself. School was finally over. It was a milestone, the end of an era. She wasn't sure what the road ahead would be like, but she knew that whatever it was like, from here on, her life would change dramatically. Charles shot her a broad smile.

"So, how does it feel?" he asked.

"Wonderful."

"Nervous?"

"Should I be?"

Charles smiled and shook his head. "It's going so much less boring at UCT with you there."

She matched his smile and reached for his hand. "I still can't believe they accepted me."

"I'm not at all surprised. Your grades are stellar."

Constance took that moment to say something, proving she'd been listening to the whole conversation. "Well, it doesn't hurt to have a good word from one's mother—who also happened to study medicine."

Charles frowned. "But didn't you study in Port Elizabeth?"

Constance shot him a look. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, surely you couldn't have known anyone in UCT to have given your daughter a leg up. We should acknowledge her achievement for what it is, not diminish it by saying you put in a good word for her." Charles replied.

Constance snorted and shook her head. "I suppose I can't expect a *business* student to understand, but anyone in the medical field is well aware that it runs in the blood. To say that I was once a nurse is the same as saying that Elizabeth could be, too."

Charles frowned. "I'm sure she'll make an excellent nurse."

Elizabeth was flicking glances between Charles and her

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

mother, looking uncomfortable.

Constance held Charles's gaze a moment longer. "You'd do well to mind your place, youth Atherton."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Smythe, I meant no disrespect."

"Of course, you didn't," Constance said, smiling once more.

Hattie piped up from beside her. "If it does run in the blood, maybe I should apply to medical school when I graduate."

Constance gave a dismissive laugh. "Don't be silly, Hattie!"

"What's silly about it?"

"You'd be overreaching my dear. Set your sights to a more appropriate level, so you're not disappointed."

Her words silenced Hattie, and everyone else in their group. Elizabeth felt uneasy, and glancing sideways, she couldn't help but see Hattie glaring at her with ill-concealed contempt.

When Elizabeth was finally called up to take group photos with her graduating class, she was relieved. Somehow her mother always knew exactly what to say to make everything as awkward as possible. Of course Hattie couldn't hope to apply to medical school, not with her grades, but did her mother have to say that? Let Hattie find out for herself.

When the graduation speeches finally ended and the ceremony was over, Charles asked Elizabeth's mother for permission to bring her home in an hour so they could go to the park for a while. Constance gave her permission without reservation. Now they were walking down along the river, beneath the cool, flickering shade of the trees. A little girl and boy ran screaming past them with their chubby black nanny in hot pursuit.

"Come back here, you little devils!"

"Can't catch me, can't catch me!" the little girl screamed back through a giggly grin.

Elizabeth watched them with a smile. "Adorable," she said.

Charles just shook his head. "Adorable monsters."

She raised an eyebrow at him and bumped his arm playfully. "Oh don't be a grouch."

"Well, you have to admit they're a little out of control. . . ." Charles's gaze followed the children as they raced in circles around a large tree trunk, while their maid sat off to one side, panting, her head between her knees.

Elizabeth laughed again at the scene. "No, they're perfect."

Charles spluttered. "Those little hellions – Perfect?"

"You sound envious," she looped her arm through his and

stared lovingly up at him. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a pair just like them?"

"Um, that's a trick question, isn't it? I'm not going to answer."

Elizabeth laughed again, but a frown broke through her smile and she began to regard Charles curiously. Was he being serious? Did he want children someday? She tugged Charles toward a bench beside the river. "Let's sit for a while."

They sat down together and Elizabeth leaned her head on Charles's shoulder. "I wish you could come with us to Siesta."

"I know, so do I," he said, "but it's Christmas and my mother hasn't seen me in over a year. I owe it to her to visit."

Elizabeth sighed. "Yes, you should visit her. She must miss you terribly."

"Not nearly as terribly as I'm going to miss you," Charles said, his clear brown eyes staring fixedly into her blue ones. She allowed herself to be lured in by those eyes until his cocksure grin met her slightly parted lips. They kissed as softly and gently as the wind as it rustled through the tree branches overhead and sent a rain of leaves cascading down around them. When the kiss was over, Charles grinned once more and picked a little yellow leaf out of Elizabeth's hair.

"Next year I'll join you and your family in Siesta."

"You promise?"

Charles took her hand in his and placed it over his chest. "Cross my heart."

* * *

Nicholas sat down on his bunk with a pen and paper and a pile of letters. It was time to answer his mail. First and most important to reply to was the letter from his long-time girlfriend and childhood friend, Denise. She'd written less than a month ago to ask if he would be coming to spend Christmas with her family in Sterkspruit as he'd promised. It seemed like a lifetime ago that he'd made her that promise, and yet it hadn't even been six months. He'd made Denise that promise before Denise had given him her permission to visit Elizabeth. The visit was meant to have brought some closure to his relationship with Elizabeth, but he hadn't gotten the closure he'd been looking for until a few months later, when he'd risked so much and travelled so far to take her to her matric farewell only to be turned away at the door.

Nicholas shook his head, realizing what a mistake it had been to visit her. It had only drawn out the inevitable and made it more

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

painful. No, now was the time to focus on more stable relationships. Denise was about as stable as they came. What they'd always had was special. No one could deny it. Everyone in Sterkspruit just expected that they'd end up together.

Nicholas nodded to himself. He could use a return to their easy, familiar relationship. Maybe that was it; maybe she was the one. Maybe he'd spent all this time looking in all the wrong places when really the one he'd been looking for had been with him from the start.

It was time to find out. Nicholas wrote his reply to her letter, confirming that he would in fact be coming to visit her and her family over Christmas. He didn't have enough leave to go see his family in Siesta, anyway. Five days wouldn't be enough to get all the way from Pretoria—where he was now stationed as a radar instructor on AFB Waterkloof—to the Wilderness and back, but Sterkspruit lay halfway between Pretoria and the Wilderness, so it would be much easier for him to drive out there for his holidays.

Nicholas unfolded Denise's letter and placed it on one knee while he wrote his reply to her. As Nicholas wrote, he found himself smiling. He was really looking forward to seeing her and her family again. That's how it should be—not this sick rollercoaster of emotional highs and lows that Elizabeth had led him on. Love shouldn't be so tumultuous. It should be constant, mutual, friendly, happy, and carefree.

As Nicholas finished his letter, he signed it:

See you soon, Denise!

Love,

Nicholas

“See you soon,” he repeated softly to himself.

Chapter 14

Constance sat outside her tent in Siesta luxuriating in the rising warmth of the sun as it shimmered across the rippling surface of the Touws river. This was the best part of the day. It was peaceful, the air was fresh and still but for a light morning breeze. It was tranquility, and for a wonder not even the birds were up and about to disturb it. Constance sipped her steaming cup of tea and smiled as the fragrant flavor of it washed what felt like years of built up tension from her body. She felt every tense muscle and taut nerve relax as she sighed with bliss. For once, no accusing voices cut into her thoughts. No ghosts haunted her dreams. Perhaps best of all, there were no nail-biting, heart-stopping fears that Edwin could, any day now, be told by the chairman what she'd done to Lawrence.

She had had her first good night's sleep in ages. It was a miracle. She'd forgotten what it felt like to wake up well-rested. It just went to show: one could have all the material comforts in the world, but a good night's sleep was priceless!

There came a rustle of tent fabric and Constance turned to see Edwin coming outside.

"Hello, dear," he said, covering a yawn.

"You're up early," she replied.

He shot her a familiar grin, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "I wouldn't want to waste the day by sleeping through it."

She flashed him a conspiratorial smile. "And what have you planned for today that you wouldn't want to miss?"

Edwin took a few steps forward and smiled out at the horizon where the sun was peeking above the horizon, a bright golden disc against the pale blue sky. "Everything."

Constance smiled as she sipped her tea. Apparently she wasn't the only one who was coming to life in this paradise. *A pity one can't always be on vacation, she thought.*

But maybe that wasn't it. Maybe they just needed to get away. She considered the matter carefully, her smile now replaced by a thoughtful frown. Could they afford to give everything up now? To

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

lose what she'd worked so hard to achieve for her family? *No*, she shook her head slightly, but if the opportunity arose, if they could find a way to trade what they had for something equally promising. . . .

She wouldn't even hesitate. Constance took another sip of her tea, possibilities swimming through her head.

Edwin turned from admiring the view to study her. "What are you so pensive about?" he asked.

She shook her head and smiled. "Oh, nothing, dear, just making plans for our vacation."

"Ah," Edwin nodded. "So was I. Well, I'd better go wake the girls. Shall we start breakfast?"

Constance nodded. "I'll be right in."

* * *

Elizabeth let loose a heartfelt sigh. It wasn't the same. She'd been in Siesta for more than a week now, and it was all just painful and depressing. Her mood sunk to a new low every day. Here, in Siesta, surrounded by all her memories with Nicholas, she felt like she was seeing him everywhere she looked. She'd passed Uncle Flippy at his usual spot, but this time Nicholas hadn't been with her, and Flippy hadn't teasingly referred to *Super-glue* as he had many times before. What had happened? Why had Nicholas just simply disappeared out of her life after promising her he'd never do that? She wondered as she sat alone and lonely on the old wooden bench in the Siestuary where they had spent so many happy hours together, talking the nights and mornings away. Here, more than anywhere else, she could picture him clearly, as though he were sitting there right beside her now. His shaggy, brown hair was stirring in the wind, and his boyish face was lit up with wonder and barely-contained excitement. His keen green eyes stared intently into hers with obvious adoration and such openness that she knew without a doubt he was a man she could trust. But he just disappeared. Charles had yet to look at her like that. With Charles she always felt like he'd walked straight off a movie set. His manner and appearance were always perfect, his words always so precise. He rarely let his guard down. It put her on guard as well, and as a result she'd still not fully fallen for him, even after more than a year of dating. Any other girl would have easily fallen deeply in love with his suave, well-mannered façade—add to that his good looks and obvious wealth—but despite all that, there was a nagging doubt in the

back of her mind. There was no question that she loved him, and that he loved her, but she still felt this nebulous fear that somehow, someday, he was going to hurt her, as thoughtlessly and callously as if he'd never really cared for her at all. It was a strange feeling. She felt as though she had yet to fully get to know Charles, and her imagination greedily filled all the blanks in his character with the worst possibilities.

Elizabeth frowned. She'd never worried like that with Nicholas. He'd always been honest with her, always sincere. What she saw was what she got, there was no façade, and it had been easy to fall for his lively, witty charm and his boyish, good looks. Elizabeth looked away from the empty space beside her as the apparition of Nicholas faded. She gazed out toward the horizon. The sun was shimmering cheerfully on the water; the tall grass growing along the riverbank was waving lightly in the fresh morning breeze. That breeze brought with it the cloying floral scents of nearby flowers, mingled with the loamy smell of the morning dew upon the grass. It was so peaceful, yet that only made it feel the lonelier.

Normally she looked forward to her family's yearly vacation in Siesta, knowing that she would see Nicholas again, but she'd already walked by his parents' campsite, seen Dr. Strauss, and briefly chatted with him. He'd noticed that she was alone in Siesta, and she'd confirmed as much. When she'd asked him how Nicholas was, he'd been somewhat guarded in his reply, noting only that after he'd had to deal with major trauma early on in his air force training; he was valiantly trying to pick up the pieces and get on with his life. She had noticed a rather pointed look in his eyes when he'd told her that, but then they'd ended their brief conversation on cordial terms, and she'd thought no more of it. Lizzie didn't press home the point by asking what that trauma was; it wasn't any of her business anymore. Nicholas had made that quite clear. He'd promised to write her, but never did. At the very least, he could have let her know that he wouldn't be able to take her to her matric farewell. Instead he'd just expected her to figure it out from his silence.[‡] Maybe her mother was right. That had just been his way of breaking up with her. Elizabeth sighed

[‡] **20-20 Hindsight:** Had Elizabeth inquired of Dr. Strauss what the "major trauma" was, Constance's complex schemes would have collapsed under their own weight.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

again. It wasn't fair. By now Nicholas had probably forgotten all about her, Maybe he was with another girl—Denise, perhaps? And here she was still remembering him like it was yesterday. It wasn't fair to Charles, either. She loved him, she knew that, but he still didn't have all of her heart, and she was starting to fear that he never would. *Maybe that's just how it is*, she thought. *A little piece of everyone sticks to you, and you to them, so you never truly forget and move on. All the people you've loved leave less for those to come.* She hoped that wasn't true. She didn't like to imagine Nicholas haunting her every step forever. And yet that was exactly what he was doing.

"Let me go, Nicholas," she whispered, the agony of heartbreak etched onto her face. "Please – let go of me!" But now the silent tears came, first filling her eyes, then spilling over onto her cheeks, running down like twin waterfalls. Lizzie just sat there, making no effort to wipe them away – no sobs, no sound; just a constant flow that somehow seemed to ease the relentless nagging pressure on her heart. They were honest tears, born out of a genuine agony of a love lost – of unrequited love ... a love that would now, forever, have to stay that way.

* * *

The beach was a crowded mess of colorful beach towels and umbrellas. Constance sat beneath their umbrella, reading Edwin's newspaper. Elizabeth and Hattie were swimming. Constance lowered the newspaper, suddenly bored with it. She looked around, and an uncharacteristic grin sprang to her lips as she noticed Edwin sprawled out and snoring on the beach beside her. He was lying half in and half out of the shade. He was going to wake up with a very odd tan. Just the thought of it had her in hysterics. She covered a giggle with one hand. Maybe it was something in the air? But she knew what it was. She'd been under such a terrible strain at home without even realizing it—the constant worry, the lack of sleep, the bad dreams, and the ever-present, haunting presence of Lawrence wherever she went . . . now that all of that was gone, she was bouncing back like a wound up spring. She had to find a way to live like this permanently. To get out from under all the stress that weighed her down.

Her gaze slid back to Edwin as she considered the matter. There was really only one way out. She knew Edwin wasn't going to like it, but he would warm up to the idea in time. They needed

to move, to leave Wellington and go someplace else. He would need to find a new job—one that was outside of Western Leathers International if she were to get them out from under the chairman's petty influence. Of course Edwin wouldn't find such a job for himself. As ever, she would have to do it all for him. She would have to be alert for any opportunities, and meanwhile work on Edwin to make him see the sense in her plans. That would take some doing, she knew. With a sigh, Constance returned to reading the news. The headlines were all of war and riots and political problems. South Africa was under siege from within and from without. The days of Apartheid were numbered. And after that? Well, it didn't take a genius to see that the heretofore repressed Black majority would rise up like a mob to take what they thought should have been theirs from the start. All the power, all the wealth, all of everything that had been denied to them for so long. . . . The backlash was coming, and when it did—maybe five, maybe ten years from now—Constance certainly didn't want to be around to see it. Ideally, any escape plan she came up with would take that eventual future into consideration. A future where Whites became repressed and Blacks ruled the country.

Constance nodded grimly to herself. *If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.* She scanned the long beach before her, crowded with pale white bodies. She tried to imagine that expanse overrun by Blacks, but the very thought of it gave her a shudder and she had to shake her head to clear away the image. No, she couldn't live in a South Africa like that. She sent her husband a sidelong glance. The real trouble wouldn't be getting him on board with her plans; eventually, as he always did, he would yield to whatever she wanted just to keep the peace in their marriage.

The real trouble would be getting Elizabeth and Charles to agree. Elizabeth was growing up, and she was increasingly asserting her independence. And while Charles wasn't stupid enough to get on her bad side, she still needed to make sure he was willing and able to go along with her plans. She didn't want to lose such a sterling catch for her daughter. There was no guarantee that she would ever be able to find such a perfect man for Elizabeth again. No, better that she include Charles in her plans and make sure that he would go along with them.

They'd always had that sort of easy confidence where she felt she could include him in her plans. This would be a bit more

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

disruptive to his life, but then again, South Africa wasn't really his home, and she had often caught him speaking disparagingly of the country whilst lauding the more modern, more stable first world. She had a feeling he was only here for Elizabeth's sake, so if she were to leave, so would he. The real trick would be in getting him to go with them when they did.

But where would they go? And when? Constance looked up just in time to see her daughters returning wet and dripping from their swim. "Hello, girls."

"Hello," Elizabeth and Hattie chorused back.

"Hungry yet?"

Hattie nodded and went over to their picnic basket to dig through it for one of the sandwiches they'd prepared. Elizabeth gave no reply; she simply laid out her towel on the sand and sat down beneath the shade of their umbrella. Constance watched her daughter staring pensively out at the horizon and she frowned at that. Elizabeth had been melancholy since they'd arrived. Knowing her foolish daughter, Constance supposed that she was probably missing Nicholas.

That would pass in time, but she would have to have a serious talk with Elizabeth about it. And while she was at it, a serious talk with Charles about his intentions couldn't hurt either. It was time to accelerate things a bit. After all, it would be much easier to deal with Charles and Elizabeth as a single entity. Constance smiled and chose that moment to offer her daughter some advice. "Don't waste your time dwelling on the past, Elizabeth." Her daughter turned to look up at her, and Constance went on, "You have a bright future, my girl. Don't run from it. That's the worst sort of cowardice."

Elizabeth nodded slowly, but said nothing.

Constance smiled to herself. Her plan was working perfectly. Whether Elizabeth knew it or not, her future was already upon her. Constance could see it taking shape before her very eyes; she merely had to reach out and grab it - then give it to her daughter. One day Elizabeth would thank her.

Chapter 15

It was the last day of Nicholas's leave. He felt like the time had gone by too quickly, but in some way he was also glad that it was over. Being with Denise again was awkward. He was still hung up on Elizabeth and it showed. He wanted to forget Elizabeth; he wanted to get over her; he wanted to fall for Denise as swiftly and completely as he'd fallen for Elizabeth, but it wasn't that easy.

Nicholas grimaced.

He was walking up to the cliff at the edge of the Hepburn family's property, the tall grass was scraping over his jeans; the air was fresh, but warm; the sun glowing weakly above the distant horizon, the grasshoppers buzzed, and a jackal yipped somewhere not too far away—the sounds of an African Summer. Nicholas let loose a long sigh. He reached the edge of the cliff and sat down overlooking the stream far below. He watched the sun sink closer to the mountains, and the clouds began to glow with bright threads of red and yellow.

Over the months he'd spent working for Denise's family earlier in the year, he'd often come up here to sit in the long grass and think, to clear his head and get some perspective.

Nicholas heard a rustle in the grass and turned to see Denise sitting down beside him. "Hello, handsome," she said.

He smiled. "Hello."

"What's on your mind?"

"Ahh . . ." He looked back to the horizon. "The future."

"Oh? Am I in it?" she regarded him with curious green eyes.

He turned to her with a frown. "Denise, you know I've been thinking about us, and . . ."

She waited for him to continue. When he didn't, she cocked her head and prompted, "And?"

Nicholas sighed. "It's just that, apart from me, you've never really had any serious boyfriends."

"Well . . ."

He shook his head. "And I feel like I still need time to put some parts of my past behind me."

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

A sad look crept into Denise's eyes, but she nodded slowly. "I noticed," she said.

Nicholas sighed. "Then you know what I'm about to say."

"Nicholas . . ."

He shook his head. "I'm not breaking up with you. I'm not even sure if what we have can be ever be broken up."

Denise smiled at that and reached out to stroke his cheek, and Nicholas sighed again. "But how can you know if I'm what you want, what you're really looking for, when you have so little experience? This next year, while I'm in the air force and you're in matric, we're not going to be able to see each other anyway. I think what would be best for both of us is if we dated other people in that time, though the way things are going, it's unlikely I will."

With those words her smile faded.

He went on, "If at the end of that time we're both sure that we should be together, then we should consider resuming our relationship, but this time make it more official. More exclusive."

Denise's eyebrows rose at that. "Go steady, you mean?"

He nodded. "It's time we start getting serious. It's time to start thinking about the future."

Denise hesitated. "Okay, Nicholas, I'll agree to that, for now."

"I hope that by the end of the coming year we'll find that our paths have crossed once more." Nicholas added, feeling awkward.

Denise sighed and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I hope so, too, Nicholas," she whispered. "I hope so, too."

Nicholas wrapped an arm around her shoulders and together they watched the sun sink behind the craggy mountains with a final crimson flare. The sky glowed a dark puce, and then all of a sudden the sun disappeared and it was like someone turned out the lights. Within a minute the sky was dark and sprinkled with a million stars; then the moon began to rise. It was a giant yellow orb, gazing down on them like some ancient cyclopean eye.

"Nicholas?" Denise asked.

"Mmmm?"

"What if our paths don't cross again? What if by the end of next year I'm happy with someone else?"

Now it was Nicholas's turn to hesitate. "Then it's better for you—for us—if you find out now rather than later, don't you think? I don't want to shut down all your other options before you've even had a chance to pursue them, like at least I have." He turned to look at her in the fading light. "Promise me

you'll try, that you'll use this opportunity. I don't want you to end up with me just because you never gave anyone else a chance."

Denise sighed. "Okay," she said softly. "I promise, I'll do that."

He kissed her on the cheek. "Good." Looking up at the star-dappled sky, he wondered if maybe he'd just made a big mistake. He risked losing her by telling her to date other guys, but she had to know—and so did he—what and who else was out there. Was this comfortable, easy relationship the best they'd ever find?

Nicholas frowned. After Elizabeth he felt sure that there was more, but was any of it real? Was any of it worth it? Those powerful, tumultuous feelings that had swept his world away and made him feel like he'd never truly lived until the moment he'd met her—were those feelings real, or just an illusion? Was that kind of love even love at all, or just sweet madness? But it was hard now—hard to go back, now that he'd had a taste of it. And here, now, so close to someone who was so special and had meant so much to him over the years, he felt more confused than ever. Denise should have been good enough for him. She should have been everything he'd ever needed. Yet somehow . . .

She wasn't.

* * *

Elizabeth's first day at the University of Cape Town was a confusing mess of orientation speeches, of going here and going there, picking up books and syllabuses, paying bills with her parents, and last but not least, settling into her residence at Tugwell Hall. The university's twin residence towers looked like a pair of toilet paper rolls standing on their ends—two identical cylinders, one for the women students and one for the men. The apartments were a decent size, and she didn't have to share hers with anyone else, since her parents had agreed to pay for a private room. She could imagine living and studying here, feeling at home. The space wasn't very large, with the little kitchen, bedroom, and study area all sharing the same open space. The bathroom at least had a door, and there was a window gazing out on the grassy green campus. When she walked up to that window for the first time and looked down from the 17th floor, she had to take a quick step back. She wasn't used to living so high up. It gave her a flutter in her stomach to see the cars in the parking lot far below, each of them barely the length of her thumb.

When her parents left and she was all alone in the apartment with her boxes of things, she realized for the first time that she'd

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

never really been alone before. Of course every now and then her parents had gone somewhere and Hattie would be gone, too, leaving her all alone in the house, but that was different; she'd known they were coming back. This time she knew she wouldn't see them or her sister again for many months. She glanced around, feeling suddenly like the walls were somehow closer, the apartment smaller than it was when she'd first laid eyes on it. The silence seemed to be shouting at her, although she could hear the muffled sounds of other girls in the hall moving into the apartments around hers.

That was another thing.

She hadn't seen anyone she knew yet. She did know a few girls who'd graduated with her and were also going to UCT, including Dilly, but she had yet to find them in the residence. They could be on any floor, in any of the apartments. Elizabeth frowned and began digging into a big box of clothes to unpack them before they became any more wrinkled than they already were. When she was done unpacking, she would go ask the receptionist at the front desk to help her find Dilly. It would be nice not to have to spend her first night away from home all by herself.

* * *

Basic training was long since over, and Nicholas was getting into a routine at AFB Waterkloof. He was now a corporal and a radar operator instructor there. Adrian (Mighty) Graves and Grant (Bakkies) Baker were stationed there as well, but the Becketts had been shipped off to AFB Swartkop where they were manning attack helicopters as door gunners. Nicholas kept in touch with them during the week via the occasional phone call, and now that it was Sunday, he was going to use his leave to meet both brothers at a nearby cafeteria. Their air-bases were close to each other, so it was easy for them to get together and do something.

When he walked into the cafeteria, he found both the Becketts already seated in a booth and waiting for him. Nicholas approached their booth and sat down opposite them with a smile that quickly faded. The Becketts looked awful, like they'd aged ten years in the past week; they were tired and haggard-looking, like they wore the weight of the world on their shoulders.

"You guys look terrible," he said.

Jamie smiled faintly. "Yeah same to you, Beaver. Course you always looked terrible, so it's kinda hard to tell."

Nicholas grinned and shook his head. His gaze flicked sideways

to Shorty's older brother, Billie, who was staring deeply into his water glass with a faraway look in his eyes. He hadn't even acknowledged Nicholas's presence yet. Nicholas snapped his fingers in front of Billie's face and grinned. "What's the matter, Muffy? Girls on the brain again?"

Billie looked up, but his eyes never really focused, as though he were looking straight through Nicholas. His face was blank and expressionless, and he made no attempt to reply.

Nicholas grew uncomfortable, asking, "Hey, are you okay?"

Jamie cut a quick glance to his brother and suddenly his face was pinched with worry. He bumped his brother's shoulder, saying "Hey, Beavster asked you a question, Muffball."

Suddenly Billie snapped out of it, as if waking from a deep sleep. He grinned broadly and his eyes began dancing with a wild, odd light. "I'm fine," he said. "I'm just fine."

The way he said it, grinning maniacally, only made Nicholas worry more. "Well, that's good to hear, Muffy . . ."

Billie nodded slowly and began playing with his water glass, sliding it back and forth between his hands. "Yeah, just haven't been sleeping that good."

"Ah . . ."

Jamie grinned and whispered loudly, "Girls."

"Ahh . . ." Nicholas nodded; he could relate. "Well, I've had some of those problems myself lately. Mostly in that I haven't had any girls to give me problems."

Jamie laughed loudly. "And isn't that the biggest girl problem of them all?"

Nicholas nodded solemnly. "Yeah."

When they were ready to leave the cafeteria, Billie excused himself to the bathroom and Nicholas was about to follow him, but Shorty stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Hey, hold on a minute, Beaver. I need your advice with this girl I'm dating."

Nicholas smiled wanly, but sat back down. This was new. Shorty asking for girl advice. Usually he was the one giving it—qualified or not. "Well," Nicholas began, "I'm not sure if my advice is going to be all that helpful given my luck with girls lately. What's the trouble?"

Shorty was distracted with watching his brother leave, and he didn't reply immediately, but when Billie was gone, he turned to Nicholas, his expression suddenly serious. "Can you talk to him?"

Nicholas cocked his head, suddenly frowning. "Who, Billie?"

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

"I can't get through to him, Nick. He's changed. It's like he's not there. Something is eating him up inside and he won't tell anyone what it is. I've talked to the flight sergeant, but all that did was get him sent to the base psycho, and that didn't help a bit. I'm worried about him. I think all this . . ." Shorty shook his head. "You know it's not easy to kill someone. Black or White, terrorist or saint, I don't think it's ever easy. Doesn't matter how far away from them you are. And we're mowing them down by the hundreds. . . . I've lost count of how many men I've killed. It's really sick, Nicholas. War is horrible. Sometimes I see their smudgy black faces at night, except in my dreams they always have these yellow, bloodshot eyes, like they are not even human. You'd think that would make it easier to kill them, thinking of them as monsters." He shook his head. "That's what they are, right? I just have to keep reminding myself that these are the guys who burst into shopping malls and churches with AK-47's, firing all their ammunition into crowds of women and children. But even remembering that, sometimes it's hard. I think it's even harder for Billie. I don't think he's found a way to square it off with his conscience, you know? Maybe if you could talk to him. Remind him why we're fighting."

"Sure, Shorty. Definitely."

"He just needs someone to remind him that what he's doing—what he's being asked by his country to do—isn't evil. We're not the bad guys here."

Nicholas nodded. "Yeah."

"He just doesn't have anyone to talk to, and he doesn't want to talk to me for some reason. When he gets back, I'm going to make up some excuse and leave you two alone to talk."

"Okay."

Billie came back and stopped beside the table. "Hey, guys, how much do I owe for lunch?" Billie said, his voice as flat and emotionless as his expression.

Nicholas shrugged. "No, don't worry, it's on me. You guys can get the bill next time."

Shorty looked up with a grin. "Thanks, Beaver! Hey, Muffy, I need to get back to base and answer some mail, but don't let that stop you two from having a good time."

Billie frowned. "I should get going, too . . ."

Nicholas shook his head. "No, man, stay a while; I need someone to keep me company. I'm going to order another Coke."

Billie looked hesitant, but Shorty slid out of the booth and pushed his brother in. Billie sat reluctantly. "I'll see you guys later, then," Shorty said.

"See you," Nicholas replied. After an awkward moment of silence, he signaled to their waitress and she came by with eyebrows raised. "Two more Cokes, please."

She nodded and hurried off, and then Nicholas turned his attention to Billie. He was staring absently out the window now.

"Hey, Muffy . . ."

Billie slowly turned from the window. "Yeah?"

"Tell me about what it's like to be a door gunner."

Billie flinched. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it must be exciting!"

Billie grimaced, looking like he might get sick. "Not really."

"Really?" Nicholas was putting on a show of jovial naiveté. "I don't get to see any action where I'm stationed, doing what I do. It's almost like there is no war, like it's make believe, you know?"

Billie was shaking his head. "No, it's real, Nicholas. Believe me, it's all very real."

"Yeah? Tell me about it. I'm curious. What's it like on the frontlines?"

Billie looked up at him with an unsettling smile. "I'm sorry, Beaver; I need to go," he said, rising from the booth. "This has been nice. We should meet again sometime."

"Ah, what about your coke?"

"Oh . . . right, right, yeah . . ." Billie was nodding quickly as he dug through his pocket. He placed a few coins on the table. "This should cover it. You can have mine, too."

"Uh, okay . . . if you're sure . . ." But Billie was already walking away, and in such a hurry to leave that he almost knocked a waitress over on his way out. "See you next week, Muffy!" Nicholas called out, but Billie gave no reply.

On his way back to Waterkloof, Nicholas wore a heavy frown. Shorty was right. Billie had changed. He was an entirely different person. The young, happy, bumbling boy he'd known was gone, replaced by someone who looked just like him, but acted completely different. Even Shorty had changed, but he was still there; every now and then Nicholas could see Shorty's old mischievous nature peeking out from behind a melancholy curtain. Billie, on the other hand, was just gone—like someone had turned out the lights and shuttered all the windows.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Nicholas shook his head, suddenly glad that he hadn't been assigned to the frontlines. He was at a loss as to what he could do for his friend. Maybe he could talk to the flight sergeant and explain the changes he'd seen in Billie? He could push for Billie to be reassigned.

As he walked up to the gates of AFB Waterkloof, he saw Grant there with his vicious Rottweiler, Sparky, talking to the other security guards. He walked up behind his friend, intending to scare him, but Sparky began growling long before he got close. Grant turned and greeted Nicholas with a broad grin. "Hey, you old *bliksem!* How's it going?"

"Not too bad, Bakkies." They exchanged a backslapping hug, while the other two guards at the gates frowned at their lack of proper military discipline.

"Hey, Sparky," Nicholas put out his hand, leaving it about a foot away from Sparky's snout, but Sparky just snarled at him, and he quickly tucked his hand back into his pocket. Grant laughed and patted the dog on the head. "There, there, Sparkster, he's a friend. We like Nicholas."

Sparky broke into a panting grin and looked up at Grant with his big, brown eyes, as if to ask, *Please, can I bite this one, master? Just one finger.*

"So how are those Bloody Becketts?" Grant asked.

"Good . . . well . . ."

"Getting into lots of mischief as always?"

"Yeah, well, actually Billie isn't doing so well."

"Oh?"

"He's kind of out of it. I'm thinking of going to have a talk with his flight sergeant. Maybe you could come with me? I don't think Billie should be on active duty right now, or at least not doing what he's doing. It really seems to be affecting him."

Grant was nodding slowly. "Yeah, sure, Nick. I'll go with you. What time were you thinking?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Soon as we can?"

"Well, my shift ends in an hour, so I could go around four."

"Perfect. Meet you in the recreation hall?"

"Sounds good."

They parted company, and Nicholas went on his way feeling slightly better. They would help Billie any way they could. That's what friends were for—and Billie wasn't just a friend.

He was family.

Chapter 16

Look, I'm sorry, but we're short-handed right now. Until the next batch of recruits finish training, I'm not authorized to make any reassignments. If I take your friend off the active duty roster, I'll be sending a bird up with a mighty blind spot and that will put the whole crew at risk."

Nicholas was frowning deeply. He traded a glance with Grant, who was sitting beside him in the flight sergeant's office. Grant asked, "Isn't there something you can do?"

"I've already had our shrink check him out. He's prescribed some mild sleeping pills and anti-anxiety medication. Far as the doc's concerned your friend is still good to go, so I'm not going to pretend I know better and pull him off duty because he's having a bit of trouble sleeping." Nicholas sighed meaningfully, and the sergeant went on. "Look, boys, this type of thing is very common. I've seen it all before. Usually it just takes a few months to get desensitized to the horror of it all. Your friend is going to be fine."

Nicholas was slightly reassured, but he felt compelled to ask anyway, "And if I were to volunteer to take his place?"

The flight sergeant sat back in his chair with a frown. "And who would take yours?"

Nicholas shrugged. "I'm sure someone could take over for me."

"And I suppose you've had gunnery training?"

"Well, in basic, yeah—"

"Not the same thing, corporal. You've either been trained to do it or you haven't. I'm sorry but I can't let you fill in for him either. You'd be a liability to every mission I send you on. Little better than sending no one at all."

"So there's nothing you can do."

"If Billie is not better in a month, I'll pull some strings, but for now he needs to stay where he is. Dismissed."

Nicholas and Grant promptly stood up and left. On their way out of Swartkop, Grant turned to Nicholas with a grimace. "So much for that."

"Yeah," Nicholas replied. "At least we tried."

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

“He'll be fine, Beaver.”

Nicholas breathed a deep sigh and looked up at the bright, burning sun and the clear blue sky. “I know.”

* * *

Charles pulled up in front of Tugwell Hall and stepped out of his freshly waxed and polished Mercedes, looking like he'd come straight from Hollywood. He was wearing a brown suede jacket over a striped dark gray shirt with a pair of beige pants. To complete the image of style and confidence, he wore an expensive pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses, which he now folded and tucked into the lapel of his coat as he breezed in through the doors of the residence and up to the front desk.

The receptionist gave him a lingering, up-and-down look before asking, “May I help you?”

She was pretty, so Charles answered her scrutiny with a charming grin. “Yes,” he said, leaning casually across her desk. “Please call Elizabeth Smythe, 1704, and tell her Charles is here.”

“Of course, one moment, please.”

Charles nodded absently and took a moment to bask in the attention he was getting from every passing girl in the lobby. Some of them were extraordinarily beautiful, but that only made them more brazen with their hungry looks. He met their scrutiny unabashedly and smiled becomingly to each of them in turn. Some matched his smile with a quick flutter of their eyelashes or a reciprocal flash of pearly white teeth, but then they would quickly flitter away, as if embarrassed to have been caught staring at him, or afraid that their innocent scrutiny had suddenly turned more serious.

Charles felt his ego swell, and he basked in the warm glow of their attention while he waited for Elizabeth. Girls couldn't seem to keep their eyes off him. He wouldn't trade any of them for Elizabeth—well, perhaps one or two of them if looks were his only concern—but it was always nice to remind himself that he had options. One could become so fixated on a particular girl, that he forgot there's actually more than one in the world. If he had to, he could always find another Elizabeth.

The elevator chimed and Charles turned to see Elizabeth come breezing out into the lobby. She was beautiful as ever, smiling broadly as she crossed the lobby to him.

“Charles,” she said, drawing out his name affectionately as she stopped before him.

He reached out to take her hand and raised it to his lips. "Elizabeth," he replied with equal sultry emphasis.

The receptionist was watching them with a mild grin, but as soon as Charles took a step closer to Elizabeth and lifted her chin to look her more squarely in the eyes, the receptionist cleared her throat noisily. "None of that in here, you two. Go on. Get out."

"Charles turned to her with a wicked grin. "You're just jealous." The haughty presumption in his tone was made somehow more tolerable by his British accent, and the receptionist merely smiled. "I'll have you know I have a nice fiancé whom I wouldn't trade for a dozen charmer boys like you."

"Well, your loss," Charles said, turning away with a shrug. He wrapped an arm around Elizabeth and guided her to the door.

Elizabeth was smiling faintly as they walked out into the sun. "What was that about?"

Charles stopped to open the back door of the Mercedes for her. "What was what about, my dear?" he asked as she climbed in.

Charles climbed in beside her and then she turned to face him with eyebrows raised. "You flirting with the receptionist."

Charles snorted. "You must be joking—flirting? With her?" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder as a disgusted look crawled onto his face. "That wasn't flirting, it was just a bit of playful banter. Second of all, I wouldn't be stupid enough to flirt with a girl right in front of you."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "So you'd flirt with one when I'm not around?"

Charles's mouth hung open in shock and bemusement. The car began pulling out of the parking lot and the driver asked, "Where to, sir?"

"Just a minute, James."

Elizabeth turned away from Charles to look out the window, clearly ignoring him.

"Sir, shall I pull over while you figure it out?" James asked.

"Oh, just use your little brain for a change, James! I'm assuming you've got one. Go somewhere—anywhere. I'm busy." Turning back to Elizabeth, he reached out and stroked her arm before quietly asking, "What's got into you?"

She breathed a deep sigh and sent him a wan smile. "Nothing."

"No, that's not nothing. What is it?"

She hesitated. "I saw all the girls in the lobby looking at you."

Charles's brow furrowed with confusion. "What, both of them?"

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

"No," Elizabeth shook her head. "The receptionist, too. And this isn't the first time . . . it's like that every time you pick me up! They look at you like a piece of meat. They're talking about you. I have to listen to what they're saying about you every day. I hear them gossiping behind my back. Even my friends are making jealous comments. They're treating me differently."

Charles couldn't help the cocky grin which sprung to his lips. He went on stroking Elizabeth's arm and asked in a coaxing voice, "So what are they saying about me?"

"That's not important!"

"No, it is. Whatever they're saying, it's obviously got you all upset, and so I consider it very important."

Elizabeth sighed. "They're wondering why you're with me and not with them. Some of them think they could steal you from me, and the one's who don't think they could wish they could."

"I see."

"That's all you have to say for yourself? I see?" Elizabeth still hadn't uncrossed her arms.

Charles's grin broadened. He had been sidling closer to her while they'd been talking. Now his arm was wrapped around her shoulders and his lips were mere inches from hers, but his close proximity wasn't enough to defuse her. She did not look amused. She pursed her lips as if daring him to kiss her.

Charles allowed his gaze to bore into hers. Her eyes flicked from side to side, searching his. He kept his gaze steady and constant as he replied. "You are the only girl who catches my eye, Elizabeth, the only one I dream about, who enters my thoughts and refuses to leave. You're there with me every moment of every day, so near to my heart, yet still so maddeningly far away. Your absence, however brief, is a torment that I must endure, an addiction from which I suffer endless withdrawals. Were it possible, I'd spend every moment of every day with you." He reached up to stroke her cheek. "What more can I say? You don't need to be jealous of other girls, because none could steal me from you, not even if she tried."

Elizabeth said nothing. Her gaze was still intent upon him, but he could feel her tense and rigid muscles begin to relax. He gently teased a kiss from her lips.

"I love you, Elizabeth Meriwether Smythe."

She smiled and kissed him more eagerly now. "I love you, too, Charles Lucas Atherton."

At length, Charles looked away to address James, but then he noticed his unfamiliar surroundings and frowned. "Where the Devil are we, James?"

"You told me to go anywhere, so I thought I'd just pick a direction at random."

"Brilliant! Now we're lost!"

"Well, no, sir, you may be lost, but I know where we are. You want to go back?"

"Well, of course I bloody want to go back! It's a wonder I don't drive myself around with all the trouble you cause me."

James smiled tightly as he made a quick U-turn and thought to himself, *Oh, I do wish you would, sir. I do wish you would.*

* * *

Nicholas was in the rec hall enjoying his daily break from all the stress and worry of being a radar operator. It wasn't an easy job, and there was a lot of responsibility involved, so he always relished the few hours' downtime he had at the end of each day. Usually he'd spend them here in the rec hall playing snooker or cards with the guys.

Today, however, something was different. Nicholas couldn't quite place what it was. It was like something had been subtly added or taken away from the room, and he'd only subconsciously noted its absence. He looked around, scanning the faux-wooden walls. The picture frames hung slightly askew. Most of them were of servicemen posing together in scenes of camaraderie. The stools along the bar counter were only half full; a few guys were sitting there sipping beers they'd ordered. The rest of the guys were scattered through the hall, playing snooker, cards, or darts. They were all familiar faces . . . minus one. Suddenly, Nicholas realized what was missing. Grant wasn't there. Usually he was the first one lining up to play snooker and ordering himself a beer. Nicholas asked around for him, but no one seemed to know where he'd gone. Nicholas decided that something must have come up and didn't give the matter any further thought.

It was nearly half an hour later when Grant came hurrying into the rec hall with a dire look on his face. The jovial atmosphere disappeared as his mood radiated through the room. Something was wrong. Grant walked straight up to Nicholas and jerked his head over his shoulder, indicating back the way he'd come.

"We need to go, Nicholas."

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Nicholas frowned. "What's up?"

Grant clenched his jaw. "It's Billie."

"What about him?" Nicholas asked.

Grant just shook his head and turned to go. "Come on."

Nicholas followed him out of the rec hall and onto the tarmac between buildings. Outside it was already dark, but the base was well-lit. The wind was whipping with primal fury, as if nature herself were ill-at-ease.

"What's going on, Bakkies?" Nicholas asked, shouting to be heard above the wind.

"There's been an accident."

"What? What kind of accident?"

Grant was silent as he marched them over to the Hercules Transport hangars. The giant four-propeller planes were used to transport personnel and supplies to and from the frontlines. Nicholas had a sick, twisting feeling in his gut as they rounded one of the hangars to the side door. He was suddenly afraid to ask Grant for details. Had Billie been airlifted back for emergency medical attention? No, that made no sense. They would have taken him to a military hospital closer to the frontlines. . . .

Grant marched into the hangar. Inside it was deadly quiet. There were just a few men clustered around the yawning back end of the transport plane. Nicholas recognized one of them by his above average height and large frame. It was Adrian (Mighty) Graves. He was there with a handful of other officers, all of them clustered around another man, looking small and insignificant where he sat on the loading ramp with his head in his hands, his fists working roughly through his short, brown hair, as if he were trying to rip it all out.

Nicholas frowned; the man sitting on the loading ramp was familiar. . . . Adrian turned to look at them, and Nicholas did a double take to see his friend's face; it was deeply-lined and drawn with grief. In that instant, the man sitting on the ramp looked up. It was Shorty. Nicholas felt a sharp lance of dread pierce his heart. He couldn't hold back any longer. He had to know.

"Where's Billie?"

Jamie Beckett smiled wanly, tears shining brightly in his blue eyes. "Hey, Beaver. I didn't see you standing there. How's it?"

Nicholas frowned at the casual way Jamie had dodged his question, and he turned to Adrian in askance. Adrian nodded to the cavernous hold of the C-130. The plane was full of dark,

brooding shadows and almost entirely empty. Nicholas went on peering into the hold with morbid curiosity. As his eyes began to adjust to the dimness inside the hangar, the vague outline of a box grew visible. He swallowed past the lump in his throat and looked away. There was no longer any doubt about it.

Shorty was staring blankly at the far wall of the hangar, his gaze fixed between Nicholas and Grant, his face slack and pale. Nicholas took a jerky step forward and sat down beside Shorty on the sloping ramp. He wrapped an arm around his friend's shoulders and said, "It's going to be okay, Shorty. Billie is . . ." Nicholas's voice broke there, and his eyes started itching with the threat of tears. *Billie is what?* What could he say? That Billie's in Heaven? Was he? How could he know?

Jamie nodded slowly. "I know," he said in a croaking voice. "He is – because he was confirmed."

Nicholas winced as that statement struck the very heart of his concerns and raised a whole new set of frightening questions. "That's right," Nicholas said, hoping they could leave it at that.

Grant clapped a hand on Shorty's shoulder and squeezed until his knuckles turned white. "We're here for you—any time, day or night. We're going to help you get through this somehow."

Shorty tried to say something, but then he abruptly closed his mouth and went on staring blankly at the wall.

Nicholas felt his vision blurring, and he reached up to wipe the tears away before they fell. *How could this have happened?*

He was still asking himself the same question as they left the hangar with Shorty an hour later. They offered to keep him company, but he dismissed himself and accepted a ride back to Swartkop from one of the other officers. He said he just needed to get some rest. They watched him leave, looking so forlorn and heart-breakingly alone as he walked across the tarmac.

Now that Nicholas was alone with Adrian and Grant, he turned to them and asked. "What happened?"

Adrian shook his head. "They were out in Angola raiding a terrorist camp. Someone shot him from the ground with a spray of bullets. He died almost instantly. Line of duty. Just bad luck. "

Nicholas shook his head, his heart freezing over with fury. "No, that's not all it was. Billie wasn't himself. He wasn't sleeping well. He wasn't fit for duty."

Grant was nodding along. "That's right."

Adrian cocked his head curiously, as if to ask what they meant

by that. Nicholas went on, "We saw him a few weeks ago and he was a real mess; he could barely function. We went to speak with his flight sergeant, but he assured us that Billie's behavior wasn't unusual, and that he couldn't afford to reassign him anyway."

Adrian looked from Nicholas to Grant and back again. "You think he died because of negligence?"

"That's exactly what I think," Nicholas said, his jaw clenching angrily. "I'm going to go speak with his flight sergeant."

Adrian caught him by the arm as he was turning to leave. "Hey, Nicholas—" He shook his head. "—this won't help, Billie."

"No, but it might help someone else."

"And what if you're wrong? You might destroy a man and his career for nothing."

Nicholas hesitated, his jaw bunching furiously. "It's not fair."

"No, it's not fair. Life's not fair! Don't make this worse, Nick. The flight sergeant already knows. If he's even half human, this is going to be bad enough for him without you making it worse."

Nicholas clenched his teeth and shrugged off Adrian's hand. "He knew that Billie wasn't fit for duty! We told him! We explained it all! He can't be allowed to get away with this."

Adrian was shaking his head. "This is war. Bad stuff happens. People die. *Friends* die. It's no one's fault, Nick."

"No one's fault?" Nicholas shook his head. "What's the *point*, Mighty? Can you tell me that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean why are we fighting? Why are we dying? Why can't we just live in peace?"

Adrian smiled ruefully. "In a perfect world . . ."

"Yeah," Grant clapped him on the shoulder. "This isn't it, Beaver. We're just marking time until the big man calls us home."

Nicholas smirked. "Home? You mean Heaven?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Grant said, shrugging.

"Are you sure that's where he went?"

Grant frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, how do we know Billie's up there in Heaven right now? How do we *know* where he went?"

"I guess no one really knows, Nick, but he was confirmed. That's at least something."

Nicholas snorted. "Is it? You think God cares how we score on a test? Someone could fake it you know. You could study for that test and not believe a single word of what you studied. There has

to be more to it than that.”

“Well, I don't know, Nick . . . be a good person, do your best to treat others well. Billie did that.”

Adrian was looking uncomfortable. “Hey, guys, I better get some rest; I'm up at 04:00. Take it easy, Nick. Billie is in a better place. You know that. If God turns him away, we're all in trouble.”

Nicholas nodded slowly. “Exactly, Mighty. That's exactly my point. None of us is any better. What if we all die tomorrow?”

Adrian shrugged helplessly.

Grant sighed. “You know, Nick, I know you've always been a real skeptic about this, but maybe you should go get yourself confirmed. I think if you go through the process you'll see why it's important. This has obviously been eating at you for a while.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Nicholas said, glancing around distractedly. After an uncomfortable moment of silence, he said, “I better go get some sleep, too. I'm up with the bugle call tomorrow.”

Grant covered a yawn. His eyes were bloodshot and world-weary. “Who isn't?”

With that, they said goodnight and parted ways. Nicholas went with Grant, but he let himself trail at an ever-increasing distance behind his friend. His thoughts were spinning in dizzying circles.

When Nicholas reached his barracks, he crawled into his bunk half an hour early and slept fitfully until the morning bugle call. He went through his daily routine mechanically, trying to distract himself as much as he could with his work. When the day was finally over, he knew what he had to do. He used his downtime to drive the few miles between Waterkloof, where he was stationed, and Swartkop where Shorty was. Once he reached the other base and parked, he walked straight up to the officers' quarters. He didn't care what Adrian said; that miserable flight sergeant was responsible for all of this, and he deserved to feel just as awful as he should. That would be justice—make the man live with his mistake. Let him be haunted by it.

Nicholas arrived at the door of the officers' barracks and managed to gain entrance by asking for the sergeant by name—Flight Sergeant Gert de Bruin. After walking the halls for a minute, Nicholas came to the Sergeant's quarters and knocked twice sharply on the door. There came a clunk of someone moving around behind the door, and then it opened a moment later to reveal a tired, haggard old man.

“Whash can I do fur you, corpraal?” The man's breath smelled

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

of alcohol, and he was slurring his words.

Nicholas frowned, watching the sergeant sway on his feet. His uniform was rumpled, his short hair in utter disarray. As Nicholas looked past him into the room beyond, he saw that it was also a mess. There was an empty bottle lying beside the bed. Nicholas grimaced and shook his head. "Nothing, sir. I must have the wrong room. Sorry to disturb you, sir."

Nicholas saw the old man's eyes light with recognition, but he turned away before the sergeant could become any more certain of Nicholas's connection to Billie. "Heysh, aren't you that guy, that friend of . . ."

When the sergeant trailed off, Nicholas thought for a minute that maybe he couldn't even remember Billie's name. He turned back to Gert de Bruin with a fresh surge of anger, only to see the old man staring dejectedly at his shiny black shoes and shifting his weight from one foot to the other like a little boy. "You know he isn't gone. They say he is, but it's a lie. They never really leave you." Nicholas watched Gert look up from his shoes, the old man's eyes and cheeks were shining wetly. "You geta keep 'em wit' you wher'ver you go."

Without really realizing what he was doing, Nicholas reached out and clapped the older man on the shoulder. He offered a reassuring smile that he didn't really feel, and said, "This is a war, sir. People die. The best you can do is take care of the ones who are still alive."

The sergeant nodded slowly and swallowed past an obvious lump in his throat. "Dismissed, soldier."

Nicholas about-faced and walked away. He heard the sergeant's door shut a minute later, and he breathed a heartfelt sigh. Adrian was right. There was no one to blame. No bad guy besides the one who'd shot Billie. Some tragedies had no sense to them, and there were no fingers you could point to make yourself feel better. Life *wasn't* fair.

But did that mean that God wasn't fair either?

That question brought Nicholas back to a conclusion he'd drawn early on in his life: God might exist, but he didn't care. He was as remote and distant as the heavens, which explained quite nicely why Nicholas couldn't recall ever having had any of his prayers answered.

We're just ants in His colony, Nicholas thought. Why should He worry what happens to one of us?

Chapter 17

Constance set the phone down with a scowl. This was exactly why she needed to get away. Exactly why her family needed to move. The chairman hadn't been satisfied with her getting Edwin to vote in favor of his takeover plans. Now he was looking to get Edwin on side yet again. This time he wanted Edwin to come out in favor of a new, more modern tannery that they planned to construct in Paarl. Edwin would never be in favor of such a move, and for good reason—that plan could jeopardize his job and his workers' jobs in the existing tannery in Wellington. She already knew he was going to suggest the company save money by modernizing its existing tanneries rather than building new ones, which made perfect sense to her as well, but now the chairman wanted her to manipulate her husband into changing his mind yet again. This time she would be convincing Edwin to make a move which could undermine his career.

This had to stop! The chairman was going too far. It was time to get out. Adding the chairman's constant blackmail to her already long list of reasons to move, it was obvious that her family's time in Wellington was up. Whether or not they ultimately stayed in South Africa would depend upon what opportunities she could find for her husband to obtain outside the country. She'd already been doing a little bit of preliminary research. Edwin's experience could be applied to just about any job, but she wasn't willing to trade his current standing for any lesser position. She would either find him a job equal to or better than his current one, or they would stay where they were and endure a little while longer. So far, nothing particularly interesting had come up, but perhaps that was just as well. Constance had other plans to set in motion first.

With that in mind, she picked up the phone once more and began dialing. It rang three times and then a servant woman answered. "Atherton residence." Charles was staying at his father's penthouse in Cape Town to be closer to the university, but apparently he hadn't left his father's mansion in Paarl

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

without at least taking one servant girl with him.

"Yes, it's Constance Smythe, may I speak with Charles Atherton, please?"

"One moment, madam."

"Of course."

The phone went silent for a few moments, and then there was a click and a smooth masculine voice spoke: "Mrs. Smythe? To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?"

Constance smiled in spite of herself. "I was hoping we might be able to have lunch together, say tomorrow at noon?"

"Of course. Is there any special reason you'd like to meet?"

"Yes, I'd like to discuss you and Elizabeth. There are some important developments afoot that you should know about."

"Ah, nothing troubling I hope?"

"No, nothing troubling, but I would like to keep you in the loop and see where you stand in all of it."

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Smythe. Where would you like to meet for lunch?"

"Well, I think I'll come to Cape Town for the day. I was hoping you might surprise me, since I'm not terribly familiar with the restaurants in the area. I'll be at your father's apartment just before noon and we can go from there."

"Sounds marvelous. I'll be waiting."

"Splendid. Have a good day then, Charles."

"Until tomorrow."

"Yes, I look forward to it. Goodbye."

She set the phone down for the second time in the last quarter of an hour, but now with a smile rather than her former scowl. Mr. Gaines was mistaken if he thought she was going to let him manipulate her forever.

* * *

Charles took Constance out for lunch to the Seaside Veranda, a popular restaurant with a clear view across Table Bay. The menu was over-priced, and everything on it seemed to have a fancy name, but Constance pretended to be in her element, as though she were accustomed to dining at such fancy restaurants. Charles recommended the shark fin soup, but she passed it over for a grilled roast beef sandwich on herbed focaccia with gruyère cheese and a fresh garden salad. Charles went with the soup.

"So?" he asked as he watched her studying the vista. From where they were sitting on the veranda, they had a clear view out

to Table Mountain—it was the giant, flat-topped mountain for which Cape Town was famous. There were a few yachts sailing through the bay which lay between them and that ancient mesa; the white triangles of their sails were billowing in the wind. The water was a crisp, deep blue, and the sky a stunning shade of blue with scarcely a cloud to mar its clarity. The air was warm and laced with the fragrant smells of grilling fish and fresh-baked bread. Constance turned from the view with a dreamy smile.

“Yes?”

“What was it that you needed to discuss with me? You mentioned it had to do with Elizabeth?”

“Yes, of course. The fact of the matter is, Charles, we're not so very happy at the moment.”

“With me?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No, no, more in general—with life.”

“Oh? I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything I might do about it?”

Constance flashed him a gracious smile. “No, dear boy, nothing that a change of scenery won't fix. The trouble is we've been considering moving for some time, and I think now it won't be terribly long before we do.”

“I see. . . .”

“The fact of the matter is, South Africa is becoming an increasingly dangerous place. I fear it won't be long before we see a Black South Africa, and when that happens, the Whites will be in danger of extinction.”

Charles nodded agreeably. “That's certainly a possibility.”

“Then you know why we must move.”

His eyes widened. “You're planning to leave the *country*.”

“Yes.”

“But surely you don't think the ANC actually has a chance of overthrowing the government?”

Constance smirked. “If not by their terrorism, then by international pressure. The days of Apartheid are numbered. Anyone can see it.”

“Well . . .” Charles trailed off uncertainly. “This does come as a shock.”

Constance reached out to grasp his forearm. “Tell me Charles, what are your intentions with Elizabeth?”

She watched his brow furrow. “I should have thought that obvious by now.”

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

“Well, all the same, it would be nice to hear it from you.”

He sighed. “I suppose I have already talked to Elizabeth about this, so I don't see why I can't tell you, but someday I plan to ask for her hand in marriage. My intentions are and have always been with that in mind.”

“Good.” Constance smiled broadly and let go of Charles's arm. “Then this won't come as such a shock to you. I came to eat lunch with you today so that I could tell you that Edwin and I would not at all be opposed to you asking for Elizabeth's hand in marriage—provided you agree to follow us should we decide to leave the country.”

Charles sat back with a heavy frown. “You ask a great deal of me.”

“I'm aware of that.”

“I don't even know where you're planning to move.”

Constance shook her head. “Don't worry; if we decide to leave the country, I assure you it will not be a step down, but a step up. Somewhere in the first world—English-speaking, of course. Perhaps England?”

“I'll need some time to think,” Charles said.

“Of course,” Constance replied. “That is why I decided to tell you first of all, and for that reason, you must keep these plans to yourself for now.”

Charles nodded absently and turned to watch as their food arrived. The waiter set a steaming bowl of soup in front of Charles, but he frowned dispassionately into it, having abruptly lost his appetite. Before he even took a sip of the delicious broth, he looked up and said to Constance, “You realize you are asking me to leave my father, my studies, my friends—everything!”

Constance smiled thinly. “And I do not ask it lightly, but surely you can't expect me to believe that you have put down substantial roots here in less than two years.”

“I have.”

“Indeed?” Constance regarded him evenly. When he didn't relent, she sighed. “Charles—” She decided to take a gamble now. “—even so, if your love for Elizabeth is not enough to follow her to the ends of the earth, then perhaps you should be the one questioning your intentions with her.”

“I'm not sure I follow you.”

“Love is about sacrifice, Charles. What are you willing to give up for Elizabeth? If you answer that question honestly, you'll

know how much you really love her.”

Charles was back to frowning into his soup. After a long moment, he replied, “I think I’d give up just about anything for her.”

“So if she were going to move to another country . . .”

He looked up, his eyes suddenly fierce, determined. “I’d follow her.”

Constance smiled and reached out to pat his arm. “That’s exactly what I needed to hear.”

“What if she doesn’t want to go?” he asked.

“What makes you think she has a choice?”

“I see,” Charles said, nodding. Constance gave her attention back to her lunch. They passed a few minutes in silence, and Constance could almost hear Charles thinking, but she decided to give him time to absorb the news while she pretended great interest in the view.

Charles interrupted her with a sigh and she belatedly gave him her attention. His expression was firm, his eyes narrowed. “You drive a hard bargain, Mrs. Smythe.”

She smiled innocently. “Then you agree to my terms?”

He hesitated briefly, but nodded once, decisively. “I do. Should you decide to move to another country, I will follow—provided it’s to a country within the first world, and that it’s an English-speaking country.”

“Of course. I would never consider such a move otherwise.”

“Well, then I agree. When you decide to leave South Africa, I won’t be far behind.”

“Good, good. But Charles . . .” He cocked his head curiously, waiting for her to go on. “You still have time to propose to Elizabeth. It wouldn’t make sense for you to follow her to another country if she were merely your girlfriend. You need to formalize things beforehand. Otherwise, what guarantee do you have? I am not making a one-sided bargain, quite the contrary; I’m offering you my eldest daughter in exchange.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Smythe. I do consider that fair exchange, but I’m curious: what about your husband? What does he think of all this?”

Constance smiled. She hadn’t even discussed it with him yet. “I’ll work on him. As for your proposal to Elizabeth, he shall have no objections.”

“Well, that much is reassuring, I suppose,” Charles said,

stirring his soup around and taking an experimental sip.

“Yes, but if I may give you just one piece of advice, Charles—” she waited for his attention. “—Don't make Nicholas's mistake.”

“Oh? And what was that?”

“He waited too long to declare his intentions. By the time he finally did, he'd missed his chance. Never put off for tomorrow what can be done today. Start making your plans soon. It would be nice to have the wedding here in South Africa before we leave.”

“Yes,” Charles agreed. “I think that is crucial. Can you guarantee me some time?”

Constance frowned. “It is difficult for me to do that, since we may have to take whatever opportunities we can as soon as they present themselves, but . . . let us say that I doubt we'll move before the year comes to a close.”

“Good. That should be time enough.”

Constance smiled broadly and turned back to the view. “Yes,” she said absently, almost dreamily. A warm breeze blew in off the ocean, caressing her face. She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply of the salty ocean smell. “I believe it shall.”

Chapter 18

It was now the Easter long weekend, and Nicholas had a few days' leave. His family was planning to travel down to Aliwal North for the holiday and spend those four days at a caravan park around the hot springs there. Since it was only a five-hour drive from Pretoria, Nicholas had made plans to meet them at the park. It was going to be a great weekend, Nicholas smiled out at the sunny horizon as he drove his old VW Beetle around a long, arcing corner. He imagined seeing all his family again for the first time in more than six months. It was going to be a welcome break, and a great opportunity to get his mind off all the troubles that had been weighing him down. Elizabeth was long gone out of his life, and there was no way to get her back. Even so, Nicholas often thought about her. He wondered if she was happy. If she and Charles were good for each other. If he deserved her. If they were in love. He hoped so. Even if she couldn't be with him, he still wanted her to be happy.

That's what love is, he realized. Being able to let someone go even if it makes you miserable. His thoughts turned to Denise then as he realized that that was always how she had treated him, he felt a painful stab in his chest and winced. Maybe he was just the stupidest man in the world. He had someone who loved him, but for reasons that confused even him, he kept putting her off. When last they'd seen each other at Christmas, he'd told her to date other guys. He couldn't have sent a clearer message than that. She was probably doing the same thing as he was with Elizabeth right now, trying desperately to move on from someone she loves but who doesn't love her back.

But he *did* love Denise, just not enough. Not as she deserved to be loved. Not with a love that would do anything for her, that would overcome any obstacle, that would last forever. No, he shook his head, she deserved to know what that kind of love felt like. It made everything else feel like a poor imitation.

Nicholas wondered if there were people who went through their whole lives never having encountered that kind of love, and then

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

he wondered what was worse, never to have found such a love or to have found it only to lose it. What happened to those people? The ones who'd had a taste of true love.

Maybe we just end up old and alone, Nicholas thought, remembering Mr. Gee. That seemed like the most likely outcome. To find another Elizabeth would be like waiting for lightning to strike at the same place twice.

Nicholas sighed and forced his thoughts in a different direction. This was a weekend to be happy, not sad, wishing for what might have been. He pasted a broad smile on his face and squinted out the windscreen of his car. *Be happy, Nicholas! You have your whole life ahead of you! Good things are waiting just around the corner!* He turned a literal corner in the road and saw the rain clouds gathering against the horizon and the ragged peaks of the Drakensburg Mountains. His smile flickered. An hour later he was driving through a pounding rainstorm as he wound through the mountains. He slowed to a crawl and sat hunched over his steering wheel to see through the sheets of rain pouring off his windscreen. The inside of the car began to fog up from the humidity and he cranked open his window a crack. It didn't help much.

It was an hour of driving like that before the rain clouds parted and he was through the mountains and the storm. Now driving down into the sunny, dry valley of Aliwal North he felt a smile flicker to his lips and he began singing a familiar song.

"I can see clearly now the rain is gone . . . I can see all obstacles in my way! I think I can make it now . . . the pain is . . . gone . . ." Nicholas trailed off with a frown, suddenly realizing what song he was singing. It was his and Elizabeth's song. He rolled his eyes and shot an accusing glance to heaven. "Why did you ever let us meet? Were you so anxious to ruin my life? You could have waited until I'd lived a little."

He shook his head. *What am I doing?* He gave a short laugh. *I'm talking to myself! God's not concerned with my trivial life.*

* * *

Elizabeth smiled against the warm, salty spray of the ocean. She grinned out at the infinite expanse of deep, wavy, blue ocean and then back at Charles. "This is amazing!"

He matched her grin. "I thought you'd like it."

They were standing on the prow of the boat, climbing over each mighty swell and listening to them hiss and roar around the hull

as they cruised through the deep, blue water. This was no little cabin cruiser, but a large, comfortable, fully-powered yacht, brand-new and sparkling white.

“Why haven't we ever done this before?”

Charles snorted in amusement. “Well, it might have something to do with my father not having owned a yacht before.”

“Well, it's amazing! It feels like we're flying!”

Charles rested his head against hers and slid his arm around her waist. “I'm always flying with you.” She shot him an amused look and then gazed back out at the infinite blue of the horizon. Her hand found his behind her back, and they stood there like that, arms linked, the boat rising and gently falling beneath them as they rode over the swells in Table Bay.

“I want to be with you forever,” Charles said.

She shot him a pleasant smile and spent a moment studying his face. He was staring distantly at the horizon, his expression serious, his eyes fixed. As if only speaking to himself, he went on softly, “Then there are times when I think forever isn't long enough.” Elizabeth cocked her head, and suddenly Charles turned to look her in the eyes. She was caught off guard by the intensity of his gaze. “Sometimes I feel like I can't breathe when I'm not around you, Elizabeth, like I just can't function by myself anymore.”

Elizabeth sighed and leaned against him. They hit a particularly large wave and the spray hissed up around bow, drenching them lightly. The deck rocked beneath their feet, threatening to send them tumbling aft, but Charles held them fast to the railing, only swaying slightly on his feet.

“I feel the same way, Charles, but sometimes you scare me,” she said softly against his chest.

“Scare you?”

She looked up at him, her eyes wide and serious, and so innocent. He frowned, staring deeply into those eyes, so deep and blue they might as well be the sea. “What do you mean?”

She sighed once more and put some distance between them. “I mean, we've been dating for a while. A long while. I feel like I know you, but like maybe I don't know you at all. I feel like even after all this time you're still keeping your distance from me, maybe only showing me the things you want me to see.”

“I'm not sure I know what you mean.”

“I mean who are you, Charles? What are you afraid of? What

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

do you dream about? Who are you when I'm not around? Who do look to when there's just nothing you can do? Have you ever really struggled or had to fight for anything?"

Charles narrowed his eyes. "Everyone struggles with something. As for the rest, I'm me. Ask me anything; I'll give you an honest answer. I'm not hiding anything."

Elizabeth shook her head and leaned back against him with a sigh. "No, maybe not on purpose."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She shook her head. "Never mind."

"No, not never mind! I mind!" He withdrew from her sharply. "Where is all of this coming from? Why didn't you tell me before that you had all these doubts?"

A pained expression appeared on her face. "Forget it, Charles. I'm sorry I said anything. Let's not spoil this beautiful day."

"Well, too late, Princess!" Charles said, his chest rising and falling with pent up fury. "If you don't trust me, that's just fine! Why should I care?"

"I didn't say I don't trust you . . ."

"Of course you did! You just used a lot more words than you needed to, that's all."

Elizabeth frowned at him, her expression showing concern. He was already turning to walk away. "Where are you going?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "Below deck; I need to talk with the chef about our dinner."

"Okay . . . shall I come with you?"

"No, no don't trouble yourself. I'll be back in a minute."

When Charles got below deck he went straight to the galley and barged in on the chef. The young Black man was just putting the finishing touches on a pair of Kingclip fillets. The champagne glasses were sitting to one side, not yet filled, one of them was already furnished with an expensive gold and diamond ring. Charles breezed up to that glass and emptied it into his palm. He tucked the ring into his pocket and patted it to make sure it was there.

"It was an unoriginal idea, anyway," Charles muttered.

The chef looked up from garnishing the fillets and noted the now-empty champagne glass. "Something the matter, sir?"

"No, nothing's the matter; mind your own business, you little Hottentot." With that, Charles stormed off, and the chef went back to his work. He took some private solace in the boy's

troubles. Charles wasn't a nice man. It didn't matter how sweetly he smiled or how perfectly white and straight his teeth were, one could see it in those dark brown eyes, always swirling with contempt and thinly-veiled malice.

* * *

Nicholas was sitting on a chair outside his family's camper, staring fixedly between the leafy green trees. Every now and then his mother would pass by and send him a worried look. His dad had tried to talk some sense into him, but Nicholas had barely been listening, and eventually his dad had given up. Nicholas's brother was at the hot springs with his now-serious girlfriend, Linda, and his sister was off playing with a friend. That was perfect as far as Nicholas was concerned, because he had plenty of time alone to think. But his thoughts just kept running around in circles. Something about being back in a caravan park again, even though it wasn't Siesta, just brought all the memories rushing back, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get rid of them.

After a while, Nicholas became aware of a new set of eyes upon him. He broke his death stare away from the trees and looked up to see his older brother.

Philip was standing there in his swimming trunks, dripping wet, wearing sunglasses and a disgusted look on his face. "What are you moping about? You need to smarten up, Nick."

"Smarthen up?" Nicholas asked, allowing a wry grin. "What do you mean?"

"Oh come off it. You're sitting there with your round puppy eyes and that hangdog look, your face all droopy and sad. Wake up! There's no end of girls in the world!" Philip came to stand beside him and clapped him violently on the back. With his other hand he gestured to the horizon as if to paint a picture. "She's out there somewhere."

"Yeah. Someday I'll meet her."

"No, you *domkop*, not someday. Go meet her today. What's stopping you?"

"Meet who?"

Philip shrugged. "Anyone! What's it matter?"

Nicholas snorted.

"Look," Philip gestured, nodding off to one side. "What about her?"

Nicholas followed Philip's nod to a girl with long, silken honey-

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

blonde hair and pale white skin. She was tall and skinny, and clearly attractive. She was wearing a loose white shirt over her bikini, but it was wet and plastered to her body, revealing an exquisite figure. She was carrying an armful of dirty dishes and walking toward the camp scullery. Nicholas looked away, feigning disinterest. He shrugged. "She's okay."

"Just okay? You must have rocks in your head man!"

Nicholas shrugged again and went back to staring into the shadows between the trees.

"Oh . . ." Philip trailed off meaningfully. "I get it . . ."

Just leave me alone, Nicholas thought, barely resisting the urge to scream it out loud.

Philip went on, "It's those little chicken feet of yours that are slowing you up ..."

Nicholas turned back to his brother slowly. "Chicken feet?" he parroted dryly.

Philip looked immensely pleased with himself. "That's right."

Nicholas let loose a short laugh in spite of himself.

Philip clapped him on the back again. "Well, I guess I can see how you lost Elizabeth, then." Philip was grinning broadly as he said it.

Nicholas's eyes narrowed. "What's the supposed to mean?"

Philip seemed to sense he was in dangerous territory so he took a casual step back, but he shrugged to make it seem like he wasn't concerned. "No woman likes a man who doesn't know what he wants and is afraid to go out and get it."

Nicholas's green eyes stayed steady and unblinking on Philip, burning with a sudden, dire contempt for his brother. Making matters worse, Philip turned to him then with a pitying look, and in a patronizing tone, he said, "Hey, I get it. It's hard to know what you want sometimes – even harder to go and get it."

Nicholas stood up suddenly and walked past his brother, bumping him violently in the shoulder and sending him tottering back against the tent. Nicholas's every step was fueled by righteous indignation and blinding rage. He could barely think straight. He was storming off as much to keep himself from physically attacking Philip as he was to prove his brother wrong. By the time he was almost to the scullery, where the girl in question was washing dishes, his adrenaline gave way and his thoughts cleared. Suddenly he realized with a bitter smirk how his brother had just manipulated him. He rounded the corner

and entered the small building which contained rows of sinks for washing dishes.

The pretty blonde girl they'd been talking about looked up and her gaze briefly locked with his. She hurriedly looked away. *Too late to go back now*, he thought, as his resolve began to fade. His brother would be just thoughtless enough to keep rubbing his face in Elizabeth's rejection until he did something about it. He never should have told his family what had happened. His dad had been quietly disapproving, making him feel like even more of an idiot than he already did. His mother had been painfully sympathetic, and his brother had made no secret of how pathetic he thought Nicholas was.

Nicholas forced down a fresh tide of anger and plastered a pleasant smile onto his face as he stepped up beside that young girl. She looked up once more, startled to find him standing there. He felt suddenly foolish and grasped the first logical explanation he could find.

"Hello, I'm Nicholas." He held out his hand. She stared at it for an awkward moment before drying her hands on a nearby towel to shake hands with him.

"Lynn."

Nicholas put on his most infectious grin and nodded to her pile of dirty dishes. "Would you like some help? I could dry your dishes for you."

Nicholas became aware of a few of the older women at the sinks looking up from their tasks to smile and nod in his direction. One lady in particular, who was standing quietly at the sink beside Lynn's, was looking on with a small smile. Nicholas shot her a glance to let her know he was aware of her scrutiny, but the woman didn't look away, and her smile only broadened. Nicholas looked back to Lynn, trying to ignore the older lady. He cocked his head, still waiting for her to accept his offer of help.

Lynn nodded and took a step sideways to make room for Nicholas at the sink. "That would be wonderful, thank you."

Nicholas stepped up to the counter beside the sink and began accepting dishes from Lynn as she washed them.

"Where are you from?" he asked while drying the first plate.

"I'm an American girl, living in Rhodesia, but I'm attending the Bulawayo Teacher's College, which is near Pretoria."

"Pretoria? That's where I'm stationed."

She looked up at him. "You're in the military?"

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Nicholas grimaced. "Air force. Compulsory service. Almost another year to go."

She nodded solemnly. "What do you do there?"

"I'm a radar operator instructor."

She smiled. "Nothing too dangerous, then."

He shook his head. "No, nor very exiting."

"That's good. You're lucky." She said, smiling.

"I know - how come you're not in America?" He asked.

"My mom came to work as a missionary in Rhodesia many years ago. There she met and fell in love with my dad. They got married, started a family - and we've lived there ever since."

"Aah, ok ... that makes sense," he said, "So you're studying to become a teacher?"

She nodded and laughed pleasantly. "Yes. Also not terribly exciting I'm afraid."

He added a short laugh of his own. "No, I guess not."

She bumped his shoulder playfully. "Hey, no laughing at me."

"Sorry."

Their conversation went on for a while, touching briefly on their plans for the future, their age (she was the same age as him), their current relationship status—she was single, too. Nicholas smiled at that revelation. As they were coming to the end of the dishes, Nicholas thought to ask.

"So what brings you down here?"

"Vacation. You?"

He shrugged. "The same. I'm taking the opportunity to visit my family. And you? Are you here alone?"

"No, I'm visiting my grandmother, my dad's mom. When Grandma Gibby retired from teaching a few years ago, she came here to Aliwal North. Ever since then, we've been coming down to the hot springs for the holidays, and to visit her while we're at it."

Nicholas abruptly stopped drying dishes. "Grandma *Gibby*? Mrs. Gibby? She didn't teach in Sterkspruit by any chance?"

"Yes, among other places . . . why?"

Nicholas barked a short laugh and broke into a grin. "My family lives in Sterkspruit. Before I went to boarding school I went to school there, and Mrs. Gibby was my standard one teacher!"

Lynn gaped at him. "You're joking!"

"No," he shook his head, smiling.

"Wow, what a small world."

"Are you here with your grandmother now?"

"No, she lives in town. I'm here with the rest of my family."

"Oh, that's nice. Same as me, then."

Lynn handed him the last dish. While he dried it, she leaned around him and gestured to the woman standing at the sink beside them. Nicholas turned to look. It was the same woman who had been staring at him so obviously when he'd first arrived, and had been stealing looks at him as he chatted to Lynn, clearly amused about something.

"Nicholas, I'd like you to meet my mother, Agnes – you know, the American missionary I told you about?"

Agnes flashed Nicholas a broad smile now as she dried her hands and held one out in greeting. Nicholas hurriedly set down the last dish and took her hand, more than a little flustered.

"Ah, it's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs . . ."

"Mrs. Gibson," she filled in for him.

Some of the other ladies at the sinks abruptly stopped washing their dishes and broke out in peals of laughter. Nicholas felt his cheeks burning. Lynn's mother had been standing there the whole time while he was chatting-up her daughter! Now she knew as much about him as her daughter did. That was *Awkward* . . . [§]

Agnes's eyes were sparkling with amusement, sensing his discomfort. "Why don't you take my daughter for a walk."

Nicholas smiled, relieved, and turned to Lynn in question. Lynn made a move to pick up the pile of clean dishes beside the sink, but Nicholas beat her to it. "No, let me."

"Thank you," she said.

On their way back to drop off the dishes, Lynn turned to ask him. "Nicholas, why don't you and I go for a swim in the springs?"

"Sounds great," he said. The sun flickered down through the canopy overhead and lit her eyes a clear, sparkling shade of amber. Maybe he wouldn't end up alone after all. This young American girl seemed so friendly and open, so natural - easy to talk to. It invoked well guarded memories still buried deep inside of him ... memories of another summer romance, of days gone by.

[§] Nicholas met Lynn (that's her middle name) at the Aliwal N. Hot springs in exactly this way. Her mother Agnes (real name) would laugh about that meeting many years later, reminding him of it. But that's a whole other story ... one that will have to wait until the final novel in this series. Agnes was a gentle little American lady, living in Africa. She's since gone on to Heaven. One could say she's home - but before she left, this little unassuming lady was used powerfully, under most unusual circumstances, to change a lot of the lives of characters in these books - strange how that happens?

Chapter 19

“Come on, Nicholas,” she said just before diving into the steaming, blue pool of water. The hot springs were full of minerals, making them colorful and inviting. Nicholas stood at the edge of the water, smiling at her as she broke the surface.

“It’s warm, you chicken!”

“Chicken?” he parroted. “We’ll see who’s chicken. I’m coming to get you!” With that, he jumped in, making an indelicate splash. She grinned and ducked beneath the water, swimming off toward a cascading waterfall. Nicholas broke the surface and wasted a moment searching for Lynn before she surfaced and revealed herself.

He grinned—“Aha!”—and then set chase.

She sent a beguiling smile over her shoulder and swam away from him. He caught up easily, but by the time he drew near, they were almost to the waterfall. The cascade was gentle enough that they could swim up to it with ease. She swam behind the waterfall and turned to face him. “I’m safe in here.”

He stopped on the other side and they tread water there, each remaining on their own side of the cascade. “Oh?”

The water was like a thin curtain of glass between them. Nicholas drifted a bit closer, until he could barely see through the spray. “What makes you think you’re safe?” he asked, squinting at her through the streams of warm water running into his eyes.

“You can’t see me. The water has blinded you.”

He grinned, forcing his eyes to focus on the blurry shape behind the cascade. “Who said I need to see you to catch you?” He allowed himself to drift closer still, until the water was pouring over his head. Now he really couldn’t see, and he didn’t notice that Lynn had allowed herself to drift in under the waterfall with him until he felt her legs brush against his. He felt the contact like a jolt of electricity, and in that instant he could no longer resist. He reached out blindly for her, his hands finding her face, and then he pulled her to him. She came willingly and their lips met, soft and tentative at first. Suddenly Nicholas realized she’d

stopped swimming, and she was dragging him under, but that wasn't enough to stop him. It was only when both their heads dipped beneath the crystal blue surface and their mouths filled with water that they broke away from each other.

They came up laughing and spluttering, swimming away from the waterfall. "You tried to drown me!" Nicholas accused.

She laughed and coughed once more. "I was just giving you a chance to save the damsel in distress."

Nicholas snorted at that. "A fine damsel who goes looking for distress." They were swimming toward each other again.

"A fine knight who can't keep his damsel from it," she said.

"Oh, touché." Their legs brushed once more, and Nicholas reached out to wipe the stray hair from her eyes. It was hanging like strands of golden silk in front of her face.

"I feel like I've known you forever," she said, staring deeply into his eyes.

He grinned and kissed her again. Once more, he felt that giddy rush of adrenaline, and this time he stopped swimming, hoping to drag her down with him. Just before they sunk below the surface again, Lynn pushed him away. "Now who's trying to drown whom?"

He laughed, and she splashed water in his face, but that just made him laugh all the harder. When they were tired of swimming, they left the warm pool to lie on a flat gray slate of rock that was high and dry in the sun at the top of the waterfall. They lay watching the clouds drift into mysterious shapes, trying to read nature's sign language.

"Nicholas . . ." Lynn began.

He turned his head to her. "Yes?"

She turned on her side to meet his gaze. "There's a dance on Saturday, at the Savannah Hotel. How about you and I go?"

Nicholas blinked, his mouth opening slowly for a reply, but he hesitated, thinking about how familiar all of this was. It seemed like a lifetime ago, or maybe just yesterday, when he'd met Elizabeth in Siesta, another caravan park, and she'd invited him to take her to a dance at the Fairy Knowe, another hotel. Maybe this was Destiny's way of saying that what he'd found with Elizabeth could be found again, and maybe just maybe, he had already found it. *Destiny?* Nicholas wondered. He didn't believe in Destiny, but it couldn't be God's work either, because God doesn't meddle in human affairs.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Coincidence? he wondered.

Mistaking his hesitation for disinterest, Lynn turned away to stare up at the sky again. "If you don't want to go, that's fine."

Nicholas broke into a grin, reaching out to touch her arm. "Hey." She looked at him, her lips pouty, tempting. Nicholas continued "I do want to go! There's nothing I'd like more."

"Oh, okay," she said, turning back to face him, smiling. They spent a moment just staring into each other's eyes.

Nicholas reached out to stroke her cheek. "You have the most beautiful eyes," he said.

She raised her eyebrows. "I bet you tell all the girls that."

He laughed lightly. "Some - but not all. But yours are different, very unusual—the color of amber or honey."

"Thank you. . . . So it's a date?"

His smile broadened and he pulled her close to kiss her. When she broke away, he was smiling. "Oh yes - it's a date!"

* * *

It was Monday morning after Easter break, and Nicholas and Lynn were sitting on a shelf of rock submerged at the edge of the hot springs, up to their necks in the warm, mineral water. There were only a handful of other people to be seen, and just now cresting above the short waterfall where they'd first kissed, they could see the sun blazing a trail into the sky.

"It's hard to believe the time went by so fast," Lynn commented. "It doesn't feel like three days."

Nicholas nodded slowly. "I know. I can't believe it either."

They sat quietly watching the sun climb toward its zenith. Somehow the warm, steaming water and the fragrant flora all around lulled them into a place where time didn't exist, or simply didn't matter. They lay back against the shelf of rock together; Lynn nestled in under his arm, and Nicholas laid his head back and looked up at the clear blue sky peeking out through a web of leafy green tree branches. He sighed. *If only every moment could be just like this one*, he thought. It could have been minutes or hours which passed like that; it was impossible to tell.

But soon vile thoughts of reality began tiptoeing around him and Nicholas was caught up in thinking about the long drive ahead of him, and how he had to be back on base before his leave was officially over at six o'clock tonight. The warm water began to grow uncomfortable and the sun flickering through the trees onto his face reminded him that he was going to burn. Nicholas shifted

and Lynn eased out from under his arm.

Nicholas sighed again. "I don't want to go."

"Neither do I," she said.

"But I have to."

She nodded. "I'll walk you back to your campsite."

While they were drying themselves at the edge of the pool, Lynn bent down to pick something out of her beach bag. She turned to Nicholas with it in hand. It was a piece of paper, neatly folded. Nicholas raised his eyebrows and accepted it from her as she drew near.

"What's this?" he asked, beginning to unfold it.

She placed her hands over his, stopping him. "It's a letter. Read it when you get back. I gave you both my addresses so you can write to me, and . . . so you can visit." A slow smile spread across his lips. "Bulawayo is close to Pretoria."

He nodded. "I know."

"You'll visit me then?" she asked, her voice hopeful, her clear brown eyes shining brightly in the sun.

He broke into a grin and took a step toward her. Reaching up he stroked her cheek and stared deeply into her eyes. "As often as I can," he said, and then he kissed her. They stood like that a long moment, denying themselves air until they could avoid the inevitable no longer. They parted with a smile and walked quietly back to Nicholas's campsite where his family was also waiting to say goodbye. Lynn stayed through all the long goodbyes, and when it was her turn, she was biting her lip and trying to look brave. Nicholas smiled. Here was a girl who had known him barely three days, acting like she'd known him forever, and worried that she might never see him again.

He opened his mouth to say something, but she took a quick step forward and silenced him with a kiss. With all his family watching, she didn't let it go on very long. "Don't forget me Nicholas," she whispered as she broke away.

Nicholas smiled, caught off guard by her sincerity and openness. Any other girl might have kept her feelings to herself at this point, and guarded what she was thinking to avoid giving him too much of the upper hand, but Lynn seemed utterly unconcerned that he might take advantage of her heart-on-her-sleeve approach. Here was one truly honest girl.

It made him trust her implicitly and want to respond with the same degree of sincerity. "I could never forget you, Lynn."

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

She smiled and nodded. "Good!" With that, she started backing away. Before she turned around, she sent him a quick wave and blew him a kiss, and then she turned and Nicholas watched her walk away. After a moment he felt a hand land heavily on his shoulder.

"You see, Nick? I told you. They're a dime a dozen."

Nicholas turned to his brother with eyebrows raised and shook his head. "No, Philip; you've got it all wrong."

"Oh?"

Nicholas turned to nod in Lynn's direction. "They're one in a million." And as he said it, he realized he was talking about both Lynn and Elizabeth, but it was too late to take it back. Philip seemed to realize this as well, backing off with a snort. Nicholas turned to pick up his bags and then started toward his old VW Beetle. It was time to go back to reality.

* * *

"You can't go around inventing your own reality whenever it pleases you, Elizabeth!" Constance had her hands on her hips; she was fuming. Her anger had been held in all Easter weekend, pent up - waiting for the right moment to explode.

Charles had told her all about what had happened to his plan to propose to Elizabeth on Friday, and she had only now managed to wheedle the other side of the story out of her daughter. Of course, Elizabeth had no idea that her antics had led to Charles calling off his plans to propose to her. She had no idea that he planned to propose at all.

"It's not my own reality, mom; it's true. He's too perfect."

Constance threw up her hands and shook her head. "Oh, dear, that is a problem! You've found the only perfect man in the world, and the only problem you can find with him, is that he's too perfect. Yes, I do see your point, my girl."

Elizabeth was frowning. "You don't understand."

"No, you're perfectly right, I don't. Maybe you should explain yourself better."

Elizabeth began rocking on the swing bench, her attention on the horizon rather than her mother.

"Well?" Constance demanded.

"You wouldn't understand."

Constance snorted. "Shall I call Charles and tell him to please excuse my daughter, because apparently she's taken a dive off the deep end?"

Elizabeth turned to give her mother a dry look. “No.”

“Well then?”

“He never slips up. He never says the wrong thing, or shows a weakness. Whenever I’m around him I feel like . . .” she shook her head. “I feel like he’s acting. Like he’s hiding something—or everything! Like he could be anyone at all, and I’d never know. He never lets me in. It’s almost like he has an agenda he doesn’t want me to know about.”

“Well of course he has an agenda!” Constance blurted.

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“Every man has an agenda,” Constance said, sidestepping the question. “You should be flattered that he’s decided to make you his agenda.”

“It’s not just that he wants to win my heart, it’s that I feel like he’s never really given me his.”

“What do you mean? He hasn’t said he loves you?”

“No, he’s said that plenty. I just don’t believe it. Like it’s part of the act. I feel there’s another side to him that I’ve yet to see.”

“If his feelings for you aren’t genuine, what else could he possibly be after?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Constance snorted once more. “Well, my girl, with such a propensity for vague suspicions, it’s a wonder you know anything at all.” With that, Constance returned inside, sliding the door to the terrace shut, leaving Elizabeth staring into the pool.

Maybe I’m being ridiculous, Elizabeth thought. Maybe it was normal for Charles to maintain some distance in their relationship. But it wasn’t just the emotional distance she felt. She felt like she was dating Dr. Jekyll and had yet to see Mr. Hyde. On the other hand, maybe her mother was right. Maybe that other side of Charles simply didn’t exist. What a fool she would be if she ended up losing the perfect man simply because she couldn’t believe that such a man could exist.

Chapter 20

The curtains swished open with a screech of metal rings. Charles groaned and rolled over, burying his face in the pillow.

“Wake up, master Atherton. You've slept long enough.”

“I'll be the judge of that, thank you, Miriam,” he said, his voice muffled by the pillow.

“You instructed me to wake you before midday. It's midday.”

“Go away!”

There came a heavy *whump* of something landing on the bed beside him. The resultant vibrations through the bed springs gave him an idea about its weight. It wasn't his maid. It had to be something lighter than her blubbery bulk. . . .

Charles peeked one eye out of his pillowy refuge to see a pile of textbooks staring back at him.

“Oh, bollux.”

“That's right, bollux. You have a term paper due tomorrow.”

Charles pushed himself halfway up and leaned heavily on his elbow, squinting at his maid with resentful fury. “Oh, would you stop nagging me already? I heard you.”

She frowned at him. “You instructed me to nag you, sir.”

“I don't care what I instructed! I instructed you last night. That was before the hangover. Now if you really want to be useful go put on a pot of coffee and fetch me some biscuits. How am I supposed to wake up properly with all of this badgering? It's setting me on my nerves, Miriam. I can't tell you how much I detest waking up on the wrong side of the bed!”

“Very well, sir.”

“Good!” He glared balefully at her as she left. Once the door had shut behind her, he slumped back into bed. It wasn't another ten minutes before he was sound asleep and snoring.

Miriam returned and set the coffee and biscuits on the end table beside his bed, not daring to wake him a second time. The man was never happy, only ever content when he was asleep. Everything and everyone around him was never good enough, never quite right.

Miriam eyed the spoiled young man as he lay face down in his king-size bed. She snorted as she left the room, shaking her head. She pitied the woman who'd marry him someday. She'd have to be long-suffering to put up with his demands!

Charles awoke hours later feeling groggy and miserable. His head was pounding with the after effects of last night's bingeing. He spied the tray of coffee and biscuits lying beside his bed, right next to the pack of cigarettes he'd acquired at some point the night before. His brow furrowed to see the pack sitting there on the nightstand. He wasn't a smoker, but he did enjoy the occasional cigarette at a party. Now that he was sober, the cigarettes held absolutely no appeal. He hoped Miriam wasn't in the mood for gossip. She'd undoubtedly noticed the pack sitting there. If she were feeling spiteful she might think to relay that little detail to his father.

Charles reached over for the cup of coffee only to discover that it was ice cold. He made an irritated sound in the back of his throat, but hefted the tray onto his lap and began tucking in. It was now late afternoon, and he had a lot of work to do before he went back to university tomorrow. He shouldn't have gone out with the guys last night, but he'd been inconsolably depressed; he'd had to do something! Ever since Elizabeth had unwittingly spoiled his proposal, he'd been thinking, wondering if maybe he was about to make a mistake. Elizabeth hadn't revealed any doubts about him before, at least none that he could remember. Maybe she'd somehow guessed that he intended to propose and she had wanted to put him off. Maybe she wasn't ready for marriage yet. Maybe . . .

Charles shook his head and popped a sugar-dusted biscuit into his mouth. It was dry and stale. He almost choked on it, and he had to swallow a hasty gulp of cold coffee to wash it down. He'd have to remember to chastise Miriam for her poor service. The least she could have done was realize that he'd fallen asleep again and then waited to serve him a fresh cup of coffee when he woke up. And there was absolutely no excuse for the biscuits. These old leavings were like a slap in the face. Charles shook his head and grumbled under his breath. Why was it that no one knew how to do their job properly? Perhaps it was South Africa—one could only expect so much from a third-world country. He decided he wouldn't be so sorry to leave the country after all when he left to follow the Smythes. *Then again* . . . He frowned. At

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

this rate, he wouldn't be following them anywhere. He needed to come up with another plan to propose to Elizabeth. A better plan.

And perhaps now, before he executed that plan, it was a good time to address Elizabeth's doubts about him. He'd ignored her all weekend. She'd called several times on Saturday and once more on Sunday, but he'd wanted nothing to do with her. He was still fuming over what she'd said to him. He'd opted rather to go out with the guys both Saturday and Sunday night. It was Easter weekend, so no bars had been open, but that hadn't stopped them from throwing some real wingding's in one another's flats. The first party had been at his apartment. He'd allowed Miriam all of the next day to clean up after them while he'd slept and recuperated for the second party. That one had lasted until sun-up, which was why he couldn't drag himself out of bed now. Good times, but all that partying had left him with a mountain of unfinished homework and a horrifying headache.

But now Charles felt somehow more at ease and back in command. His life was his to do with as he pleased. He could be happy with or without Elizabeth. She would have to realize that and be careful where she trod, lest she miss out.

Charles finished his cold cup of coffee with a gulp and then rang the bell beside his bed. When Miriam appeared, he held up his empty mug and shook it by the handle, his eyes scathingly narrowed. "I don't suppose a *warm* cup of coffee would be too much to ask?"

"No, sir."

"Good," he nodded, placing his mug on the tray and passing it to her. "And these biscuits are rather disgusting! If we had a dog, I'd suggest you feed them to him, but you can have the remainder if you like. No one will notice if you get any fatter." Miriam shot him a wide-eyed look. He smiled as if he didn't know how rude he was being. "That's the nice thing, I suppose. If you don't take care of yourself, no one expects you to."

Miriam was deadly silent as she left. "I'll be back with your coffee in a minute, sir."

He continued smiling sweetly at her as she went. "Take your time, Miriam." When she was gone he allowed his smile to fade back into a scowl. *Insufferable woman*, he thought.

* * *

Nicholas's first order of business when he returned from Aliwal North was to go visit Shorty Beckett at Swartkop. Not much time

had passed since Shorty's older brother had been killed, and Nicholas felt some responsibility to look after his friend. He was expecting to find Shorty depressed and lackluster, so he brought Bakkies along to help lighten the mood. They crossed the tarmac to the usual roar of engines and the *whoop, whoop, whoop*, of helicopter rotors.

After asking around for him, they found Shorty in the recreation hall, sitting at the bar and laughing with a group of guys clustered around him. Nicholas was surprised to find his friend in such good spirits. They came up behind Shorty and Nicholas caught a brief glimpse of the photo in Shorty's hands. It was a picture of a girl. Shorty turned to them, his freckly face stretched into a happy grin.

"Beaver! Bakkies! How was your holiday?"

Nicholas and Grant traded suspicious glances. "Fine," Nicholas said, answering for them both. "How was yours?"

Shorty just went on grinning. "Well, rotten at first, but . . ." He turned the photo he was holding to Nicholas and Grant so they could see. "Then I met Melissa."

Suddenly Nicholas understood, but when he realized how beautiful the blonde girl in the photo was, he didn't believe it. "You're joking," he said, snatching the photo from Shorty.

"Hey! Give that back!" Jamie said, making a quick grab for the photo. Grant moved to intercept and Jamie's arm was caught grasping blindly between them. Nicholas and Grant inspected the photo, making appreciative noises while Jamie leapt off the barstool and began trying to recover it in earnest. His comparatively diminutive height left him with little choice other than to wait until Nicholas and Grant were done.

"Give me my photo back!" Jamie demanded, getting angry.

"Hold your horses," Nicholas said, holding it high out of reach, and keeping Jamie back with his other hand. "If you'll recall, I once had a photo like this and it got passed all around the school thanks to you." The other guys looked amused.

"So? Who is this, Shorty?" Grant asked. "You don't really expect us to believe she's your girl."

"Well . . ." Jamie trailed off with a burgeoning smile. His face red, his freckles standing out boldly from the exertion of trying unsuccessfully to get his photo back. "I don't know if I would call her *my* girl . . . I mean we're just seeing each other is all."

"Aha, *seeing* each other," Nicholas said, placing careful

emphasis on the word. He was back to studying the photo carefully, like a jeweler appraising the value of a diamond. "Of course you are . . ."

Jamie sighed. "Are you done yet?"

"Well . . ." Nicholas moved very slowly and deliberately to hand the photo over. As soon as it was within reach, Jamie snatched it back and tucked it into his pocket. "You're lucky I didn't pass it around the base," Nicholas said, grinning.

"Yeah, yeah, real big of you," Jamie replied.

"So?" Grant prompted. "Tell us about her! What's she like?"

"Well," Shorty began, leading them around the bar to a set of cushy chairs. "She's amazing!" he said.

"Ok, hold on, start at the beginning," Nicholas said as they sat down. "Where did you meet?"

"I went to visit my family in Johannesburg over Easter. A friend of mine was going to a Matric Farewell with his girl on Saturday, and he suggested I go along, you know, just to have some fun. I wasn't really planning to meet anyone there, since all the great girls go to those dances with guys."

Nicholas sat forward, elbows propped on his knees. He was intrigued. "Go on."

"Well, turns out Melissa did have a date, but they were having some kind of fight, so he decided to go with her friend instead, figuring he'd make her mad or jealous or something. And bang! There I met her, all alone by the punch bowl."

Grant burst out laughing. "You're a vulture, Shorty. Circling, circling, just waiting for the carrion of dead relationships."

Jamie wrinkled his nose, but then he broke into a wild grin. "Yeah, I guess I am."

Nicholas shook his head. "So? You met, you danced? You . . ."

"We kissed."

Grant whistled softly. "What, right away? I don't think we've been giving you enough credit all these years."

Jamie laughed. "No, of course we went dancing first."

A barman came by at that moment to ask them if they'd like anything to drink. Shorty ordered a round of beers. "It's on me, guys," he said.

"Thanks," Nicholas replied. Grant nodded eagerly and gestured for Jamie to go on with his story. Jamie described the night they'd met in more detail, and in the process he let slip that Melissa came from a very rich family in Johannesburg.

Nicholas raised his eyebrows and asked. "How rich?"

"*Stinking* rich—not that it's important. . . ." he said, trailing off meaningfully. Money might not ultimately matter to Shorty, but he wasn't going to sneer at it either.

Grant was looking skeptical. "What did she see in you?"

Shorty puffed out his chest. "My masculinity. My charm." He tapped his head. "Let's not forget my wit and intellect."

Grant snorted. "Wit, I'll grant you, but you must be a grand actor to pull off the rest."

Shorty began laughing at that.

"Okay," Nicholas said, "Just to clarify, by *stinking* rich . . ."

"I mean her father owns Woolworths in Johannesburg."

That silenced both Nicholas and Grant and left their mouths hanging wide open. Woolworths was a chain of high-end stores in South Africa, renowned for quality and a wide-variety of products. Not everyone could afford to shop at Woolworths.

"So . . ." Nicholas said, recovering slightly from the shock of that revelation. "We've established that she's rich."

They all burst out laughing at that. Their beers arrived and they took a moment to raise them in a toast. "To Shorty's new girl," Nicholas said.

"May we all be so bloody lucky!" Grant chimed in.

They clinked glasses, and Nicholas nodded sideways to Grant. "Sounds like you might have some competition there."

Shorty snorted and waved a dismissive hand at Grant as he settled back in his chair. "Well, I'm not planning to let her meet the likes of you two."

Grant grinned at that. "Why not?"

Shorty was gazing at the ceiling now, a faraway look in his eyes. "I wonder if she'll agree to join a convent. . . ."

Nicholas barked out a laugh. "Fat chance. A beautiful girl like her? Besides, I bet her father tried that years ago."

"A man can dream, Beaver. A man can dream. . . ."

Chapter 21

Elizabeth and Charles were just sitting down to dinner at a private table in a fancy restaurant along Table Bay. The restaurant was on the third floor of a hotel; they were sitting on the balcony, overlooking a small harbor. The terrace and the quaint cobblestone street below were lit in gold and vermillion by old-fashioned streetlamps, giving the area a quaint, anachronistic charm. This was no modern, bustling corner of the city, but a sleepy fisherman's town.

Elizabeth reached across the table for Charles's hand and smiled. "I'm glad we were able to resolve our differences," she said.

"So am I. Where you managed to get the idea that I'm hiding something, I'll never know."

She frowned. "Well, I'm sorry. Sometimes things seem a little too good to be true, you know?"

He nodded. "Yes, I know exactly what you mean."

"You scare me, Charles."

He raised his eyebrows curiously and sat back with a frown. "I scare you? What like a monster in the closet?"

The waiter came by and interrupted them by placing their menus on the table. He asked them what they'd like to drink, and Charles made a brief inquiry about their wines. He selected one by a fancy name that Elizabeth could barely recognize let alone appreciate, and the waiter hurried off to fill their order. Charles turned back to her with a smile, this time reaching for her hand across the table.

"Now, where were we? Oh yes, you were busy flattering me by comparing me to the boogeyman."

Elizabeth laughed. "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Making fun of me."

"Why?" he asked, his brown eyes sparkling with mischief. "You started it."

"Well, then let me end it. I didn't mean to make fun of you."

What I meant was that . . ." she trailed off, trying to find the right words so as not to offend him. "We each put our best foot forward."

Charles nodded. "Why would we not?"

"Exactly. So whatever defects you have, I have yet to see them, right? I don't have a full picture of you Charles, even after dating you for almost two years! Don't you think that's strange?"

He was frowning now, and she feared their conversation was taking a bad turn. "What do you mean strange? Perhaps the picture you're looking for doesn't exist, Elizabeth. Why would you want me to have defects?"

"It's not that I want you to have them, it's that everyone does! You're no exception. So, what are your defects, Charles? You have me awfully curious."

He sat there, staring at her with pursed lips and furrowed brow for a long, awkward moment. Elizabeth waited patiently with her eyebrows raised. The waiter came and poured their wine. Charles took a cautious sip of his and ordered tempura prawns for an appetizer.

"Surely you know your own defects?" she asked as the waiter left.

He shrugged. "You want me to make them up?"

Elizabeth frowned, feeling foolish. "Let me start," she said.

"You?" he asked.

"Yes, I'll tell you my defects."

"I already know one: mistrustful."

Elizabeth conceded that with a nod and a small smile. "I'm also naïve—"

"You don't sound it. You sound positively jaded. You look for the worst in people. Let's add cynical to your faults. I believe that's the opposite of *naïve*, princess."

Elizabeth sighed and reached for Charles's hand once more. He didn't pull away, but he didn't look amused either. "Charles! You're misunderstanding me."

"Do explain."

"I'm not looking for your faults to throw them in your face and use them as reasons not to love you."

"Indeed? I thought that's exactly what you're doing."

She shook her head. "I'm looking for your faults so that I can love you more. It's easy to love a person for everything that's good about them, but true love is about accepting the good things with

the bad. How can I truly love you if I haven't seen anything bad that I must also accept?"

Charles sighed eloquently. "Okay, you win. I'll tell you about my faults."

She nodded for him to go on.

"I'm exacting. I like things to be just so."

"Demanding?"

"I know what I like and what I don't."

"Okay."

"I don't like to be questioned. . . . something you've been doing an awful lot of lately."

Elizabeth nodded. "Pride, then." Charles seemed to consider that, as if it didn't quite fit with his perception of himself. Before he could object, she said, "I already know about all of that. Isn't there something else? Something you've been keeping from me?"

"Such as?"

She shrugged. "What about vices? Have you any?"

"What, like women, alcohol, and gambling? I date only one woman at a time. I rarely drink. And gambling, well I suppose there's the occasional game of poker."

"Really? You play poker?"

"Once in a blue moon."

"I didn't know that."

He broke into a wry grin. "Shocking isn't it? Let me shock you further. I've lost a great deal of . . ." Elizabeth's eyes were already wide with anticipation. "Pennies."

"You play for pennies?"

"I suppose you were expecting something more serious from my gambling addiction."

Elizabeth sighed and shook her head. "So you really aren't hiding anything?" her eyes were wide and innocent, full of wonder.

"No, Elizabeth, that's what I've been trying to tell you! Except for some reason you won't believe me."

She shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry, Charles," she said, her voice a whisper. She raised her glass for a toast. "Let's forget this nonsense."

He raised his glass to clink it with hers. "To the forgetting of nonsense."

They drank to that, and Elizabeth luxuriated in the warm, fruity flavor of the wine. It soothed her anxieties and calmed her

spirit. She imagined curling up on the couch with Charles in his father's penthouse, a roaring fire in the fireplace. The days were growing colder quickly now. The rains had come and the air had a distinct, muggy chill, especially at night. Elizabeth gave an involuntary shiver, and Charles stood quickly from the table.

"You're cold," he said, already shrugging out of his sports jacket. "Here."

She didn't object as he wrapped it around her shoulders. "We could go inside," he suggested, casting a quick glance over his shoulder to the warm glow of the lattice windows separating the terrace from the inside of the restaurant.

She shook her head. "No, it's okay. Come sit beside me."

He smiled and dragged his chair over. She leaned against him and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. They sat like that, sipping their wine and watching the boats coasting in and out of the harbor below, and Elizabeth thought, not for the first time, *this is too good to be true*. But she stopped herself there. She'd questioned Charles enough to see that he was sincere. He wasn't hiding anything. Maybe he wasn't letting himself be vulnerable around her, but that was okay. One day she'd see that side of him. She supposed that kind of intimacy was something she could really only expect from marriage.

Marriage.

She frowned, wondering if that was where she and Charles were headed. What would she say if he proposed? But they were a long way off from that. She had only turned eighteen a few months ago.

She nestled in closer to Charles, and He kissed her on the top of her head.

"What are you thinking about, princess?"

"The future. What about you?" she asked, glancing up at him.

He smiled slowly. "The very same."

* * *

Nicholas was reading Lynn's reply to his latest letter. He kept reading and re-reading the last line: *Come and visit me!* it said. He was turning the idea over and over in his head, already imagining what a great time they'd have together.

Bulawayo was only a five hour drive from where he was stationed in Pretoria. If he could get even two days' leave he'd be able to make the trip. He decided to ask his flight sergeant that afternoon. He'd need a weekend, plus a day or two for travel. The

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

base wasn't terribly busy right now, so it was the perfect time to request leave—maybe with a small bribe thrown in to sweeten the deal for his sergeant.

At his earliest opportunity, he went to Sergeant Koets to make his case. The sergeant had him sit down in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

“So, Nicholas, what can I do for you?” he asked, speaking in Afrikaans.

Nicholas replied in the same language: “I'd like to request a few days' leave, sir.”

“Oh? What for?”

“Well . . .” Nicholas trailed off.

“Hmmm . . . mmhmm. I know what that means.”

Nicholas grinned. “It's to see a girl.”

“Always is,” the sergeant said, leaning back in his chair. “Always is. But look, if I gave you leave to see her, soon I'd have every one of my men coming to me asking for leave.”

“I'll keep my mouth shut.”

“They'll notice you're gone.”

“I'll tell them it was to visit a sick relative.”

“Your grandmother, I suppose?”

“Could be.”

The sergeant broke into a gruff burst of laughter and then clapped his hands together decisively. “Okay, Nicholas! But just this once, you hear?”

Nicholas stood up with a grin. “Thank you, sir.”

“Get me your papers so I can sign them, and then it'll be official.”

Nicholas nodded. “Will do.”

“By tomorrow afternoon, no later!” the sergeant called after him.

Nicholas turned from the door. “You've got it.”

Chapter 22

Flight Sergeant Koets granted Nicholas three days leave—a weekend and the following Monday, which Nicholas would use for the return trip. Today, Saturday, Nicholas made the 7 hour drive to Bullawayo. The journey was made all the longer by Nicholas's impatience. He was dying to see Lynn again. It had been several months since they'd last seen each other at Easter, but he could still remember those three days like they were yesterday.

Now, in just a few minutes, he would see her again. The mere thought of it sent his stomach into figure eights. He was embarrassed to admit to himself that he was nervous. When he drove in through the gates to the Teacher's Training College, that feeling only grew stronger.

Nicholas parked in front of the school and stepped out of the car. It was mid-afternoon, sunny and warm—slightly warmer than Pretoria—the breeze, however, was cool, and the air smelled fresh with a recent rain. Further evidence of the rain was all around him in the lush greenery of the campus. Umbrella-shaped acacia trees stood here and there, proudly dotting the grassy fields. Flowering hedges bordered the school buildings, adding vibrant color to the scene.

Nicholas walked up the short set of stairs to the entrance of the school on legs that felt weak and rubbery. He was giddy with anticipation. The receptionist behind the front desk of the school was on the phone when Nicholas walked in, so he spent a moment looking around the empty waiting room. He spied a nearby bouquet of familiar white flowers, spreading their fragrant aroma through the lobby. They were arum lilies. He walked up to the flowers and reached out to touch the silken white petals, assuring himself that they were real. Just the sight of those flowers brought back so many wonderful memories, memories made haunting now with the promise of what might have been. He shook his head and looked away. The receptionist was just setting down the phone as he walked up to her desk.

“May I help you?” she asked.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

"Yes, I'm looking for Lynn Gibson. She goes to school here."

"She lives on the campus?"

Nicholas nodded.

"You'll have to go to the students' quarters and ask for her there. It's the big stone building with the creepers growing up the sides."

Nicholas thanked her and left. He found the specified building and walked in through the double wooden doors. When he asked the concierge there for Lynn, he saw a flash of recognition on the woman's face.

"Oh, I'm afraid Miss Gibson is in the infirmary."

Nicholas's eyebrows shot up at that. "Why, what happened?"

The concierge shrugged. "I'm not sure, but I can call to see if she's allowed visitors."

"Please."

After a brief conversation with a nurse, the receptionist said, "You can go see her now if you like."

Nicholas nodded. "Could you point the way?"

"Of course."

Her directions led him back to the main building where he had initially asked for Lynn. The receptionist there was surprised to see him again, but he quickly explained and asked her to show him to the infirmary. When they arrived in the infirmary they talked briefly with the head nurse—Susan—and she pointed the way. Nicholas reached the indicated room a minute later, but he stopped in the open doorway, feeling suddenly like an intruder. Lynn was lying in a room with two beds. Hers was furthest from the door, by the window, while the other stood empty. Lynn had her head turned away from him, as though she were looking out the window, and Nicholas couldn't tell if she were asleep or awake. Sunlight was pouring into the room, giving everything a warm, ethereal look, rather than the sparse, clinical white it might have been. A vase of white flowers stood on the windowsill—like the ones in the lobby they were also Arum Lilies. Nicholas sighed and winced at the rush of memories they evoked. Lynn stirred with the sound. He knocked softly on the door to announce himself properly, and now she turned lazily to see who it was.

She spent a few moments blinking stupidly at him. Nicholas supposed she must have been asleep. He smiled as he crossed over to her bed and sat down beside her. Her eyebrows were

raised, but now she was smiling broadly, and her bright brown eyes were sparkling with life. That was a good sign, Nicholas thought. The nurse had explained that she was doing fine, that it had just been a routine illness, but somehow he'd still feared the worst.

"Hello," he said.

She shook her head slowly. "If this is a dream, don't pinch me. I don't want to wake up."

He reached out to grab her hand and clasped it tightly between both of his. "And if it's not?"

"Then don't let me fall asleep."

He smiled at that. "What happened, Lynn? What are you doing here? The nurse said you were sick?"

She reached out to cup his cheek with the hand that wasn't holding his. "It's just a mild flu. I'm better already, but they won't let me out."

Nicholas frowned. "Mild?" He gestured to her surroundings. "They don't put people in the infirmary for a mild flu. . . ."

She rolled her eyes and smiled as if it was all greatly exaggerated. "I had a high fever. They wanted to keep me here in case it was malaria."

Nicholas's eyes widened. "That serious?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. They're just paranoid."

"Ah." He nodded slowly.

"Nicholas!" She exclaimed softly. "You came!" she said, as if only realizing it now.

He grinned. "I told you I was coming."

She nodded. "I received your letter just a few days ago."

"So you were expecting me."

"Yes." She smiled.

They talked like that on the edge of her bed for a whole hour before someone came by to interrupt them with a soft knock on the open door. They both turned toward the sound and saw the head nurse, Susan, coming into the room. She smiled brightly at both of them as she stopped at the foot of Lynn's bed.

"You seem to be doing fine now, Miss Gibson."

"I'm feeling fine," she said.

"Good. Why don't you go get some fresh air, then? It's a beautiful day and I'm sure it could only be good for you to get out of this stuffy room. Why not take this handsome young man of yours down to the rose gardens for a while?"

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Lynn smiled and turned to Nicholas. "Give me fifteen minutes?"

"Of course." Nicholas nodded and stood up from her bed. "I'll be waiting."

Outside, in the small waiting room of the infirmary, Lynn's 15 minutes turned into more than half an hour, but when she finally emerged from the long, white hallway leading to the wardrooms, she was a picture of radiance. Her golden hair fell in a wavy cascade over her shoulders, her face, now made up, was no longer sickly pale but full of color and life. Her light, honey brown eyes were accentuated by mascara, and rather than wearing her pajamas, she was dressed in blue jeans with a brown, embroidered halter top that brought out the color in her eyes.

She met him in the waiting room and wrapped her arms around his neck for a quick kiss. From there she led him by the hand through the clinical white hallways of the infirmary to a side door. They walked outside, straight into a fragrant rose garden that was part cultivated and part wild. The aroma from the flowers was almost overpowering. Nicholas found his gaze wandering from side to side of the rose-lined walkway.

Lynn flashed Nicholas a quick smile as they walked into the speckled shade of a long, tunnel-shaped trellis with red and white climbing roses growing over and through it. "Beautiful isn't it?"

Looking at her, he said, "Gorgeous," and he stopped halfway down the rose-lined tunnel to pull her close for a kiss. After a long moment, she broke away with a smile.

"You have no idea how I've missed that," she said.

"You're not the only one," he replied, and he then tugged her along gently once more. The cobblestone path ended in a circle with a bubbling fountain at the center. Benches were arrayed around the fountain, and they picked one at random to sit on. The bench was only partly shaded by a nearby tree, but it was already late afternoon, and the sun wasn't very strong. There, with the sounds of the birds chirping and the fountain bubbling behind them, they were able to relax completely. The garden was an isolated paradise, a private grotto where the rest of the world and all its pressing concerns ceased to exist.

They passed another hour there, talking and laughing, catching up on the details from each other's lives until the shadows lengthened, and a cool darkness crept between the trees and flowers. Lynn gave an abrupt shiver, and Nicholas frowned.

"You need to get back inside," he said.

"No, I'm fine."

But Nicholas shook his head. "No, you're just getting over a bad flu."

"I'm better now."

Nicholas looked skeptical. He caught a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye and turned toward it. The head nurse was standing at the end of the flower-lined trellis. She smiled and nodded to Lynn. "They're about to serve dinner, dear."

"Thank you, Susan. I'll be in in just a minute," Lynn replied.

The nurse hesitated, as if she wanted to insist, but she gave a reluctant nod and turned to leave.

"You see?" Nicholas said reasonably, one hand tucking the hair behind her ear and then returning to stroke her cheek. "I'm not the only one who's worried."

Lynn ignored the amused smile on his face, and met his expression with a look of genuine concern. "I don't want you to leave. It feels like you just got here!" Her hands found his face now, too, and she pulled him closer until their foreheads touched.

Nicholas sighed. "Tomorrow we can spend the whole day together, I promise."

Her lips brushed his, caressing them, and then she gave him a lingering kiss. When they broke away, Nicholas let out a long, controlled breath, trying to calm himself. Lynn seemed to realize the effect she'd had on him, and she stifled a laugh. Then, more seriously, she said, "I hope I don't make you sick."

"In exchange for kisses like that, it would be worth it."

She stood up from the bench and held her hand out to him, smiling broadly in the fading light. "Walk me inside?"

"Of course," he said, taking her by the hand. They walked back slowly, reluctant to leave the garden paradise behind and return to the sterile white halls of the infirmary.

Dinner was already waiting for Lynn when she returned to her room. Nicholas stayed to keep her company while she ate. When she was finished eating, he noticed that she was having trouble keeping her eyes open, so he bid her adieu, saying that she needed to rest. She objected strongly and made a good attempt to convince him that she wasn't tired, but after another ten minutes of talking, he could see that she was having trouble keeping her eyes open. Whatever had laid her up in the infirmary had to have been fairly serious. He stood up from the bed and kissed her

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

forehead. As he did so, he could feel that she had a light fever. "I'll be back tomorrow," he whispered.**

"Come early," she said, holding on to his hand until the last possible second.

"I will."

Half an hour later, as he was climbing the creaky wooden stairway to the door of his hotel, he felt his own fatigue come crashing down on him. It had been a long day. After a quick shower, he lay in bed staring up at the ceiling, almost dizzy with exhaustion. He conjured up an image of Lynn's smiling face, and with it, a smile. With that memory firmly fixed in his mind's eye, he let himself drift off to sleep, hoping to carry her with him into his dreams.

**

This hospital bedside scene with Lynn and Nicholas get's to be repeated some 20 years later, in a most dramatic way, and with so many destinies hanging in the balance, the inter-connected lives of many characters in these novels are changed forever!

Chapter 23

Nicholas awoke with a fleeting afterimage of Lynn's face hovering just for an instant in the air above him. He sat up with a frown. He'd had a strange, unsettled night of tossing and turning. If he'd dreamed anything at all, he couldn't remember what, but he hadn't slept well. He felt groggy and tired, but a quick glance at the alarm clock beside his bed told him it was already late morning, and he couldn't justify sleeping in any longer.

It was strange that he hadn't slept well, since he should have slept better than ever now that he had his own bed and a quiet room, instead of the noisy barracks he shared with two dozen other men at Waterkloof.

As he took a shower, Nicholas felt his fatigue feeding into a strange, almost forbidding feeling which cast a pall over his thoughts. He shook his head to clear it away, and went to open the blinds and let some light into his hotel room. The day was already bright and sunny. Seeing that, his spirits lifted. The sunny weather boded well at least. Last night, when he'd asked the concierge about any tourist attractions in the city, he'd heard about a famous park nearby, the Hillside Dam Park. Today he planned to go there with Lynn. He'd buy some food and prepare a picnic for them. The change of scenery would do her good. He frowned, remembering the light fever she'd been running last night, and hoped she was better today.

When Nicholas arrived at Lynn's room, it was just before lunch time. He knocked lightly on her door. The nurse was in the room with her. Both she and Lynn looked up and smiled to see him there.

"Come in, Nicholas," Lynn beckoned.

He came to stand beside Lynn's bed.

"I'll be back shortly with your lunch," the nurse said, already leaving to give them privacy.

"Actually," Nicholas began, "I was hoping to take Lynn out to Hillside Park for a picnic."

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

The nurse hesitated only briefly. "Of course, that's a wonderful idea!" she said.

An hour later—half of that time spent waiting for Lynn to get ready—they were walking through the sunny park. The birds were out and chirping cheerfully, lifting Nicholas's previously dour mood. Nicholas carried their picnic lunch in one hand and held Lynn's in his other as they walked through the park. Here everything was cultivated and green. The grass was neatly cut, the flowering hedges trimmed, the trees growing proud and tall. The sheer variety of flora was staggering, with plants Nicholas had never even seen before. And there in the distance, lay the shimmering blue water of the city reservoirs.

They found a cool, shady corner by the edge of the dam, beneath a flowering yellow acacia tree, and sat down there. A stand of purple floss flowers and red, small-flowered canna was growing beside them, near the water's edge. Lynn ran a hand through the fuzzy purple floss flowers, and then turned to him with a smile. "This is so perfect, thank you! I can't imagine a better way to spend the day!"

Nicholas grinned and handed her one of the two paper bags he'd brought. "Just wait until you see what I prepared for lunch."

"Oh?" she asked curiously, peering inside her bag. She reached in and pulled out an ordinary-looking sandwich. "Ham sandwiches?"

"With cheese," he said, as though that made all the difference. "And don't forget the apple."

She laughed and flashed him a happy grin. "A veritable feast, then."

"I bet you didn't know I could cook."

She shook her head in amusement. "No, you're right, I didn't."

They ate quietly, watching the birds flitting through the air. One of them, a yellow weaver finch, seemed to be in more of a hurry than the rest. Nicholas pointed him out, and they watched the bird flying back and forth with dry blades of grass clutched jealously in its beak. One blade of grass at a time, the little finch added to the nest he was busily weaving in the acacia tree over their heads. They watched him curiously while they ate; marveling at how dexterously the little bird used his beak to weave strands of grass together.

"He's a hard worker," Lynn commented, but Nicholas's attention had already drifted elsewhere. He was staring fixedly at

an old couple walking hand-in-hand along the edge of the reservoir. There was nothing particularly remarkable about them, apart from the fact that the woman was holding a white Arum lily, just like the ones he'd seen in numerous bouquets around the school. His gaze lingered on that flower and the old woman holding it.

Lynn followed his gaze to that old couple, and then she looked back up at him, her expression curious. "What is it?"

Nicholas shook his head. "No, nothing . . ." he said slowly, as if coming out of a daze. He flashed her a quick smile.

"You recognize them?" she asked, nodding to the old couple.

"No, but for a moment they reminded me of some people I once knew."

"Ah . . ." Lynn commented, her expression bemused.

He reached for her hand, his eyes intent upon hers. "I'm sorry. You were saying something before I got distracted?"

Lynn smiled and pointed overhead. Nicholas turned to look, and he saw high above them in the acacia tree, the weaver finch was hovering off to one side of his nest, tweeting furiously and beating his wings as another small, unremarkable brown bird viciously attacked his work, tearing at the nest with its beak, and ripping at it with its talons.

"What?!" Nicholas exclaimed. "Why doesn't he do something? That other bird must be half his size."

"That other bird is his mate."

Nicholas turned to Lynn in horror. "His mate?" He barked a short laugh. "I suppose he cheated."

Lynn smiled and shook her head. "Look closer."

Nicholas obediently turned to look again, but all he could see was a fine rain of dry grass fluttering down from the tree. At last the nest broke free of the tree branch it was tied to and it fell softly to the ground a dozen feet away from them. Lynn stood up and went to fetch it.

Both birds quickly flitted off, and Lynn returned with the broken nest. She handed it to Nicholas. He turned it over in his hands. It was incredibly intricate and light. "Why'd she tear it down?" he asked.

"She was testing it. Making sure it would safely guard her eggs through whatever storms might come."

"So that's it? It didn't meet her satisfaction, so she tore it down? Maybe she's just too picky."

Lynn smiled. "He will try again. That was probably his first attempt to make her a nest. He'll do better next time."

Nicholas snorted. "Seems to me like he went to a lot of trouble for the wrong bird."

Lynn smiled and reached for his hand. "Maybe, but we don't choose who to fall in love with, do we?" He looked up from the nest to see her staring adoringly at him. He met that look with a grin. "Where do you come from, Nicholas?"

He raised his eyebrows in bemusement. "What do you mean? I'm from Sterkspruit, you know that."

"No, I mean what's your past, where have you been, and where are you headed?"

"That's a lot of questions," he said, laughing lightly, but his eyes skipped away from hers. They were also uncomfortable questions.

"Let's start with the past."

"What makes you think I have one?" he asked, his gaze on the horizon.

"Everyone has a past."

He turned to her with a smile. "True, but we live in the present, and we live *for* the future, so the past isn't all that important."

Lynn was frowning, clearly unsatisfied. "I suppose."

Nicholas hesitated. "Okay, what do you want to know?"

"Well, I don't know, what about your last girlfriend?"

Nicholas looked away. "That's a long story."

"I'm a good listener," she pressed.

He shrugged, and then told her the barest details of how he met Elizabeth and how they'd broken up. He mentioned that she'd stood him up at her Matric Farewell, and that that was how it had ended, but he didn't mention how much trouble he'd taken to be there for that dance.

"I see," she said. "That's it? A summer romance?"

"Well, I had another girlfriend at home in Sterkspruit. Her name was Denise."

"So you had *two* girlfriends, then," she said, arching an eyebrow at him.

He laughed at her meaningful tone. "They knew about each other, so it wasn't like that, but . . . Denise was more of a friend to me. I'm not sure she saw me that way, but we grew up together. We were . . . *comfortable*."

"So you didn't really like her."

He frowned. "No, I did, I just . . . I don't know. It was complicated."

Now it was her turn to laugh. "It sounds that way."

"So who was your last boyfriend?" he asked.

"Well," she began, picking at the blades of grass at her feet. "His name was Kyle."

She proceeded to tell him about Kyle. Lynn didn't go into many details, and she finished with a shrug, as though to emphasize that Kyle hadn't been an important part of her life. Nicholas nodded and smiled.

"Come on," he said, standing up from the grass and brushing himself off. "Let's go for a walk."

Lynn joined him in standing. "Where do you want to go?" she asked, looking around.

He took her hand in both of his and looked deeply into her eyes. "Wherever! So long as I'm with you."

Later, as they were walking down along the banks of the dam, they came upon a grove of familiar white lilies. Nicholas stooped to pick one of the white flowers, and he turned to hand it to Lynn. She smiled graciously and lifted it to smell the fragrant nectar.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"Some people say those flowers are unlucky," Nicholas commented as he watched her admire the flower.

"Really?" she asked. "I've never heard that."

He flashed her a grin. "And I've never believed it."

His luck was definitely changing. Maybe lightning could strike in the same place twice. He certainly felt like he'd been struck by something.

* * *

Edwin was sitting on the board of the directors listening to yet another proposal to sink money into the new tannery they were building in Paarl. It was in moments like this that he wondered why he had followed his wife's advice to vote in favor of the proposal to construct that tannery in the first place. She'd argued that there weren't a lot of directors like him, that the company would probably choose to promote him and have him manage both tanneries.

Except that hadn't happened. The board had voted for a young up-and-coming manager to be promoted and manage the new tannery. The new manager wasn't yet sitting on the board of directors, but it was only a matter of time before he would be

appointed.

And what had Edwin gotten out of it? Nothing. The existing tannery in Wellington remained as it was, with old, broken down equipment, whilst the new one would be twice as productive as his once it was finished. The only thing he could hope for now would be for the new manager to somehow slip up and for the board to realize their mistake and appoint him, Edwin, instead.

Edwin had already subtly made that suggestion to the chairman, saying that the new tannery would require someone of greater years and experience to manage it, but Mr. Gaines had merely reassured him by saying that the new tannery would in no way threaten his job as the managing director of the existing tannery in Wellington. The chairman had reassured him that they weren't building the new tannery to replace the old one, but to expand and increase Western Tanning's overall output. Edwin wasn't reassured by any of that.

When they came to the matter of new business on the agenda, the chairman informed them all of an upcoming leather convention in the United States. It would mean a week-long vacation, but the company would only pay for the airfare, leaving the bulk of the expenses to whoever went. The chairman was asking for volunteers to go, saying that it would be a great opportunity for them to learn more about the modern techniques, trends, and equipment that they'd be using in the new tannery in Paarl. With his eyes fixed firmly on Edwin, the chairman went on to say that they could also apply those more modern techniques to their existing tanneries. Now everyone turned to look at Edwin, and he squirmed beneath the combined weight of their stares. Suddenly it no longer seemed like a matter of volunteering.

"Ah, well, I might be interested in going," Edwin said slowly.

"Good!" the chairman said, slapping his hands down on the table for emphasis. "It's settled then. Edwin will go to the leather convention and report back to us with his findings."

As Edwin was leaving the boardroom, it was with a heavy frown and a nagging feeling that he'd been manipulated. The chairman came up to him and slapped him on the back. "Don't forget, here are the details for your trip." Edwin stopped and turned to see the chairman holding a manila folder out to him. He accepted the folder and looked briefly through the contents. "In there is everything you'll need," the chairman said, grinning broadly. "I have high hopes that it will revolutionize the way we do

things.”

“Well,” Edwin sighed, “I’ll be sure to glean as much information as I can for us.”

“That’s the spirit!” the chairman said, slapping him on the back once more.

Edwin watched the chairman’s silver-haired head bob and weave through the crowd of board members as they left the room. He looked through the manila envelope once more and sighed a second time. Constance wouldn’t be happy with him. The trip would be expensive. More than anything, he would be there doing research for the rookie manager of the new tannery, and all at his own expense.

He didn’t have to wonder about what she’d say to that.

* * *

“Well, of course you shouldn’t have volunteered without my permission!” As predicted, Constance was not amused. Edwin had already apologized, so the only thing left was to weather the storm. “But . . .”

Edwin’s ears pricked up with that word. It was the window he needed to escape. Whatever followed, he should agree with it wholeheartedly.

“I suppose that there will be plenty of opportunities to network in such a convention. . . .”

“Well, yes, that is one of the purposes of it,” Edwin said with furrowed brow. He wasn’t sure where she was headed with that. He was sitting up in bed, the folder Mr. Gaines had given him for the trip lay open on his lap. Constance was sitting beside him, picking through the materials. “I’m sure I’ll meet plenty of important people. And of course I’ll learn a lot about how to better run the tannery here in Wellington,” Edwin said.

“Well, it’s settled then; we’ll just have to go.”

“We?” Edwin asked, now more curious than ever. “You mean you and me?”

“Well, of course you and me. Who else?”

“Why would you want to come? The company won’t pay for your airfare.”

“No, but since you’ll have to pay for everything else anyway, we may as well make the best of it. We’ll make it a vacation,” she said, smiling now. “That way it won’t seem like such a waste of money.”

“Well, it would be nice to have company. . . .”

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

"Of course it would," she said, patting his knee.

"But I'll have to spend a lot of time at the convention, you know. Are you sure you won't be bored, sitting around the hotel all day waiting for me?"

"Who says I'm going to sit around the hotel waiting for you? I'll attend the convention with you."

Edwin sighed. "It's not free to enter, you know."

"Well, we'll just have to suffer the extra expense."

He shook his head slowly. "Why would you want to attend? I'm sure it will be terribly boring for you."

"Nonsense," she said. "An opportunity to educate oneself is never boring."

"If you say so, dear."

"I do say so."

They lapsed into an awkward silence and Constance spent a moment longer examining the materials in the folder before handing them back to Edwin and telling him to turn out the light.

A few minutes later Edwin lay wide awake and staring at the ceiling. He listened to the sound of his wife's breathing. He could tell when she drifted off from the sudden silence which fell in the room. That silence gave him time to think and consider this strange new turn of events. He knew his wife had an angle, some reason she hadn't yet voiced for which she wanted to accompany him to the leather convention. The burning question was what? What possible reason could she have?

Chapter 24

Nicholas was sitting in the booth of a local diner in Pretoria, waiting for a highly-anticipated Sunday morning brunch of pancakes and sausages. Jamie Beckett was sitting opposite him, waiting for the same, and talking about his girlfriend, Melissa. Shorty's girlfriend seemed too good to be true—beautiful, smart, educated, and rich. What didn't she have going for her? When Jamie seemed to be running out of breath, Nicholas decided it was time to add his own relationship news.

Things with Lynn were going so well that it was time for his friends to know about her. They'd long passed that uncertain stage where things could go either way. Now he felt like his relationship with Lynn was stable. He'd returned from his visit with her only a week ago to find her reply to his last letter waiting for him. She had gushed on for half a page about how wonderful it would be to see him again, about how much she missed him, and how much he meant to her. After reading all of that, he'd felt a familiar lightness in his steps, like if he didn't have his feet on the ground he might just float away. It had been a long time since he'd felt that. It was a welcome return to those first few weeks after having met Elizabeth, when anything was possible and the world had seemed so full of life and hope—the future hanging there before him like a beautiful masterpiece, painted in all the most vivid colors. Nicholas couldn't keep the broad grin from his face as he thought about it. He saw Shorty staring suspiciously at him, and he wiped the grin off his face. Shorty had been saying something, but Nicholas hadn't been paying any attention.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Nicholas asked.

"What are you so smiley about?" Shorty asked.

"Oh, nothing," Nicholas replied, diverting his attention to his water glass and taking a cautious sip.

"No, that's definitely something. Who is she?"

Nicholas looked amused. "Why does it have to be about a girl?"

"Come on, Beavster, I know you. If you're grinning like that it's always about a girl."

"Can't I just be happy for a friend?" he asked through a smile.

"No."

"Well, I *am* happy for you, Shorty, but . . ."

Jamie's eyes were twinkling with anticipation. "I knew it!"

Nicholas replied with an irrepressible grin. "Her name's Lynn."

He quickly told Jamie all the details, starting with how he and Lynn had met over Easter. Jamie listened with polite interest until the end, and then he adopted a wounded look. "You mean you've known her all this time, and you didn't say a thing? All this time I've been talking about Missy, and you could have said, hey, I have a girl, too, Shorty. Who else knows about this girl of yours? I suppose I'm the last to know?"

Nicholas was laughing. "No, actually you're the first to know."

That stopped Jamie in his tracks. "Oh." He broke into a sudden grin. "Well, she sounds great, Nick."

"Yeah, she is."

"Does she know that?"

Nicholas looked up from studying the salt and pepper shakers. "What do you mean?"

Their food arrived then. Steaming stacks of pancakes with a big bottle of golden syrup. Jamie's eyes went wide and his mouth hung open in eager anticipation. Nicholas half-expected to see him start drooling, but Jamie shut his mouth before that happened. He reached for the syrup and proceeded to pour half the bottle on his plate. "I mean," Jamie said, licking the syrup from his fingers and passing the sticky bottle to Nicholas. "Have you told her what she means to you? Girls can't get enough of that you know. They just love hearing how great they are, and if you don't tell them, they sort of think that it's because you're too busy telling someone else."

"You're saying that if I don't tell her what she means to me, she's going to think I have someone else who means more to me?"

Jamie shrugged eloquently and carved out a man-sized bite from the mountain of pancakes on his plate. He chewed vigorously for a moment before answering. "You only see her now and then, right? I mean, she lives five hours away, and you only get to see her when you have leave."

"Yeah . . ."

"So if you're not giving her a whole lot of good reasons why she's the only one for you, she's got to be thinking about who else you're seeing. I mean, think about it, that's what happened with

Elizabeth, right? You waited too long to tell her how you felt about her, so she figured you weren't really serious and she found someone else who was."

Nicholas abruptly stopped chewing. That reasoning hit him like a slap in the face. Was that really what had happened? Nicholas swallowed and winced. "You think?"

"Of course I think! It's you who's not thinking! My advice? Tell her how you feel before someone else beats you to it—again."

Nicholas was nodding absently, mulling over that revelation as he ate. "I think you're right, Shorty."

"Of course, I'm right," he said through a mouthful of pancakes. "I'm always right."

Nicholas laughed. "Yeah, yeah, eat your food balloon head."

Later that afternoon, as Nicholas was walking back to base, he was still thinking about Shorty's advice. It made a scary amount of sense. Here Lynn was telling him in every letter she wrote how much she adored him and missed him and wanted to see him again, and he was still holding back, waiting for some sort of reassurance that if he gave her his heart, she wouldn't kick it back to him as Elizabeth had. If Lynn was willing to take the risk to tell him how she felt about him, why couldn't he do the same?

It was time to fix that.

As soon as he was back on base, Nicholas headed over to his barracks and began writing his reply to Lynn's letter. When he actually sat down and thought about it, it was easy to tell her how he felt about her. With his visit with her in Bullawayo still fresh in his mind, Nicholas covered a whole page, back to front with adoring words. He read through it a couple of times afterward, in case there was something that he needed to change, but everything looked perfect. It was honest, not over the top. He read through Lynn's letter once more, focusing on all the wonderful things she'd said about him, just to make sure he wasn't overreaching, but when he read her words again, he was encouraged. The last line of her letter read: "You're the most wonderful person I've ever met! You make my world better just by being in it. I think I love you, Nicholas. . . ." How could he scare off a girl like that? No, he decided, sealing the envelope. She would appreciate a little honesty in return. It was time to make sure he didn't repeat his previous mistakes. With those thoughts in mind, Nicholas started off to mail his letter, whistling as he went. This time things would be different.

Divine intervention?



It would be 20yrs spent wondering what had happened to each other - before, in one of the strangest twists imaginable, Nicholas and Lynn finally made contact again, from opposite ends of the world, and figured out what had happened to keep them apart as young sweethearts. But welcome as that was, the chain-reaction of events that contact unleashed, changed lives on both sides of the world in such a positive manner, that all of them understood there was a far bigger picture in all of this. Nicholas and Lynn had no way of knowing what they would find 20 years into the future - how a dream would play such a vital role in God's plans for their families, and so many lives were changed.

Chapter 25

Nicholas was flipping through his little pile of mail, searching anxiously for the letter he'd been awaiting - one from Lynn. It had been months since he'd heard from her. Her reply should have arrived long ago, unless she'd taken her time to write a reply. . . .

That was a possibility, Nicholas supposed.

Except he'd been using that excuse for weeks now. There was another, much simpler explanation: he'd revealed too much of his feelings too soon, and he'd scared Lynn away. Maybe he'd gone too far when he'd said that she was the kind of girl he'd always imagined himself marrying. When he remembered now everything that he'd written, it made him wince. He should have kept his distance, maintained his reserve.##

It was all Jamie's fault—Jamie and his bloody awful advice! He never should have listened. *Tell her how you feel about her before someone else does. Don't make the same mistake you did with Elizabeth. Hah!* What did Jamie know about it anyway? In all his life he'd only ever had one steady girlfriend, and he'd only begun dating recently. That hardly qualified him to be giving love advice.

With a sigh, Nicholas set his stack of mail down on the bed. While there were no letters from Lynn, there was one from Denise. It had also been a long time since he'd heard from her. Maybe he'd been wrong to put her off, to tell her that they should date other people. She was the only one who'd always been there for him, the only girl who'd been a stable constant in his life. He picked up her letter, opened the envelope, and began reading.

Dear Nicholas,

It's been a while since we've heard from each other, so I thought maybe I would touch base and see how you are doing. I've been

Young people have a notoriously thin-skin when it comes to matters of the heart. He could have written again - he should have written again! Lynn was left waiting for his letter - one that never came, for 20 years, and he was left waiting for her reply to his last letter. What are the odds that the post-office would lose two letters in a row?

good. Actually, better than good. I met someone about a month ago . . . his name is Tabu. He's from Lesotho. You were right, Nicholas. I did need to date other people, to get some perspective. I'm afraid to tell you how happy I am, in case you're not very happy right now, but I can hardly contain myself! I think I'm in love with him, and he's crazy about me. It's the first time I've felt this way. Love makes everything about life better. Brighter. Happier. Suddenly you realize that what you were doing before you met that person wasn't living. You were just getting by. Then all of a sudden, you meet that special person, and everything—

Nicholas stopped reading there. He was surprised to find that it was hard for him to go on. He managed a weak smile, not a happy smile, but he recognized a spark of something akin to joy. He wasn't happy for himself, in fact somehow he was more depressed than ever, but he was happy for Denise. He was happy that she was happy, even though he felt like someone had just snuffed out the last flicker of hope he had. He let out a long breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and forced a more genuine smile. He read the rest of Denise's letter with a strange sense of loss. He could tell by the way she wrote about Tabu that he had her heart. If he was smart he wouldn't do anything to lose it, but either way, now that Denise knew what real, mutual love was like, he knew he'd lost her. He'd deserved to lose her; he'd be the first to admit that.

It still hit him hard. It seemed like there was someone out there for everyone he knew. Everyone but him. Shorty had someone. Elizabeth had someone. Denise had someone. Mighty was practically engaged; he'd been dating the same girl for four years, and now even Grant was dating someone. Nicholas felt his heart literally begin to ache, and he cast a bitter smile to the ceiling. *What am I doing wrong?*

Nicholas endured a brief silence before he came back to his senses, realizing that no reply was coming, least not from Heaven.

Nicholas sighed. Maybe he should just try to be happy alone. He hated being alone, but by the look of things, he was going to have to get used to it. He'd focus on himself for a change: his plans, his future, his dreams, his hobbies, his friends. He didn't need a girlfriend to appreciate life. He didn't need anyone else to be happy. With those thoughts, Nicholas managed to chase away the ache in his throat and chest, but he still felt horribly depressed. He needed a change of scenery. It was early afternoon

on Saturday. There was still plenty of time to catch up with his friends and see what they were doing. Maybe they'd be able to plan something together. Stuffing his mail in his locker, Nicholas left the barracks and headed for the rec room.

* * *

So far the trip to the United States had been a complete waste of time. Constance had endured no end of boring talks and demonstrations at the leather convention. Chicago, the city where the convention was being hosted, seemed more interesting, but she had yet to see very much of it. The convention took up most of every day, and by the time they left, they'd been on their feet all day and the thought of their cool, air-conditioned hotel room was better than the idea of touring around.

Now, as Constance wandered away from her husband to get away from a very boring, sweaty old man who was prattling on about techniques for curing leather, she diverted her attention away from the various booths and instead watched the people walking between them, but she couldn't easily tell just by looking at them, who among the milling crowds would be a good contact to make. She'd been hoping for some form of social function in which she might better get to know the people attending the convention, but there didn't seem to be any such functions, which only went to renew her opinion of the trip as a waste of time and money. Just the price of her entrance to the convention had been two hundred dollars.

Constance sighed and abandoned her people-watching to return to Edwin's side. It was almost time for lunch, and she was determined to leave the convention early to get some food. The milling crowds were making her feel anxious and claustrophobic. It was hot; the air conditioning wasn't keeping up, and the pervasive smell of leather was approaching a noxious reek.

Walking up behind Edwin and grabbing his arm, she dragged him away from the booth, saying, "Shall we go to lunch, dear?"

"Of course, we'll go in just a minute, Constance," Edwin said quietly as the sweaty old man in the booth laid out a half a dozen new leather samples. When the old man launched into a jargon-filled description of the first sample, Constance had to work very hard to swallow another sigh. She glanced about impatiently, wishing someone would scream *fire!* so they could all rush outside to get some air. . . .

* * *

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

George Colton could scarcely believe his eyes. He'd recognize that skinny whelp of a man anywhere, even though it had been years since they'd met. Upon seeing the man in question, George remembered an old debt that he had yet to repay. Perhaps now was the time to pay that debt. George came up behind the little man and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Edwin? Edwin Smythe?"

George had been right. Seeing him up close was all the confirmation he needed. He'd recognized Edwin correctly. But while he recognized Edwin, Edwin's brow was neatly furrowed all the way up to his thinning brown hair. "Yes?" Edwin replied.

"Don't you remember me? George Colton. We met a few years ago. You were on a business trip to Canada . . ."

Edwin's eyes lit with recognition. "Yes, of course," he said while they shook hands. George watched the woman beside Edwin turn to give him a polite smile. George offered her a reciprocal smile and held out his hand. "And you're Edwin's wife, I suppose?"

"Yes, Constance Smythe," she said, shaking his hand. "I recall Edwin's mentioned you when he returned from his business trip a few years ago. You were a friend of Lawrence's, were you not?"

"Yes," George nodded solemnly. Somehow he managed to keep his tone and his expression from revealing his building ire. "Lawrence and I went back a long ways."

Constance shook her head. "He will always be greatly missed."

"Yes, yes he will," Colton said. The only clue to his bubbling anger was in the intensity of his dark brown gaze.

Edwin shifted uncomfortably on his feet. "Mr. Colton," Edwin began. "I know we didn't part on the best of terms, but I hope by now you've realized that that . . . unpleasantness was, well, in large part just a big misunderstanding."

"Yes . . ." George was frowning now. "I heard something about that, but I never gave you a chance to explain. Now with time to examine the facts it would seem there's more to the story than I originally thought. Maybe now that our tempers have all cooled you'd like to explain your side of it?"

George watched as Edwin's gaze dropped to the floor. "Yes, I do suppose I owe you an explanation."

"Good, how about you explain over lunch? I was just on my way to meet my wife at a restaurant near here."

Constance's eyes lit up at that. "That sounds like a splendid idea!" she said.

George flashed her a quick smile. "Shall we, then?"

Edwin hesitated just a moment before returning Mr. Colton's smile and nodding once more. "It would be a pleasure."

* * *

As they left the convention center, Edwin's mind was churning with troubling memories. The reminder of Lawrence was painful. Seeing the Canadian businessman brought all the memories back as if it had only been yesterday that it had all happened. He and George Colton had not parted on good terms. In fact, Edwin was surprised that the man had come to greet him at all. Perhaps he, like Edwin himself, was just trying to understand everything that had happened. At the time, George had blamed Edwin for costing Lawrence his job. Edwin wasn't sure what he could say in his own defense. He'd gone to Canada on a business trip for Lawrence in an effort to sell Western Tanning's depreciating investment in cattle hides. Colton was an old friend of Lawrence's and apparently he'd owed Lawrence a big favor for something—Edwin still wasn't sure what—and to pay off his debt, Colton had agreed to buy the cattle hides from Western Tanning at greater than the then-current market value. Lawrence had planned to redeem his poor investment before the board found out, and hopefully, to keep his job, but somehow the news of it had gotten out, and Lawrence had blamed him, saying Edwin had deliberately told the board in order to get him fired and steal his job, but Edwin was clueless as to how the board had found out. Somehow he would have to convince George of that and set the record straight now that he had the chance.

He knew he couldn't exonerate himself completely. There'd been some things he could have done to help Lawrence out. Some things he could have done to give his friend more time and space to get his life together. For one thing, he could have offered to shoulder more of the load for Lawrence, and at that crucial time, rather than take his annual family vacation to Siesta, he could have stayed and offered to run the company while Lawrence took his vacation instead.

Something like that might have made all the difference. *It probably would have*, Edwin decided as they waited for a taxi outside the convention center. The taxi arrived and they piled in the back while George took the front seat. George gave directions to the driver and soon they were whizzing through downtown Chicago. Edwin looked out the window, trying to distract himself.

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

The sky was a clear, cheerful blue. The sun blazed brilliantly down on them, flickering in through the taxi cab windows. It was the beginning of summer in Chicago, and the weather was beautiful. The trees and parks scattered through the city were a deep, leafy green. As the taxi pulled out onto the highway running along the shore of Lake Michigan, they were given a moment to appreciate the city's waterfront. The lake was a deep blue and waves were rolling in and breaking on the sandy shores. It looked just like an ocean, except if one were to taste the water, it was fresh and clear like any lake. Although, Edwin had been told that it wouldn't be that fresh, nor would it be smart to drink the water.

Edwin's thoughts had him so distracted that he didn't notice until the taxi had stopped that they'd arrived at the restaurant where Mr. Colton had planned to meet his wife. George paid the driver and they climbed out. Edwin asked how much he owed for the ride, but George made a dismissive gesture and said, "I would have had to pay him whether you had decided to join me and my wife for lunch or not. Speaking of her, come on, I'm sure she's already waiting for us inside." George led them across the street to an elegant waterfront restaurant that was built over the water on wooden pillars.

Constance whispered to Edwin, "You see, there are decent restaurants here," as though he had yet to take her to one.

"Yes, it would seem so," Edwin replied as they walked into the restaurant. The dining area was all glassed-in and lay directly over the water, while an outdoor terrace ran along the side. Now, during the summer, the umbrella-covered tables were all full, while those inside were mostly empty.

George stopped in the entrance of the restaurant and briefly scanned the occupied tables for his wife before a busboy came up to them and helped them locate her. He directed them out onto the terrace. Upon seeing the people with her husband, Colton's wife stood from the table and smiled. George introduced her, "This beautiful woman before you is my wife, Sylvia."

Sylvia greeted each of them in turn; then they sat down together and she asked, "So how is it that you know my husband?"

"He's a business associate of Edwin's," Constance replied.

"Yes—" George looked up from his menu with a smile. "—we go back a number of years. We just happened to bump into each other at the convention."

Edwin wanted to say something to that, but he held his tongue and busied himself with the menu instead. He was peripherally aware of Constance engaging Sylvia in some polite conversation, but the more they talked, the more he began to feel the weight of the silence between himself and Mr. Colton. After the waiter came to take their orders for drinks, Edwin excused himself to the restroom. He had to get himself together! He was sweating profusely, and his heart was pounding. He almost sighed with relief as he stood from the table, but then Mr. Colton excused himself, too, saying he should wash his hands before lunch.

They walked to the restroom together, rigidly maintaining their silence until they entered the restroom, and then Mr. Colton spoke, "Edwin, I want you to know I don't hold you responsible for what happened."

Edwin was standing at the urinals when those words reached his ears. He didn't quite believe them, but he took his time to calm himself and contemplate his response. When they were standing together at the washbasins, Edwin replied, "I don't really know what to say. I'm not sure what Lawrence told you on the phone that day, but I can guess. When I set out from Cape Town, and indeed right up until the moment you informed me, I was not aware that Lawrence had lost his job. Had I known, I wouldn't have bothered coming to see you at all."

"I realize that," Mr. Colton said gruffly.

Edwin turned from washing his hands. "As for *how* Lawrence lost his job, I really don't know. I did my best to support him during some difficult times, but in the end I think the stress of it all caught up with him."

George was frowning deeply. "Yes, I only found out much later all of the circumstances surrounding his death. It seems like losing his job was just the last straw."

Edwin nodded. "I can't help feeling like I could have done more to help him."

George nodded gravely and offered a tight smile. "I'm sure you did everything you could."

Edwin shook his head. "I feel like there must be someone to blame. Maybe there was someone who informed the chairman of Lawrence's activities, but I can only give you my word as a gentleman that it wasn't me."

George came up to Edwin with a scary look on his face. Edwin almost flinched and ran. George stopped within reach of him, and

then his arm came up—

Now Edwin did flinch, and his eyes squeezed involuntarily shut.

He felt a meaty hand on his shoulder and heard George's booming laughter. Edwin cracked his eyes open. "What, did you think I was about to hit you?"

"Well, I . . ." Edwin trailed off, his brow furrowing as he took in George's grin. "I'm not quite sure what I thought."

"Relax, Edwin! I believe you. I heard about the fundraiser you arranged for Lawrence's daughters."

"Oh, you did?"

George nodded slowly. "I was invited by a colleague and mutual friend of Lawrence's, but unfortunately I was unable to make the time for a trip to South Africa. Instead, I wired him the money for my donation."

"Aha." Edwin wasn't sure how to take that. "If you believe me, then why were you so curious to hear my side of the story?"

George let go of Edwin's shoulder and shrugged. "I was still missing some of the details. In fact, I'm still curious; why would Lawrence blame you for losing his job?"

Edwin shook his head. "I ask myself that every other day. I guess because I was one of the few people who could have told the board enough damaging things to get him fired, but there were others who knew as well. Accounting for one. I don't suppose I'll ever really know. . . ." Edwin trailed off miserably.^{§§}

"No, I don't suppose. Well, let's get back and order some lunch, shall we? Who knows what damage the women are doing to our reputations in our absence?" George barked out another laugh as he was leaving the restroom.

Edwin watched George go with a frown as he dried his hands on a paper towel. He still felt uneasy, but he put that down to residual nerves rather than any tangible reason. Mr. Colton was a strange man, but at least Edwin no longer felt like they were enemies.

Just a big misunderstanding, Edwin thought as he followed George out of the restroom.

^{§§} Any novelist would love to write a scene in which Edwin gets to hear exactly what happened to make Lawrence blame him - but I don't have to make it up. In the final book of the series that scenario unfolds, as it does in real-life, in a most dramatic and life-changing way ... and I was actually alive and present there, to see it all happening.

Chapter 26

“It must be exciting to live in an exotic place,” Sylvia said.

Constance hesitated to agree. “Well there's the ANC and the PAC to worry about.”

“The what?”

Constance waved a hand. “Terrorists, bands of ruffians trying to bring Apartheid to an end.”

“Yes, I've heard about that,” Sylvia said, frowning. “Isn't the Apartheid a very racist thing? It's about enslaving Black people or something like that? I don't agree with slavery.”

Constance smiled at her ignorance. “No, no, it's not about slavery. We don't have slaves. Apartheid is more about order.”

Sylvia raised her eyebrows. “What do you mean? You mean it keeps the Black people from being unruly?”

“No, it's . . . how shall I explain . . .” Her eyes lit upon the Sylvia's neatly color-coordinated outfit. “You wouldn't wear a dress with socks and tackies, would you?”

“With what?”

It took a moment for Constance to remember where she was, and then she smiled. “Pardon me, sneakers. You wouldn't wear a dress with socks and sneakers.”

Sylvia looked affronted. “Of course not!”

“Well, it's like that. We don't put things together that don't belong together. White people live in their neighborhoods, and Black people have their townships. We don't go to the same beaches or schools or restaurants. It's really just a system of mutual respect for one another's different cultures and needs.”

“Oh? That doesn't sound so bad. . . .”

“No, no it isn't. We don't oppress the Black people, or try to enslave them. We just like to have our own space while we give them theirs.”

“So then why are so many people against the Apartheid?”

Constance smiled thinly. “Well, we can't help it if we're more

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

successful than the Blacks, now can we? They see that we have everything they want, and they're jealous. Now they're trying to take it by force."

"Oh, dear," Sylvia replied. "That is worrying."

"Yes, well we're hoping to leave before all of that happens."

"I can see why," Sylvia said solemnly.

The men chose that moment to return. As they were sitting down, Sylvia turned to her husband and patted him on the arm. He looked up from studying his menu and set his glass of Coke down after taking a quick sip.

"Honey, Constance here was just telling me about the Apartheid and the bands of terrorists in South Africa. Did you know about all of that?"

George gave his wife an indulgent smile. "Of course, darling. Why do you think I watch the news?"

"Well, it sounds terrible!" Sylvia said, her expression aghast. Turning back to Constance, she said, "I don't blame you for wanting to leave the country."

Edwin turned to his wife with his eyebrows raised. He studied her for a long moment, but she pretended not to notice, her attention was fixed instead upon her menu while she took a casual sip of water.

Meanwhile, George was studying Edwin intently. "I didn't know you were planning to emigrate, Edwin." Edwin turned from his wife. He looked flabbergasted. "You know," George went on, "if you were to ever consider moving to Canada or here, to the States, you should let me know. I could use a man of your caliber to run one of my tanneries."

Edwin blinked slowly. "Well, I—"

"Thank you, Mister Colton," Constance said. "I don't know that we're quite ready to move yet, but it is reassuring to know that we have options."

Edwin seemed to relax at that. His wife hadn't been serious. She had probably just been making idle conversation. She wouldn't ever really consider leaving South Africa. "Yes, I suppose options are never a bad thing," he said, smiling.

"No, never," George agreed.

The waiter came back and took their orders for lunch. Edwin thoroughly enjoyed listening to George's exploits while they ate. It seemed he was something of a daredevil. And though Edwin privately thought that all of George's stories were greatly

exaggerated, they were entertaining nonetheless.

At the end of lunch, George insisted on paying, saying that he'd invited them out after all.

"That's very gracious of you," Constance said.

"No, it's nothing. The pleasure of your company was more than worth it to me."

Constance smiled and turned to Sylvia. "What a pleasant man your husband is."

"Yes," Sylvia replied, laughing lightly. "Although . . ."

George looked up from the bill, his expression stormy, although there was a glint of laughter in his eyes. "Although what? I *am* a pleasant man!" he bellowed.

That drew more laughter from around the table. "We mustn't lose contact," Constance said, smiling. "How much longer are you staying in Chicago?"

"Until the convention ends," George replied.

"Perhaps we can arrange to have dinner before then? This time it will be our treat. Is there a number where we can reach you?" Constance asked.

"Of course," George fished into his pocket and withdrew a small leather-bound booklet. He scribbled in it and tore out a page. "There's the name and address of our hotel and our room number. I'm sure you'll find the hotel's phone number in the phone book."

"Wonderful," Constance said, folding the piece of paper and slipping it into her purse. "This was a treat. Thanks again!"

"You're most welcome."

That night, as Constance crawled into bed beside Edwin, she said, "I suppose you noticed Sylvia's comment at lunch?"

Edwin was silent a moment. "Yes," he said simply.

"And?" Constance asked.

"You don't really want to leave South Africa, do you?"

"The thought had crossed my mind. Edwin, can't you see that South Africa is being overrun by lunatics?"

"The news exaggerates everything, my dear, the Whites are still very much in control."

"Apartheid will crumble. It's only a matter of time, and when it does, what will happen to us?" Edwin was silent, and Constance capitalized on that silence. "It will be better for us if we are not there when it happens."

Edwin sighed. "But everything we've worked for! The cars, the

house . . . my job! We'll almost have to start over!"

"Yes, I had considered that, but you heard Mr. Colton today. He was practically offering to make you the manager of one of his tanneries. We could have everything we have now, but in a more stable country with a brighter future. Think of our children. Think of our grandchildren."

Edwin was shaking his head, looking up at the ceiling. After a moment, he turned to look at her. "I don't trust Mr. Colton."

"Why ever not?"

"I don't know . . ." Edwin said.

"Didn't you two sort out your misunderstanding while you were in the men's room?"

Edwin smiled. "You knew about that?"

"I could guess by the time you were taking to return."

"Well . . ." Edwin trailed off. "We did sort things out, I suppose, but I'm still not sure where I really stand with the man. I feel like he still harbors some ill-will toward me. I can't shake the feeling."

Constance snorted. "That *feeling* is probably just indigestion. Mr. Colton wouldn't offer to entrust you with one of his tanneries if he didn't have faith in you."

"I suppose."

"I want you to phone him tomorrow. Invite him and his wife for dinner. One way or another he'll be a good contact to have, so we need to make sure we stay in touch."

"I suppose," Edwin conceded.

"Well, good night, dear. Sleep well."

"Good night," he replied. But Edwin didn't sleep well. He could barely get a moment's rest thinking about what Constance had said. Leave South Africa? He couldn't even begin to imagine it. He'd lived in South Africa his whole life. Perhaps Constance was eager to leave because she was seeing North America at its best. On the surface it might look better than South Africa—more modern, more orderly, but she hadn't travelled to Canada in the middle of winter and seen the slushy, dirty, gray side of it. In just a few months this whole part of the world would be buried under several feet of snow. All the life and greenery would be dead and dormant. It would be so cold that just waiting for a taxi would feel like a life-threatening experience. No, she hadn't experienced that side of it. He'd have to tell her about all of that. Then she'd realize how good they had it in South Africa. Maybe the political climate was more favorable in North America, but the physical climate

certainly wasn't.

Edwin comforted himself with those thoughts. They wouldn't move. Things would stay just as they were. It was all just a lot of talk. . . .

* * *

Talk, talk, talk—that's all she ever does! But not about anything interesting, no. He was sick of it. George was up late, sitting at the bar in the lobby of the hotel, his hands wrapped around a glass full of scotch on the rocks. His wife was probably sound asleep by now. He'd grown bored of her frivolous conversation after just a few minutes of it. She was both naive and stupid, which was an irritating combination. If she weren't so beautiful, he might not have been able to stand it. Sometimes he thought she'd been dropped on her head one too many times as a child. He smirked at that and took another sip of his scotch.

The drink burned a trail of fire down his throat and served to clear his head. He had more important things to worry about than his third failing marriage. There were no end of women in the world. If need be he'd find another one just as beautiful.

No, at the moment he was more concerned with Edwin. Over lunch he'd hardly been able to contain his glee when his wife, Sylvia, had told him about what she and Constance had been discussing. It seemed that Constance and her husband were looking to leave South Africa. That presented a unique opportunity for him to finally pay off his debt to Lawrence. Constance had just been playing it cool when he'd offered her husband a job to manage one of his tanneries. He could tell because she'd asked for his contact information after lunch.

Besides, if they did decide to leave South Africa, where better to go than Canada? George smiled. *And I'm not without my means to influence that decision*, he thought. He raised his glass and his gaze to the ceiling. *Don't worry, Larry. I haven't forgotten.* He took another sip of his scotch. *Soon.* He nodded. *Very soon. George Colton is a man of his word.*

Chapter 27

Nicholas was busy packing his bags. He'd been granted a few days leave to go visit his parents in Sterkspruit. The leave was mandatory. Just a week ago he'd been out at a bar in the city with Grant, Adrian, and Jamie. Adrian (Mighty) Graves had mentioned that the pilot's training program was starting up soon. He had to go see his parents to get their permission. He was going to be giving a few lectures to the trainees, as well as helping out with some of the hands-on flight training once they were through with learning all the theory. Nicholas had had ample occasion to listen to Mighty's exploits, and from his experience of flying with Mighty between Pretoria and Cape Town and back, he'd become enamored with flying. He felt that being a fighter pilot must be the best job in the world. So when Mighty had mentioned that they were looking for good candidates for the pilot's training program, Nicholas had inquired about the criteria. Mighty had told him they were looking for candidates with 20/20 vision who were fit, intelligent, had a strong stomach, and were not too tall. Nicholas fit all those basic requirements. Nicholas had excitedly asked more about the training program. After a while, Adrian had just smiled and said, "Why don't you go talk to the recruiter?"

Nicholas did that. The recruiter had given him a brief interview, then set him a testing date to identify his aptitudes and skills. He'd passed all the tests with high scores and the recruiter had promptly contacted him, saying that he was an ideal candidate for the training program. There was just one catch—

"Because the country's at war, we need you to get signed approval from your parents. I'll talk to your flight sergeant and arrange a few days' leave for you to go back and talk with them."

Which brought Nicholas to today. He was going to drive up to Sterkspruit and discuss the matter in person. He wasn't looking forward to the conversation. He knew his parents would be against the idea, but ultimately, it was his life. He had the right to

make his own choices. All along the way to Sterkspruit, Nicholas rehearsed what he'd have to say to convince his parents. He knew his mom would object on grounds of safety while his dad would object on a more pragmatic level. He would debate the logic of being a fighter pilot in terms of it being a poor career choice.

That evening, as he was sitting down to dinner with his parents, he decided to broach the topic. It turned out to be bad timing. By the time they were finished eating, he was sure everyone had indigestion. Once they'd all calmed down enough to discuss the matter more rationally, they went to the living room where Nicholas once more presented his case.

"It's something that I want to do." Not his strongest argument.

"Fine, son. Today you want to do it. What about tomorrow?"

Nicholas frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, once you sign up, you won't be able to simply up and quit the air force. They won't let you. They won't invest years into your training then have you leave at the drop of a hat."

"Well, why would I want to leave?"

Johann shrugged. "You might want to settle down, get married, start a family. Have you thought about what this might mean for that type of a stable, ordinary life?"

Nicholas frowned. His prospects with women were hovering neatly around zero, and right now he wasn't sure he even wanted a girlfriend. Girls were trouble. He was happier alone. He might not experience those dizzy relationship highs, but he wouldn't have to suffer the depressing lows either. No, if he wanted to experience that sort of free fall, he could just get on a rollercoaster, or better yet, fly a fighter-jet. The exhilaration of flying was different, but it put you on a cloud, too—literally—and at least that was a ride he would be able to control.

"I've thought about it," Nicholas said.

Nicholas's mother, Kathleen Strauss, was nearby, helping the maid to clear the dishes from the table. But it was only a pretense, so that she could stay within earshot. Johann had told her to stay out of the discussion after her more emotional arguments had got in the way of his logical ones, but she was still following the direction of the conversation so that she could judge the right moment to add her own disapproval to the equation.

"And?" Johann prompted. "Are you prepared to give up a normal life for what seems like an exciting career?"

"It's not a question of giving it up. Plenty of pilots are married."

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Johann was frowning. "What kind of life is that for a wife? For children? Living in constant fear that you'll be killed? You're not thinking ahead, Nick. Just because you don't have a girl right now, you're going to give up on someday having a family?"

"That's not it."

"That is it! Trust me, son, you'll find another girl, and sooner than you think. Just because your heart was broken and you're going through a dry spell now is no reason to give in to despair."

Nicholas frowned. This wasn't going at all the way he'd planned. "I'm not giving in to despair, I'd really like to fly."

Johann was shaking his head. He picked up the admission papers, which were lying on the coffee table between them.

"I don't give my approval for this. I can't."

"What?" Nicholas was on his feet. "So that's it? You're determined to stand in the way of my dreams?"

"No. I'm determined to make sure you follow the right ones. Dreams are like stars, Nick - necessary for navigation through life. But you can use them to steer yourself toward the South Pole rather than Mauritius. One's cold and dangerous, the other warm and pleasant. Which way your dreams lead you, is up to you."

Nicholas's chest was heaving with indignation. "I'm not going to give up on this! Soon I won't need your permission either."

Johann shrugged and settled back against the couch with his beer. He took a casual sip and then replied, "Then that's your choice, Nicholas. But while I still have this one last chance to steer you in the right direction, I'm going to exercise it."

"You're going to do your best to get in the way, you mean."

Kathleen decided to intervene, "Listen to your father, Nicholas. He's not trying to get in your way. He's trying to help you."

"You can help me by signing those papers," Nicholas replied, staring at his father.

Johann took another thoughtful sip of his beer. "Sit down, son." Nicholas hesitated a moment before he complied. "I'll make you a deal. If you still want to do this next year when your mandatory service is over, then I'll give you my permission."

Nicholas did a quick mental calculation. "That's about eight months from now."

Johann nodded slowly. "Take the time to make up your mind properly. *Stadig oor die klippe.*"—*Be careful; go slowly*—"Think about all you could be giving up. You say that a lot of pilots are married, but are they *happily* married? Few women will want to

marry an air force pilot. Fewer still will stay with one. And as a career, it's not the best. You won't earn much money. If you live, they'll force you to retire while you're still young, and then?"

"There are plenty of opportunities for an experienced pilot, even when he's older."

"Really? Because knowing how to fly a fighter jet makes you qualified to . . . do what exactly?"

Nicholas shrugged. "At worst I could become an instructor in the flight school."

"A flying instructor. Also a highly-paid profession. Of course, all of that is assuming you even make old age."

Nicholas frowned, then sighed. "Eight months? I have your word?" Johann nodded slowly, and Nicholas reluctantly retrieved his admission papers from the coffee table. "Okay."

"Good. Now go get yourself a beer, and we can use the rest of this time to visit properly."

Nicholas folded the papers into his pocket and went to do exactly that. In the kitchen he found his mother waiting with a hug and tears in her eyes. "Mom, you're overreacting."

She shook her head. "I'm not," she said, giving him in a hug.

* * *

That night, at bed-time, Johann walked in on his wife on her knees in front of the bed; she was praying, her back to him and to the door. He stopped with a frown and listened to her prayer.

"And help Nicholas to change his mind. He has such a bright future. Help him to see that. Please intervene in some way to change his mind. This isn't the path you have for him—to fly in these men's silly wars and fight and die for them. Please intervene in his life before he starts down a path that he can't easily abandon. Thank you, Lord Jesus. And please also—"

Johann took that moment to announce his presence. "Still praying to Jesus Kate?" he asked.

Kathleen stood and rounded on her husband. "Ag, man, Jan! Don't you start. We've had enough fighting for today."

"Jesus was just a man, Kate."

"No, you're just a man!"

"Ja, me too," he said, chuckling.

"Leave it, Jan. Just leave it there."

Johann snorted and went quietly to his side of the bed. Kathleen climbed in beside him. "He'll be okay," Johann said.

"I hope so."

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

"He's a smart boy. Watch, give him enough time to think it through and he'll change his mind."

"And if he doesn't?"

He shrugged. "Then it's his choice. We can't make it for him."

"No, I suppose not, but I'd like to."

Johann laughed. "So would I, but quit your worrying now. Whatever the case, you won't change it with your fears."

Kathleen couldn't stop worrying. She was trying desperately to think of a way to convince Nicholas against this course of action, but there didn't seem to be anything she could do, short of praying. If she tried to argue further with Nicholas, she would probably just make him want to do it more. Children are funny that way. Nicholas would have to make his own choices, but unfortunately, that also meant he had to make his own mistakes.

Kathleen sighed. *Being a parent isn't easy*, she thought.

"Are you still awake?" Johann mumbled beside her.

She sighed again. "Ja . . ."

"We didn't raise a fool, Kate."

"Why does he want to do this?"

"He thinks he's found a clever way out. The military is a place where he won't have to do too much thinking for himself. He'll be taken here, told to go there, but he'll never really have to make those choices for himself. It's kind of like boarding school again."

"Is that it?"

"That, and I think it wouldn't hurt for him to have a steady girl to knock some sense into him. It would save us the trouble."

"It's a shame about what happened with Lizzie and that girl from Rhodesia."

"Ja, it is. . . ."

Johann went quiet, but soon that silence was filled with his snoring. Kathleen rolled over with a final sigh. Now she *really* wouldn't get any sleep. She spent the time saying the rest of her prayers, remembering to say one for her husband too, for his salvation. He'd been raised a Christian, but later in life had he complicated things and decided that he was too smart for all that.

She could only pray that God would help them to see the path He had planned for them to walk on. §§

§§ "Never Underestimate the Power of a Mother's Prayers" – **said someone very wise.**

Decades later, I remember well when I wanted to become a pilot too ... History repeating itself.

Chapter 28

The next six months went by in a blur for Nicholas. He fell into a routine of work and downtime. Military life was starting to agree with him. He'd been living like this for as long as he could remember thanks to boarding school. There was something easy and familiar about it, and he was starting to imagine he could live like this permanently. That was his plan, and he was fast coming to the end of his mandatory military service. After that, he would enlist as a voluntary serviceman, and at that point he could join the pilot's training program at Waterkloof. His dad had promised to give his permission once Nicholas's mandatory service was up, and Nicholas planned to hold his dad to that agreement.

There was, however, an unexpected change in his plans. Just this morning he'd received a letter from his parents asking if he might be able to join them in Siesta this year. Ordinarily he would have said no, he couldn't make it—which was true enough. He wouldn't be allowed more than a few days' leave over Christmas, but then his mother had mentioned something that made him sit up and take notice. She'd said that Elizabeth would be there in Siesta again this year, and that last year she'd been there as well, unattached and seemingly missing him, from what Johann had told her. His first reaction was angry. *Who cares if she's going to be there?* That was just another reason for him not to visit! But then he'd begun to wonder . . .

He knew what his mother was doing. Every letter she'd sent over the past six months had made some subtle effort to change his mind about becoming a fighter pilot. Now she was probably hoping that he'd get back together with Elizabeth and that then he'd finally change his mind about becoming a pilot. But the chances of him working things out with Elizabeth were slim to none. The fact that she'd been alone in Siesta last year said nothing about whether or not she was still dating Charles. And he was still angry. The only thing which kept his anger at bay was

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

the fact that she'd had no way to contact him to tell him that she'd decided to go to her matric farewell with Charles instead of him. Somehow his letter telling her that he was coming had never arrived, although that was suspicious. . . . Maybe it had arrived and she'd never replied? Nicholas sighed. He supposed he'd never really know, but as for Elizabeth's choice, he couldn't blame her for that. In her position he probably would have done the same. Charles had been able to be there for her when he could not.

All of that begged the question: what could he hope to accomplish by seeing Elizabeth again? He supposed that maybe he would finally get closure. If there was still a chance with her, he'd find out, and if not, he'd find that out, too. Sometimes he wondered what it would have been like if things had turned out differently—if she had chosen him over Charles. Of course, such wishful thinking was a waste of time, but he supposed it meant he still had feelings for her. Somehow Nicholas still felt like they weren't through, like maybe they never would be. Maybe it was because they'd never had a steady relationship and they had survived long absences and the existence of other boyfriends and girlfriends before. Every time they'd said goodbye it had been with the knowledge that this time could be the last, but then somehow they'd always found a way to get back together. The end had never really been the end. So maybe some part of him was still thinking that way—however foolish it might be.

Maybe his mistake had been to mix a summer romance with the life she had at home. But if their relationship could only survive for the few weeks of summer each year, then what were they really? Had they ever even had a relationship, or was it just a mutual arrangement to not be lonely on vacation?

The more Nicholas thought about it, the more he wasn't sure what to think. By the time he got to his flight sergeant's office, he'd gone back and forth so many times between wanting to go to Siesta to see Elizabeth one last time and avoiding the likely pain and rejection of that meeting, that he almost didn't care whether his flight sergeant agreed to grant him leave or not.

Now seated in front of his sergeant, Nicholas made his request, explaining that he'd like to travel down to the Wilderness to visit family over Christmas. He asked for a week's leave, but he could see from the frown on Sergeant Koets' face that he already had his answer.

"Nicholas, Nicholas, every man on this base wants more leave

for Christmas!”

“I’m also going to see a girl.”

“Oh, I see.”

“It’s . . . kind of important.”

Sergeant Koets leaned back in his chair with a growing smile. He folded his hands over the subtle bulge of his thickening midriff. “Weren’t you here earlier this year asking for leave to see a girl?”

Nicholas hesitated, then nodded. “I was.”

“Same girl?”

Nicholas shook his head.

“*Bliksem!* You’re a real Casanova.”

“She’s my ex actually. We’re broken up for more than a year now – well, lost contact is perhaps a bit more accurate.”

“I see.” The sergeant was nodding thoughtfully. “This wouldn’t perhaps be the girl who inspired you to go AWOL during basic, would she?”

Nicholas’s eyes went wide. “How did you hear about that?”

The sergeant broke into a grin. “I have my sources.”

“Yes, I can see that, sir.” Nicholas replied sheepishly.

“Well, well, well, what am I to do with you? You present me with a dilemma. If you’ll recall, I warned you the last time you asked for leave to see a girl that you were out of credit with me.”

Nicholas sighed. So that was it. There was no way to see her.

“On the other hand . . . who am I to stand in the way of love? Maybe you could *convince* me that you’re more deserving than any of the other men.”

Nicholas looked up, his hope soaring. The way Sergeant Koets had said that, Nicholas knew exactly what his commanding officer was looking for. He was looking for some sort of *tip* for his service. A bribe. Rather than feeling any ethical objections, Nicholas realized now from his suddenly soaring spirits and his furiously beating heart how much he really wanted to get to Siesta and see Elizabeth. Even if he never saw her again after that, he knew that he had to see her one last time. He had to try. He had to fight for her. Maybe it wasn’t so much that she’d chosen Charles over him. When all they could have hoped for was a summer romance, there’d really been no option. How could he compete when he’d lived so far away? But now, in just a few months, he’d have a chance to change all of that. He could either choose to join the air force on a more permanent basis, or he

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

could go to the University of Cape Town where he would have at least a few years to win Elizabeth's heart. There, finally living so close to her, he would actually have a chance to compete. He needed to make her realize that she still *had* options, and that he was one of them.

That was all assuming of course that she wasn't already in a very serious relationship with Charles. By now, she could even be engaged! Nicholas winced at the thought. He wasn't sure what he'd find when he got to Siesta.

"What's it worth to you, Nicko?" Sergeant Koets persisted.

Nicholas didn't even hesitate. "It's worth a case of Scotch," he said. Everyone knew about the sergeant's penchant for Scotch Whiskey, so Nicholas had chosen his bribe well. "If," Nicholas held up a finger to stipulate a few more conditions, "you give me a week's leave and help me arrange flights on air force planes from here to George. All of that is worth a case to me."

Sergeant Koets's eyes widened, and he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. For a moment, Nicholas was afraid the sergeant was about to say no. He was a heartbeat from sweetening his offer when the sergeant suddenly leaned forward in his chair and thrust his hand out across the desk.

"It's a deal." Sergeant Koets nodded as they shook hands.

Nicholas broke into a broad grin. "Thank you, sir." *Thank you*, he repeated mentally, not really sure who or what he was thanking, or if any thanks were due.

* * *

"When Charles comes to ask for your permission, I want you to tell him about our plans to move. Make that a condition of your approval, Edwin," Constance was pacing up and down the living room floor, biting her nails and thinking out loud, while Edwin sat on the couch looking and feeling subdued. It felt like these days it was just one thing after another. First Constance had told him she wanted to leave South Africa, and now she was telling him that Charles wanted to propose to Elizabeth and that he had to give his approval. Worse, she was making plans to include Charles in their move to Canada, which meant she was really serious about it. Just last night they'd been arguing about leaving South Africa and everything they had worked for behind. Edwin's objections were simple: they had a good life in South Africa. Constance's retort was even simpler: things were good now, but how long would that last? And he had to admit, George Colton's

offer of a job in Canada to run his largest tannery was a step in the right direction for his career.

But somehow, no matter how golden the sand seemed to glitter against the horizon, he was afraid that when he got there, it would just be sand. *Or worse, snow* . . . Edwin thought with an accompanying frown.

"Have you thought about what you're going to say to him?" Constance asked, suddenly stopping her pacing to stand before him.

"Ah . . . well, I suppose I'm going to grant him my permission."

"*After* he agrees to move with us. Don't forget that."

"Of course . . ." Edwin trailed off. "What if he doesn't honor the arrangement?" he asked, hope flickering into his voice.

"He will. I always get what I want, Edwin. You should know that."

Edwin almost snorted out loud, but he held himself in check and kept the rueful look from his face until his wife turned away and went back to pacing the floor. *Yes, she always gets her way, but at what cost?* He had a feeling not even she could begin to count the cost of what she was asking them all to do. The kids didn't know yet, and they wouldn't until it was more certain. Edwin had capitulated recently to his wife's insistence, at least in so far as to make it look like he was capitulating, but he was not without his means to resist her plans. Maybe he wouldn't tell her outright that he wasn't going to move, but he could sabotage her plans at any point by rejecting George Colton's job offer. He'd have to do it in a way that Constance would never discover, of course, but it wasn't as though she was in contact with the man. . . .

The doorbell rang at that instant, and Constance nearly leapt onto the ceiling. "He's here!" she whispered.

Edwin's brow furrowed with amusement. "Why are you so nervous?"

"Why are you so calm?" she demanded as she rounded on him, hands on her hips. "This isn't just Elizabeth's future we're talking about, but ours as well."

"I suppose so," Edwin said, rising slowly from the couch.

"Don't give him your permission too easily, Edwin," she said, following him to the door. "Make him work for it, and then when he's afraid that you're going to say no, stipulate our conditions. He'll be so relieved that he won't even hesitate to give you his

word.”

Edwin nodded mechanically. “Okay, dear.” He opened the door with a smile. “Hello, Charles. Won't you come in?” He stepped aside for Charles to enter. Constance was hovering about also smiling broadly.

“Welcome, Charles.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Smythe—Mr. Smythe,” he said, nodding to each of them and shaking Edwin's hand.

“Come, let's go talk in my study,” Edwin said, leading Charles on with a hand on the boy's shoulder. Constance followed them as far as the living room and waited there until she heard the study door shut behind them, and then she crept down the hall to press her ear against the door and listen in.

She caught only snippets of the conversation, but from what she overheard, it seemed Edwin was following her plan to the letter for a change. From the laughter and cheerful tones of their voices, she could tell things were going well. When she determined that the discussion was coming to a close, she quickly hurried back to the living room and sat down on the couch. She picked up a magazine and pretended to have been sitting there all along.

A moment later, the door of the study opened and Edwin and Charles came walking down the hall with broad grins on their faces. “Well, dear,” Edwin began as they stepped into the room. “Say hello to our future son-in-law.”

Constance stood from the couch and offered Charles both a broad smile and a handshake. “Congratulations and welcome to the family, Charles!”

“Thank you,” he said, his eyes sparkling brightly as he shook her hand.

“If I may offer just bit of advice,” Constance said.

“Of course,” Charles nodded.

“Make sure you come with us to Siesta this year.”

“Oh?” Charles cocked his head.

“It's imperative that you're there to eradicate any lingering memories Elizabeth has of that boy, Nicholas. Perhaps you'd even like to choose Siesta as the place where you'll propose.”

“Perhaps,” Charles said, nodding, his expression thoughtful. “Although it might be a mistake to propose to her in a place where she's going to be reminded of someone else.”

Constance shrugged. “We'll leave all of that up to you. I'm sure

that wherever and however you choose to propose, my daughter will receive it well."

Charles flashed her a brilliant smile. "Your faith in me is encouraging, thank you."

Constance smiled as she led him back to the front door. "You've earned it." As they were saying goodbye at the door, Constance thought to add, "Do keep in touch. I'm most anxious to hear what you have planned."

"I will," Charles said, nodding. "Thanks again."

* * *

The evening of the following day Elizabeth and Charles were sitting on the plush, white leather couch in the living room of Charles's dad's penthouse apartment in Sea Point. On the coffee table were an open bottle of wine, two empty glasses, and a cheese plate. Across from them was a raging fire in the artificial fireplace. The fire offered a welcome glow of light and heat to the room, since it was the middle of winter and the nights were chilly. Charles had his arm wrapped around Elizabeth's shoulders, to make that chill less significant, and Elizabeth was snuggled up against him, her head lying on his chest. The steady whoosh of air through the fireplace, combined with the more insistent winds flying in off the ocean and rattling the penthouse windows made it all the cozier. Lulled by those sounds and by the steady rise and fall of Charles's chest, Elizabeth felt her eyes drifting shut. . . .

A moment later she felt Charles move, and she stirred, her eyes opening again.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," Charles said, whispering in her ear.

"What time is it?" she asked sleepily.

"It's . . ." He checked his watch. "Late."

Elizabeth sat up suddenly. "How late?"

Charles had a sheepish look on his face. "Almost half an hour after midnight."

Her eyes flew wide and her face grew pale. "It's past my curfew. . . ." She stood up suddenly from the couch. "I need to get back."

Charles grinned wryly. "Relax. It's already past your curfew, so rushing isn't going to make much difference now. In fact, there's really no point to you going back to your residence at all."

Elizabeth just stared at him. "You mean . . ."

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

He broke into a grin as he guessed the direction of her thoughts. "I mean, there are three bedrooms. You can take the spare room."

She smiled. "Thank you, but I'd be in much more trouble if I did that. What's more, I would soon be the talk of all of Tugwell Hall."

"You could say you stayed the night with a girlfriend," Charles pointed out.

"But everyone saw me leaving with you."

Charles sighed. "True. Well, it was a nice thought."

Elizabeth smiled. "Yes, but I'd better go."

"I'll drive you back."

Elizabeth's eyes flicked to the empty bottle of wine on the coffee table. "What about James?"

"It's too late to call him. Don't worry, I'm fine."

They made it back to Elizabeth's residence without incident. He drove her back in his Porsche. As they were saying goodbye in the car, Charles stopped her with both of his hands clasped around hers. "Can I ask you a question, Elizabeth?"

She blinked sleepily at him, her brow furrowing. "Of course . . ."

"This year, when you go to Siesta with your family, would you mind if I come with?"

Elizabeth broke into a sudden grin. "No!" She leaned forward and gave him a quick kiss. "You silly man, of course I don't mind! I just assumed you would be coming."

Charles returned her grin. "Well then, it would seem we're both going to have happy holidays this year."

"Yes," she said, still smiling, her eyes locked adoringly on his. "You're so handsome."

He grinned. "I know."

Elizabeth gave him an indignant shove away from her. He fell against his car door, laughing. She poked him mercilessly in the belly to provoke him further. "You horribly conceited man!"

At last she subsided and he relaxed into an easy grin. "Take care, princess."

They kissed once more, and then she withdrew and left the car. He drove off with a throaty rumble of the car's engine.

Elizabeth smiled, watching him leave.

When at last she went to the front doors of the building, she found them locked. After pressing the buzzer a few times, Rina,

the old matron came to unlock the doors for her. She was frowning deeply.

“Do you know what time it is?” Rina asked.

“Yes, I'm sorry,” Elizabeth said quickly. “I fell asleep!”

“You're gated, Miss Smythe.”

“But I'm only half an hour late!”

The matron was shaking her head. “You're an *hour* late.”

Elizabeth's brow furrowed, and she checked her watch in the dim light of the lobby. She was surprised to find that the matron was right. Somehow she'd lost track of time. Perhaps those seemingly short kisses in the car with Charles had lasted longer than she'd thought.

“You know the rules,” the matron said. “No more going out this week.”

“But—”

“Don't let's make it longer by complaining.”

With that, Elizabeth went quietly to the elevators and from there to her room. She was a grown woman; it shouldn't have been possible for them to ground her! Yet she didn't have much choice if she wanted to live in Tugwell Hall. She sighed meaningfully and slumped dreamily onto her bed—for a moment she was almost too tired to take her clothes off and climb in beneath the covers, but at last she summoned the energy and crawled into bed. It wasn't more than a few minutes before she fell into a happy, dream-filled sleep. She dreamt of Siesta, of walking hand-in-hand with Charles through the grassy park, of kissing him under the moon and stars, of dancing with him at Fairy Knowe. . . .

She awoke the following morning with a dreamy smile; she rolled over and opened her eyes. She saw a fleeting image from her dream flash through her mind's eye. It was Charles, smiling at her, his green eyes sparkling, his shaggy chestnut brown hair being tousled by the wind.

Elizabeth frowned. *Green eyes? Chestnut hair?* As she became more fully awake, suddenly she realized that the man she'd been dreaming of had looked like Nicholas, not Charles. Her subconscious had only thought of him as Charles. She felt a stab of guilt, and her brow furrowed angrily. Nicholas had no right to torment her!

“Leave me alone, Nicholas,” she whispered, and with that she hopped out of bed, determined to put the incident from her

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

thoughts. But she couldn't. As she went about her morning routine, Nicholas haunted her still. She couldn't stop wondering why she had dreamt about him rather than Charles. She felt guiltier by the moment, like somehow she had betrayed Charles. Did this mean that her subconscious thought of him as second best? Did it mean that somewhere deep down she'd rather have been with Nicholas?

Elizabeth was still frowning as she shut the door to her room behind her and hurried off to her morning classes.

It was just a dream, she decided. Just a dream . . .

Special note from the author:

Maybe there's still a small chance for one last try?



Elizabeth and Nicholas, Christmas 1973, exactly 2 years prior to these pending new developments; Still happy, in love, hopeful!

In these novels I'd like to write in "one last chance" - right now, before it's too late! Alas, real-life is never that accommodating. What happens next is nothing short of tragic - for both of them!

Chapter 29

Nicholas was starting to feel suspiciously optimistic. Maybe even happy. A part of him was beginning to wonder when the other shoe was going to drop. Maybe when he reached Siesta and found that Elizabeth was less-than-pleased to see him. He tried not to focus on that outcome, and instead poured all of his energy into hoping for the best. If fears could be self-fulfilling then maybe hope could be, too. That's what he was counting on, anyway.

Nicholas was waiting in line in the mess hall when the news came over the PA system. He listened with half an ear while he waited for his food. Cuba had just invaded the southern half of Angola where South Africa had stationed troops to defend their interests in the country. Suddenly the whole mess hall grew quiet as everyone stopped what they were doing to listen to the news report. Angola was and had been in the midst of a civil war for some time. South Africa was supporting the side they favored in order to shore up their political frontiers and protect themselves against the rising tide of communism in the region. The Cuban invasion meant the balance of power had just shifted against them and they would be forced to defend against the Cubans or withdraw. South Africa was now at war on three fronts.

Nicholas listened to the news report with growing consternation. He had a bad feeling. His bad feeling only grew worse when the announcer confirmed his fears: "Due to this emergency, all leave as been cancelled until further notice. That is all. For any additional information report to your commanding officer."

Nicholas groaned. Now he had utterly no hope of getting to Siesta. Whatever fate had had in store for his reunion with Elizabeth, he'd never know now. There would *be* no reunion.

Nicholas shuffled mechanically through the lunch line. People were chattering on all sides of him, but their hushed tones conveyed the gravity of the situation. Nicholas could hear from

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

snippets of their conversations that most of them were more concerned about what this might mean for South Africa than they were about what it might mean for them personally. Nicholas started to feel selfish that he was so preoccupied with himself rather than being able to focus on the bigger picture. Initial reports put the Cuban invasion at more than 30,000 troops, but those were only estimates. Either way, it was a massive force, and far more than would be required to wrest control of the country and settle the civil war once and for all. South Africa would have to move quickly if it wanted to defend its interests in the region.

All throughout lunch, periodic updates on the situation came over the PA system, interrupting them and giving everyone indigestion.

"Pretty scary stuff," Grant commented as he bit off a chunk of his bread roll.

"Yeah . . ." Nicholas said, nodding absently.

Suddenly Grant stopped eating. "Hey, wake up! Where's your head at? You know what this could mean for us, right?"

Nicholas sighed. "Yeah, I was just thinking about that. This isn't good, Bakkies."

"No," Grant agreed, shaking his head. "It isn't."

Nicholas left it at that. He hadn't told any of his friends on base about how he'd been planning to go to Siesta for Christmas, or how he'd been hoping to reconcile with Elizabeth there. But none of that mattered now. *Now*, Nicholas thought selfishly as he stood up from the table, his lunch only half finished—

"Hey, where are you going?" Grant asked.

Nicholas shook his head. "Lost my appetite."

—Now someone had let slip the dogs of war, and all his world had certainly gone to havoc. The future, whatever it was, was fast spinning out of his control. Nicholas began to realize with a small flicker of bitter resignation that events beyond his control were catapulting him down the path to become an air force pilot, just as he'd planned.

Maybe that was his future.

* * *

Elizabeth's eyes shone bright with unshed tears, and she was smiling uncontrollably. "Oh my goodness," she gasped, shaking her head with wonderment and awe, her eyes sparkling with tiny pinpoints of light that were caught and shimmered forth in all directions by the giant diamond ring that Charles was holding out

to her. He was chuckling softly, waiting for her to recover while he balanced precariously on one knee. The deck of his father's motor-yacht was rocking gently beneath them.

A delicious fish dinner and a bottle of perfectly chilled champagne stood waiting to one side, while in the background the sun was setting in a spreading violet and crimson stain upon the clouds over Table Mountain. Charles had told her that today would be a special day—a day that neither one of them would ever forget. Elizabeth supposed he'd expected her to figure out what he was planning from that hint, but somehow the thought that he would propose hadn't even entered her mind, and now that she was confronted with the reality of it, she was overwhelmed.

Elizabeth reached out with a trembling hand for that giant diamond ring, but then she stayed herself, waiting for Charles to continue. She'd thoughtlessly interrupted his proposal before it had even begun.

Charles cleared his throat. He was smiling almost as uncontrollably as she. “Elizabeth, until the day I met you, I've been a man without direction. A ship without its sail. Now after sharing so many wonderful, unforgettable moments with you, I've come face to face with my destiny. I know where I'm going and where I want to be. Elizabeth, for better or worse, and with all my heart, I want to be with you, now and forever. Will you be my wife?”

By now Elizabeth was wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands. She launched herself at him, threw her arms around his neck, and joined him on the deck of the yacht so she could shower him with kisses.

“Oi!” He snapped the black velvet jewelry box shut to make sure the ring didn't go flying.

She broke away, laughing and dragging him down to the deck with her. His laughter joined hers, and as they lay side by each, looking into each other's eyes, he asked, “Is that a yes or maybe?”

She just smiled. “It's not a maybe Charles - it's a definitely!”[⊗]

* * *

“It's an omen, Beaver!” Shorty said, clicking his tongue.

[⊗] Now you know why the front-cover of this novel has Elizabeth wearing a wedding dress. But holding a bouquet of white Arum (Cala) Lilies - her and Nicholas' flowers?

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

"War is an omen?" Nicholas asked slowly, watching as Shorty Beckett lined up his shot on the snooker table. It was just the two of them playing; the rec hall was nearly deserted due to the recent crisis in Angola. Everyone was pulling double shifts right now.

Jamie took his shot on the snooker table and then turned from the game with a shrug. "Haven't you ever noticed that in every great love story things just work? It's like they're meant to be because it's just easy and it works. I can't explain it, but when you've found true love, you'll know it because it won't be so hard. It's like the whole universe conspires to help you out."

Nicholas looked skeptical. "No, I haven't noticed that, Shorty."

"Okay, let me put it this way: I mean, even if you make it to Siesta, you still don't know how she'll react. It's not worth it! Move on. Find a new girl! One who doesn't make you go to so much trouble for nothing. She's making you work too hard, Nick! Life's too short to waste running after a girl who doesn't want to be chased. Believe me, I've been there."

Nicholas broke into a rueful grin at that. While they'd been in St. Andrew's together, Shorty had constantly been falling in love and chasing some or other girl, but until recently none of them had ever reciprocated his sentiments, so Nicholas had to concede his friend's point. Shorty was an expert in unrequited love.

"Well," Nicholas said, letting out a long sigh. "I don't know whether it's an omen or not, but it's definitely a roadblock."

Shorty gripped him by the shoulder. "It's more than a roadblock, Beaver. It's a dead end."

As Nicholas was lining up his shot, he considered those words. It did seem to be the end of the line for him and Elizabeth. He should just accept that and move on. He and Elizabeth were never meant to be together.

Nicholas took his shot and missed the ball, scraping the velvet lining of the table. He winced.

"Jislaaik man! Don't destroy the table . . ."

"Sorry. So what about you?"

"What about me?" Shorty repeated slowly as he took his shot. "I'm great, Beaver!" he said, flashing a broad grin. "Never been better."

"That's good," Nicholas said slowly. "And Melissa? How are things going with her?"

Shorty's grin grew even broader with that question. "Wonderful!"

Nicholas began nodding. "Just be careful. The higher the high, the lower the low."

Shorty frowned at that. "Hey, just because you're depressed doesn't mean you have to rain on my parade."

Nicholas burst into a bitter peal of laughter. "I suppose that's just *my* experience talking. It seems like when things are going great there's always something bad waiting just around the corner."

Jamie took a moment to absorb that somber nugget of wisdom and then he patted Nicholas reassuringly on the back just in time to nearly throw off his next shot. Nicholas turned to glare at his friend.

Shorty was smiling innocently. "Don't worry, I'm sure things will be looking up for you soon. After all, when you've hit bottom there's only one place left to go right? And that's up!"

"I hope you're right, Shorty."

Later that night as Nicholas was lying in bed, sleepless, and looking up at the bunk above his, he was wondering about everything that was happening in his life. After his game of Snooker with Shorty he'd gone to speak with Sergeant Koets about his leave, but as he'd feared, there was no way anyone was going to get leave now. Bribe or no bribe, there was nothing the flight sergeant could do.

Nicholas wasn't one for praying, mostly because he didn't think God had the time or inclination to listen, but now he was starting to feel just helpless enough to try it anyway. He spent a few long minutes deliberating about what he would say, feeling foolish that he was considering saying anything at all. At last he settled on something short and simple:

God, I don't know if You care, or if You're listening, but if You do, and if You are, please do something to help me ... us. Please intervene. We really need all the help we can get! Thank You ... Amen.

And with that, he rolled over and tried to get some sleep. He managed to sleep for an hour and then he woke up again, his eyes wide and staring, and this time sleep was more elusive than ever. His sleeplessness endured until just before the morning bugle call awoke them all. Nicholas groaned and sat up in bed. He covered a vicious yawn with one hand and then kneaded his fists into his eyes. He felt like he hadn't slept at all.

It was going to be one of those days. . . .

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

* * *

Over the next week Waterkloof transformed into an endless roar of activity. Planes were taking off and landing constantly and at all hours. Everyone had this determined air of somber purpose and a world-weary look on their faces. Nicholas, like all the others, was working long shifts, and he was lucky if he got an hour off at night. What's worse, there was a rumor going around that all the recruits due to finish their tour of duty in January would have to stay on longer, at least until the situation in Angola was resolved—and who knew when that might be!

Nicholas could hardly believe it. He wasn't sure what that would mean for the deal he'd made with his father to join the pilot's training program after his mandatory service was over, but he had a feeling his father would use it as an excuse to further delay that decision, which meant Nicholas would spend yet more of his life going nowhere! He couldn't imagine things getting any worse.

But then they did.

Adrian (Mighty) Graves and Grant caught up to him on his way to lunch. They were both wearing familiar expressions of worry and mortal dread. Nicholas stopped in the hallway and shook his head. He felt the air suddenly become stifling and thick between them. He had a queasy feeling in his stomach, and a cold sweat was prickling down his spine.

"No," Nicholas said.

"It's Shorty," was all Mighty said.

It was all he needed to say.

* * *

One day earlier: Jamie Beckett heard the roar of the helicopter's rotors in his ears despite his sound-muffling headset and helmet. It was all a familiar routine by now. He had his eyes glued to the ground as the chopper made a low sweep over the trees. Leafy green branches reached up for him with dizzying speed, and Shorty's stomach did a quick flip. He looked out to the greasy smear of brown grass along the horizon to center himself, but only for a second, and then he was back to scanning the ground.

He was seated on a low bench in the open side of the helicopter, his gloved hands were wrapped tightly around the butt end of his swivel-mounted machine gun. All he could see between the trees were broad stretches of dry, brown grass. There were no

people, no vehicles, no encampments, nothing. It was the same story every day. It was all a lot of pointless searching and not a lot of action, but then, every now and then they'd get lucky and find one of the rebel camps. The first sign of it wasn't the people or the tents set up between the trees. Those people could be innocent civilians. No, the first sign was always the telltale rapping of an AK-47 plinking off the sides of the helicopter. It was then that they knew they'd found hostiles. Angry black faces peering up at them, waving their guns and firing whilst shouting curses and calls-to-arms to their fellows.

These were the people who wanted to take over South Africa: mangy Black terrorists hiding in the bush, trying to pull the corner stones out of the country so they could rule over the rubble. Jamie's job was to prevent that from happening. One bullet at a time he'd strike those terrorists down before they could burst into a church or a school with their guns blazing. He settled his conscience easily enough knowing just what kinds of people he was killing. These weren't men. They were animals, roaring lions waiting to pounce upon their prey.

"Coming up to a possible enemy location," the pilot said, his voice coming flat and inflectionless through Jamie's headset. "Eyes on the ground back there."

Shorty broke into a fresh sweat which itched maddeningly beneath his helmet. He pushed that sensation aside and focused on distant stand of trees where they were headed. It was thicker than any of the other patches they'd run across, so it was more likely to conceal an enemy encampment.

In less than a minute they were roaring low over the trees and doing a slow circle around them. The sun glinted sharply off something, and suddenly there came a stuttering report of weapons fire slicing knifelike through the trees.

"I've got contact!" Shorty yelled. "Live fire! Live fire!" And with that he answered the rebels with his own burst of machine gun fire. Soon they were scattering under his sights like an ant colony from a magnifying glass. Jamie pegged three of them to the ground with a spray of bullets and they lay still where they'd fallen. Then the chaos cleared and the return fire seemed to stop. He knew that was probably an illusion. In the near distance were a group of camo-colored tents, and he set his sights over there, waiting for someone else to come out. Suddenly there was movement behind the canvas and Shorty's finger tightened on the

trigger in anticipation—

Only to freeze when he saw who came out. It was a young woman, little more than a teenager. She looked up at him and the helicopter overhead, and it seemed to Shorty that she was cringing back into the tent. His sensibilities overcame him and he began speaking into his mike. “Hold fire, I think we have a civil—”

He never got to finish that sentence. The young girl wasn't cringing back into the tent out of fear, she was backing into it to retrieve something. Her hands emerged from the canvas holding an AK-47 and pointing it straight up at Shorty with a look of venom-filled hatred in her eyes.

Jamie didn't even have time to react before the first bullet ripped into his shoulder. He cried out in pain and again as another bullet tore into his leg. The helicopter made a quick leap forward to get some distance from whatever was shooting at them. Jamie was dimly aware of the rat-tat-tat of the machine gun blazing away on the other side of the helicopter while indistinct voices seemed to be arguing loudly inside his head.

“We need to get him out of here!”

“We're an hour out! You're going to have to stabilize him yourself!”

“He's not responding!”

Who's not responding? Shorty wondered, but the voices swam out of focus and suddenly he was too sleepy to care.

Chapter 30

They met with the doctor at the military hospital in Pretoria just a few short minutes after Jamie left surgery. They were the first to arrive. His parents were still on their way.

Nicholas was anxious to ask the doctor questions, but the doctor was equally anxious to get on with his day. "Your friend is fine, boys," he said, waving away their concerns. "He's a lucky man. Took a bullet to the shoulder and a glancing hit to the leg. He might live with some pain after this, and he'll have a few scars, but otherwise he's fine."

Nicholas felt as though a great weight had just been lifted from his shoulders, and he relaxed as he let out a long breath.

"Can we see him now?" Mighty asked.

The doctor nodded. "You'll have to wait until he wakes up, but it won't be too long."

They spent the next half an hour waiting in the hospital. Soon the gravity of the situation lessened and they were cracking jokes to ease the tension.

"I should have known better," Grant said.

"Oh?"

"Nothing kills a cockroach."

"Or a Beckett," Nicholas said laughing. But all their laughter abruptly ceased as they remembered Billie.

The rest of the wait was passed in silence until they noticed a beautiful young blonde girl walk in and straight up to the front desk. She asked the nurse something and then went to sit down opposite the couch where the three of them were seated. They couldn't help but notice how beautiful she was, and even though Adrian had a steady girlfriend, Nicholas caught him staring just as blatantly as he and Grant.

Grant turned and elbowed him in the ribs. "Hey," he whispered. "You're the only single one here. Go for it."

Nicholas shook his head. "In the waiting room of a hospital?"

he whispered back. "Are you crazy?"

"Maybe she's your soul mate and you don't even know it yet?"

"Maybe she's visiting her rekkie boyfriend who's just waiting to thump the guy who's chatting up his girl while he gets shrapnel pulled out of his bulging biceps," Nicholas said. The *rekkies* were South Africa's most famous special forces unit.

"Yes, but you'll never know unless you try." Grant replied.

Nicholas decided it was safer not to try anything. Besides, he was now firmly convinced that girls were a lot of trouble.

Half an hour later, when they were being admitted to see Shorty, the blonde girl was being admitted to see whomever she'd come to see, too. They walked behind her down the hall to the patients' rooms, following the nurse. They watched the girl disappear inside one of the rooms, but when they reached the same door and the nurse didn't move on, Nicholas began to get suspicious. The nurse insisted that they enter the same room, and Nicholas's suspicions intensified.

As they came up to Shorty's bedside to see that blonde girl already seated there and holding Shorty's hand while staring into his eyes with love and tears shining brightly in her own, Nicholas understood completely.

"You bloody little *bliksem!*" Grant exclaimed. "Look at you basking in your wounded-soldier routine, hamming it up!" As they all stopped beside Shorty's bed, the blonde girl looked up, startled to see them standing there. Her eyes flicked from Grant, to Nicholas, and then to Adrian.

Shorty's head turned sleepily on the pillow. "Hey guys," he said, smiling weakly up at them. "I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Melissa. Missy, these are my friends from Saints."

Melissa stood up to shake each of their hands in turn. When she reached Nicholas she said, "I've heard a lot about you."

Nicholas smiled, reciprocating the sentiment. Once everyone had been properly introduced, they all pulled up chairs to Shorty's bedside so that he could explain what had happened.

When Shorty was finished with his story, Grant let out a long whistle. "Jo, this is a dirty war! Now we're killing women and children and they're killing us."

Adrian was nodding gravely. "I'm surprised this hasn't happened to you sooner, Shorty. They should have drilled it into you during your training that anyone could be the enemy. We're not dealing with a trained, regular army. We're dealing with rebels

and civilians that come in all genders and ages.”

Nicholas just shook his head. “I probably would have done the same thing.” His eyes flicked to Melissa. She was more shocked than any of them to hear how Jamie had been injured.

Jamie turned to her with a reassuring look. “Hey, what’s wrong, beautiful?”

“Everything! I don’t want you to go out there again.”

He laughed weakly. “I don’t have much choice. I have to go where they send me.”

She shook her head and whispered something into his ear in a tearful tone. Shorty smiled again and patted her hand. “Don’t worry, it’s not that serious.”

Nicholas watched the exchange with a dull pang of envy. *How did Shorty get so lucky?* he wondered, and again he began to ask himself why his love life was so far off track while his friends seemed to have everything working out for them.

Abruptly he realized that Shorty had asked him something. He raised his eyebrows in question. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“I said, have you seen why you need to get confirmed now?”

Nicholas frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, this is war, Beaver! Look at me! Anything could happen. You could be killed tomorrow.”

Nicholas smirked. “As a radar instructor?”

“Maybe they’ll transfer you to the front. The point is, are you ready for that?”

“Well, assuming they have good food there, too, I don’t see why I wouldn’t be.”

“Okay, fine, make fun.”

“Since when did you become so religious?” Nicholas asked.

“Since I got shot and almost died!”

Melissa picked that moment to chime in, “I thought you said it wasn’t serious?”

“No, no, of course it isn’t,” Shorty hastened to say. “Don’t worry. I’m just adding emphasis for Beaver’s sake.”

Melissa seemed satisfied with that, but then, an hour later and after she’d left, Shorty told them a different story. Apparently he’d lost a lot of blood. He’d gone into shock and then cardiac arrest while he was still in the helicopter on the way back to base.

As Nicholas was leaving, he considered that and Shorty’s advice. Maybe he should get confirmed?

His mind wandered back to the afternoon in high school when

Father Wilson had talked to him about the need to get confirmed, and how later he'd caught the Beckett brothers lying beneath the oak tree behind the chapel, drunk from drinking sweet red communion wine. Nicholas had felt sure that he'd caught them in a major sin, exposing them as hypocrites for daring to drink communion wine while still insisting that he ought to get confirmed! But Shorty had pointed out that as long as it had not yet been poured into a chalice for communion, and blessed by a priest, it was just a gallon jug of fortified, sweet, red wine, stored in a cupboard in the vestry, exactly the same as what could be found in any liquor store, so they were not being sacrilegious. Nicholas was confused. *So many rituals, rules and odd beliefs. There has to be more to it than that!* Nicholas thought to himself.

Still, what would it hurt? He didn't really believe it would help, but then again, maybe his recent lack of luck and direction in life was a symptom of a greater problem. He was still waiting for God to somehow intervene in his life, to prove that He was real, but Nicholas had an awful feeling he was going to be waiting a long time, maybe forever. . . .

Perhaps it was time to follow the urgings of his friends to get confirmed? It certainly seemed to have given them a level of comfort that he did not have. Then there were all the girls he'd ever dated. All of them had been confirmed or—such as in Denise's case—baptized. Come to think of it, when he'd once gone to church with her family, he'd noticed that they all were given unfermented grape juice instead of wine, probably because they shunned alcohol.

Nicholas sighed. Maybe he'd wait until all of this wasn't so confusing. Right now it just didn't look like God actually took an interest in human affairs. He obviously had much more important things to do, otherwise why would He allow one brother to die, and another to live? Why did Billie die, and Shorty live? Why did anyone have to die at all?

Nicholas shook his head, as if to clear it. He wasn't sure what to think anymore.

Chapter 31

James was sitting in the car, parked on the curb beside a park, waiting outside the restaurant where Charles and Elizabeth were busy eating dinner. He was trying to distract himself from his problems with a bottle of whiskey in a brown paper bag, but it wasn't working, and unfortunately he *was* working, so he couldn't afford to take more than a few sips.

The trouble was that his wife was very sick and months ago he'd desperately needed a vacation to go see her in Sterkspruit. He'd asked the elder Atherton, but in recent years James had become more Charles's driver than this father's, so Lucas Atherton had said James should rather ask his son. And as for Charles . . . James remembered the boy's response well:

"If you leave, James, where am I going to find another driver on such short notice? So of course you can't go! Your wife won't get any better just because you're there."

No, James thought, *maybe not better, but she may get worse.*

James smiled ruefully to himself. Charles had made a horrible mistake by treating him so badly over the years. That spoiled little boy had allowed James to discover some damaging facts about him, and he'd thought that James would be obliged to keep those secrets to keep his job. That had all been true until very recently. A few weeks ago, after Charles had denied his request for a vacation to go see his wife, James had gone back to speak with Charles's father about his ailing wife. This time he'd mentioned his upcoming retirement, and under the circumstances, the elder Atherton had agreed to retire him early. The papers were all signed. Today was his last day of work. Tomorrow he'd be on the first train home.

As for tonight . . .

James smiled as he took another sip of his whiskey. Tonight was all about revenge.

* * *

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

Elizabeth and Charles stepped out of the restaurant, smiling and laughing. Elizabeth was a bit tipsy from the wine and it showed. Charles was supporting her wobbly steps with an arm around her shoulder. Just as Elizabeth was stepping off the curb to cross the street, a car came whirring by, and Charles yanked her to a stop.

“Careful, princess!”

Elizabeth stepped back, clearly startled. “I didn't even see it!”

“I noticed. You sure you don't need me to carry you?”

Elizabeth smiled up at him, her eyes slightly glassy. “I'm fine.”

“Really? Well, come on then, it's safe to cross now.”

Charles opened the back door of the car for Elizabeth to climb in. Once inside, Charles leaned forward to tap his driver on the shoulder. “Oi! Let's go, Jamesey boy.”

“As you wish, sir.”

Charles slumped back with a grin. Elizabeth eyed him suspiciously. “I'm not the only one who had a little too much!”

“Oh? How's that, princess?”

“*Jamesey boy?*”

Charles laughed. “I'm sure I've called him that before . . . Isn't that right Jamesey boy?”

James gave no reply.

“Oi! *Jamesey boy* . . . I'm speaking to you.”

“Yes, sir. You have called me that, sir. Is that what you'd like to hear, sir?”

Charles frowned and he opened his mouth to say something but then appeared to think better of it.

“He seems to be in a bad mood,” Elizabeth whispered.

“Yes, he does, doesn't he?” Charles replied, not taking the same care to whisper. “Jamesey boy has been of a rotten disposition all day in fact. I think he's finally growing a bit of backbone now that he's retiring.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “Retiring? Really, James?”

“Yes, Miss Elizabeth,” James replied, his tone more friendly now. “Today is my last day.”

“Bollux, right?” Charles chimed in. “I'll have to find a new boy to drive me around.”

“I'm sorry to hear that . . .” Elizabeth said, still speaking to James. “Or is this retirement good news for you?”

“Retirement means I can go home and see my family, miss, so yes, it is very good news.”

“Well, then I'm happy, too! Isn't that wonderful, Charles?”

“Oh yes, delightful. Of course no one cares what an inconvenience it will be for me to find a new driver.”

“Don't be so selfish, Charles. I'm sure you'll find another good driver quite easily. James needs to go and be with his family!”

“Well, that's true—James never really was all that good. A dime a dozen,” Charles said it with a smile, so it was hard to tell if there was any venom in that statement or if he was just teasing, but the ensuing silence left Elizabeth to wonder.

James seemed perfectly content with the silence as he drove them along the road between Cape Town and Wellington. Since it was the weekend and the start of summer holidays, Charles and Elizabeth were planning to go stay with her parents for a few days while her family got ready to go to Siesta. Charles would stay at a hotel rather than in Siesta itself, but he would accompany them on the journey, driving behind the Symthes' caravan with Elizabeth sitting beside him in his Porsche.

Elizabeth could hardly wait. It was going to be wonderful to share that part of her childhood with Charles—with her fiancé!

Fiancé . . . she repeated the word slowly inside her head, quietly marveling at it. She still couldn't believe she was engaged to be married to this wonderful man. He had everything going for him, the world at his feet, and he wanted to marry *her*. It was overwhelming.

After a while Charles filled the brooding silence with conversation. Elizabeth listened politely. He was talking about himself, bragging about how well he was doing in school—and he barely had to study! She smiled and decided to allow him to take pride in that.

They arrived at Elizabeth's house just before midnight, as per her usual curfew when she was staying with her parents—or for that matter at Tugwell Hall. Charles stepped out of the car and waited, holding the door open for her. Her parents must have heard them pull up, because they opened the door and Elizabeth could see them stepping outside.

Her mother called out to them as Elizabeth left the car: “There's the happy couple!”

Charles shut the car door and turned with a smile to answer his future mother-in-law. “Good evening, Mrs. Smythe!” He started across the lawn toward her. “Or shall I call you mum?”

Elizabeth smiled and was just about to follow Charles when

she heard someone call out softly behind her: "Elizabeth."

She turned to see James staring at her, his window rolled down. "May I have a word with you please, miss?"

Elizabeth walked to his door. "Of course, what is it, James?"

James's eyes flicked over her shoulder, and then to her. "There are things you don't know about Charles," he whispered.

Elizabeth's frown deepened. "What things?"

"Last year when you tried to catch up to master Nicholas at Worcester, Charles already knew about that accident on the road. He'd heard about it on the radio on the way to pick you up. We could have gone by the old road, but he ordered me to go via Du Toitskloof Pass so that we wouldn't reach the station in time."

Elizabeth shook her head. "That's not true."

"I'm afraid it is true, Miss Elizabeth. I know because I was there. I drove you both. I heard the news of the accident, too."

"Why are you only telling me this now?" she asked softly.

"Wait, miss, there's more."

"But—"

"Please, we don't have much time," James said.

Elizabeth looked close to tears. "Go on."

"Where is Elizabeth?" came her mother's distant voice. "Elizabeth! Come over here!"

James rushed on to tell her about how Nicholas really *had* come to take her out for her Matric Farewell, how Charles had somehow known that Nicholas was coming, and that was why he'd planned to take her out early for a picnic before the dance. James explained that he'd only found out because they'd had a flat tire on the way, and Charles had told him to hurry or else Nicholas would arrive and steal her away from him.

"Elizabeth!" her mother called once more.

"I'll get her. . . ." Charles said.

"How could he have known, James? That's not possible. Nicholas never called or wrote to tell me he was coming. He didn't come! I don't believe you!"

James just shook his head. "I don't know how it's possible that Charles knew, but if I had to guess . . . You know your mother and Charles went to dinner together earlier this year? I drove them. I don't know what they were talking about, but I suspect it must have been about you. Maybe about his proposal. Maybe she knew Nicholas was coming. I don't know. You don't have to believe me, but you deserve to know."

Elizabeth was crying, wiping away her tears with the backs of both hands. "Thank you, James—thanks for warning me!"

"Not at all, miss, and one more thing. In all the time I've waited here, to drive you on your dates, I got to know your old maid, Thandiwe quite well. I saw her a few weeks ago at the Cape Town station, and she told me that she was summarily fired by your mother, right after she'd mentioned bumping into master Nicholas at the Wellington train station—he was on his way to come here, to take you to the dance that night. You can confirm that all with her."

"What?" Elizabeth shook her head. She was overwhelmed. "I don't know how to contact her - but that would explain why she didn't stay long enough to even say goodbye!" Lizzie sobbed. "I wish you all the best, James, I really I do," she said through her tears, "I'm sure your family will be glad to have you back with them again."

"Yes, miss. God bless you, miss." James stopped short of explaining that his wife was sick and Charles had also denied him the vacation time to see her. That might have made him look like he was trying to slander Charles in order to get revenge—it wasn't slander if it was the truth.

"God bless you too, James," Elizabeth said as Charles came up beside her. Seeing that she was crying, his expression became bemused. "Hey, princess, don't cry, what—"

Elizabeth turned on him with a look of loathing and disgust. She raised her ring finger to show him the giant diamond ring he'd given her, and let him watch, speechless, as she yanked it off. Charles winced as she threw it at him.

"You, Charles Atherton, are the very last person I would marry! I don't want to ever see or hear from you again. Do you understand?"

Charles shook his head in disbelief, his eyes flashing with hurt. "Eliza—" And then he froze and turned to James with an accusing look. "What did you say to her?" His words were so full of venom that James actually flinched away from his open window. Even so, a small smile sprang to his face.

"Just the truth, sir—just the truth!"

Elizabeth smirked. "If you're worried about what he might have said, then that means it's all true. Goodbye, Charles. I hope you find a much stupider girl to marry, because I'm not quite dumb enough to fall for all your lies anymore!"

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

With that, she turned and stormed off. Charles watched her go. For a moment he just stood there frozen in shock, but then he launched into motion and ran after her. "Elizabeth!"

She reached her parents and stopped to give her mother a withering look. "This is your fault too, mother! I will not be married off by you or anyone else—don't you get it?"

Constance gaped in horror, then recovered. "*Watch* how you speak to me, girl. What nonsense is this? Explain yourself!"

Instead, Elizabeth walked by her mother, nearly bumping Constance over. Without turning, she said, "No, Mother, it's you who has a lot of explaining to do!"

Charles caught up to her, grabbing her by the shoulder, but she spun away from him. "Leave me alone, you horrible man!"

He took a quick step back, shocked. He'd never seen Elizabeth when she was really angry. Her ire gave him pause and he just stood there, watching as she walked inside the house, and slammed the front door behind her.

Constance came up beside him with a look of shock and accusation. "What in heaven's name did you do to her?"

Charles turned slowly to look at Constance. "I haven't the slightest clue, but I think I know how to find out."

With that, he turned and began stalking back to his car. "James!"

James started the engine.

"You'd better run, James!"

They heard the car lurch into gear.

"That's right! Drive off!"

James didn't drive off. He put the car in park and waited.

"Is something the matter, sir?"

"Is something the matter?" Charles echoed incredulously. He stalked right up to the car and reached in through the open window to take hold of James by his shirt and jacket.

James was a frail, small, older man, and Charles had no trouble hauling him out of the car and onto the sidewalk. Once out of the car, Charles picked him up and pressed him back against the car door. Charles's face loomed mere inches from his driver's nose. Charles's teeth were gritted and his eyes were blazing with mad fury. "What the bloody hell did you tell her?"

James said nothing for a moment, but then Charles slammed him against the car, knocking his head on the roof. Once he recovered from that blow, James lifted his head to meet Charles's

fury with a silly grin. "I told her everything you spoiled, selfish little infant."

And that was where Charles lost it completely. His eyes flashed briefly, and then he gritted out something unintelligible, letting go of James. He reared back for a jaw-breaking punch—

And then both Constance and Edwin appeared to either side of him and held him back. "It's not worth it, Charles!" Constance yelled in his ear. Charles struggled with them for a moment before he came to his senses. "It's not worth it," Constance repeated. "Let us talk to Elizabeth and sort this out. Don't make yourself look any guiltier than you already do."

At that Charles' wrath seemed to subside. "You're right."

They let go of him. Charles straightened his blazer. He shook a finger in James's face. "If you think you're getting a pension, you're mistaken. I'll ruin you. You'll end your life in poverty!"

James just smiled. "My pension is guaranteed by the state, not by your father. Would you like me to drive you home, sir?"

"Are you loony? I'm not going anywhere with you! Next thing you'll drive us both into the sea just so I'll drown! Get out of here! I can't stand the sight of you, you ... you bloody heathen bastard!"*

James's face flashed with hurt at the racial slur, but he quickly covered his reaction and straightened his uniform, shaking off the dust and dirt before he climbed back into the car. And with that, he drove away.

Constance sighed. "Perhaps you'd like to come inside for a nice calming cup of tea?"

"Yes," Charles said, nodding absently as he watched James disappear around the bend. "Yes, that would be just fine, thank you. . . ." His voice was very soft and deadly calm.

"Splendid," Edwin said. He looked shaken and confused. "Perhaps then you can also explain to us what just happened."

"Perhaps," Charles said. "Perhaps not."

"Well, do try," Constance pressed. "We're here to help. Whatever it is, I'm sure my daughter is overreacting—as usual . . ." Constance added that last part under her breath.

Charles nodded. "Okay."

"Come then," Constance soothed, taking him by the arm and turning him toward the house. "Let's sort this all out."

But Charles just shook his head and sighed. "I'm afraid this time it won't be that easy, Mrs. Smythe."

* There's a short form of that slur, but it's so offensive to black South Africans, that I've modified the wording

Chapter 32

Nicholas lay in bed just after midnight, awake and sleepless. It had become a pattern that whenever he was stressed over something, it mercilessly kept him awake.

His life was going nowhere! He'd talked to his parents recently in a letter saying he wouldn't be able to make it to Siesta thanks to the Cuban invasion and the resulting conflict in Angola. He'd also mentioned in that letter that he might not be able to leave the military early next year - that he might be forced to stay on. He tried to use that as an argument in his favor, saying that it would delay his entrance into university, but it wouldn't stop him from joining the air force permanently and start pilot training.

His father had replied, "*We'll talk about that when the time comes,*" which was as good as saying he would not receive his parents' permission. Without that he wasn't going to be allowed to sign up, at least not until he was 21. Every moment he spent in the air force that he wasn't training to become a pilot was a moment wasted. Every moment he spent not studying for university was also wasted. He was caught in limbo. And worse than that, no matter how hard he tried to forget her, no matter how much he wanted to, no matter how much he reasoned with himself and rationalized it, Elizabeth was still making unwelcome intrusions into his thoughts, his plans, and even his dreams. He kept trying to think of a way he could get to see her. Maybe he would go AWOL again. . . but the way that had worked out last time, he knew it would be a foolish mistake. What's more, that could be overlooked once, during basic training, but they would never ever accept him into pilot's training with that on his record.

He felt like he needed an exorcist. Elizabeth was no good for him; he could see that; everyone could see that. She'd made her choice, and he had nothing left to do but accept it. But somehow he just couldn't. In the back of his mind, there was one nagging thought repeating, over and over, stopping him - all of the things

that had happened in the last year, and more, did not mesh with the girl he knew. With all of these thoughts swirling around inside Nicholas's head, he knew that sleep was impossible, but tomorrow was going to be a hard day, as with each passing day the war was getting more serious. He *needed* to sleep. He began racking his brains for something, anything that would make him sleepy. Then he remembered church services at St. Andrews. They always made him sleepy. A smile sprang to his face. He began reciting mass quietly inside his head. "I believe in the Father, The Son and the Holy Ghost ..." and before long his eyes grew heavy and his recitation became a confused jumble of words. Then without consciously noticing the transition, he ended up saying a prayer of his own, asking God for help. It wasn't long before he caught himself in his foolishness - for *he* knew full well, by now, that the only solutions he could expect to find to his problems were the ones he made for himself, or else the ones that chance and others around him presented. Yes, God existed. He had no problem believing that, but clearly, he reasoned, there wasn't a personal, caring God present in this equation, just waiting for the right time to intervene on his behalf. With that bitter realization, Nicholas breathed out, and fell into a fitful, disturbed sleep.

* * *

Elizabeth heard her parents talking with Charles into the wee hours of the morning. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but she could guess. She just buried her head deeper under the covers and cried, praying that they wouldn't come to see her. There was nothing any of them could say in their defense, anyway - except perhaps for her dad. She felt sure he couldn't possibly know about any of the things her mother and Charles had been doing behind her back. She hoped not.

And surely Charles knew there was nothing he could ever do or say to fix things now. He had betrayed her trust too horribly to ever recover. She would never forget what he'd done! Forgive him maybe, but she would never forget! That went double for her mother. So what were they all talking about now? Charles couldn't possibly hope to get her father on side with him. He wouldn't allow them to manipulate her like that, would he?

But the more she thought about it, the more Elizabeth wondered if maybe her mother's control over her father wasn't strong enough to quash his objections. Whatever the case, there

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

was nothing they could do to soften their betrayal. They'd conspired against her and Nicholas and effectively forced him out of the picture, so that Charles would have no more competition. They'd manipulated her into marrying Charles. For all she knew, even Charles's proposal was her mother's idea. The worst part about it was that she had no way of contacting Nicholas, to at least apologize to him. He'd never sent a letter—at least none that she knew about, so she didn't have his address. She also didn't have a phone number she could call. The best she could hope to do would be to send a letter to his old address in Sterkspruit and hope his parents passed it on to him, but even that avenue of contact wasn't possible at this late date. His parents would be leaving for Siesta soon. It was too late. But maybe she could go and talk to them once she was there? *Yes - that's what she would do!* She concluded. *That would at least get her message to him.*

And Nicholas? she wondered, feeling a sudden surge of hope. Would he be there in Siesta with them? She had to hold on to that possibility. Maybe, just maybe, she would see Nicholas in Siesta, in person. But a lot of time had passed. He'd probably have a steady girlfriend by now. Maybe he was in a serious relationship with Denise, maybe even engaged to her? It was probably too late to fix things between them, but it wasn't too late to at least tell him how sorry she was - to explain what had happened. He must have felt awful when he'd arrived, after travelling so far, to take her to her matric farewell, only to find that she'd gone with Charles instead of waiting for him.

Nicholas had kept the faith. He'd done his part. But what had he been thinking to come without first hearing from her?

Elizabeth broke into a fresh bout of sobs. She couldn't trust anyone - not even her own family! Eventually the sounds of conversation in the living room quieted and Elizabeth heard a car drive off, outside. She hoped that it was Charles leaving. She hoped even more that her mother wouldn't come knocking on her door now to try and straighten things out. It would be futile if she did. There was no fixing this. But her mother didn't knock on the door, and soon Elizabeth's sobbing began to calm down. As she calmed, she began to think, and as her thoughts swirled, she became suspicious. This wasn't like her mother—to just let things be. Perhaps she knew she was guilty, so she wasn't even going to try to defend herself? But that was equally unlike her mother.

Whatever the case, Elizabeth had an awful feeling of

foreboding. Elizabeth couldn't imagine how, but somehow she knew her mother was going to turn this around on her and make herself look like the victim instead.

Whatever ... Elizabeth didn't care. She pushed all the worries and concerns aside, allowing herself to wallow in misery and despair. She deserved to be upset! Yes, she was the one who had been wronged – but worse yet, she had been manipulated into destroying the hopes and dreams of the only person she'd ever truly loved, and the only one who'd ever truly loved her! She'd been used as an instrument in his torture. No matter what her mother said, this time she was going to hold on to what she'd learned from James. He had no reason to lie to her. Her mother and Charles had every reason to lie to her, and they had. She wouldn't forget this as long as she lived!

Elizabeth felt hopeless. Short of praying, there was nothing she could do to reverse all of the hurt she'd inadvertently caused Nicholas, and also the hurt that had been inflicted on her.

Her mind drifted back to their waterfall, the last time they'd been there together – Christmas Eve, 1973, just after Nicholas had graduated. She remembered how she had felt overcome with guilt – how she'd apologized to Nicholas for her unfounded jealousy and for all the subsequent hurt she'd inflicted on him.

She remembered how quickly he forgave her and how they then had spent the best Christmas Eve of her, and his, entire life, together. How happy she'd been to hear him confess his love for her in their play-acting, how they'd fallen asleep in each other's arms, alone in the Wilderness, with Christmas carols softly playing, that black night - how safe she'd felt with him there. What else was there she could now do – but pray?

“Please, dear Lord, please – I beg of you! Please give me one last chance to ask for Nicholas’s forgiveness, even if I can’t fix this mess. I really need him to know that I was a victim too, and not just him. I need to ask him for his forgiveness, please Lord! Amen”

* * *

“Don't worry, Charles, I'll make her see reason.”

“What's to see? James wasn't lying.”

“No, perhaps not, but he could have been.”

“What do you mean?”

“Is there any reason James would want to hurt you?”

Charles frowned. He swirled the last bit of tea around in his cup. “Apart from the fact that the man has never really liked me?”

No, I can't . . ." Charles trailed off, his expression freezing then going slack with shock at the brilliance of his revelation.

"What is it?" Constance asked sharply, realizing now that there might be a way to salvage the situation.

"James's wife."

Constance shook her head. "What about her?"

Charles snapped out of it, a grin springing to his face. "His wife is sick. He asked me for leave to see her, but I told him I couldn't afford to do without him, and that his wife wouldn't get any better just because he was there. I told him to wait a few more months, until his retirement."

"Perfect," Constance said. "We'll say he bore a grudge against you—that he made up a pack of lies to hurt you. However . . ."

"What is it?" Charles asked.

"Let's say it was your father who denied James his leave."

"My father? Why would he—"

"For your sake, then you're only indirectly responsible for hurting James. It makes you look like the innocent victim."

"Aha, I see," Charles said, nodding slowly.

Edwin was glancing from his wife to Charles and back again, looking very much like he wanted to run away. For once he was privy to his wife's manipulations, and he wasn't sure he liked it. Of course he'd seen this side to his wife before. He'd always known she was clever, but this was something more. She was casually manipulating the facts to suit her plans and to control Elizabeth's life. Elizabeth's wants and needs didn't feature.

Charles had just told them about what James must have told Elizabeth: the fact that Nicholas had come to take Elizabeth to her matric farewell. Somehow everyone had known about that but him. To see the extent of both Constance and Charles's manipulations made him fear that his own decisions hadn't been quite his own either. While Constance and Charles were busy congratulating themselves, Edwin cleared his throat and stood from the arm chair where he was seated.

"Excuse me," he said and started toward the kitchen.

"Edwin . . ." Constance trailed off meaningfully, and Edwin stopped and turned towards his wife. "I hope you realize, this is all privileged information. We have taken you into our confidence. Elizabeth can never know what we've talked about here tonight!"

Edwin quickly nodded. "She'll not hear any of it from me."

"Good."

Edwin nodded once more and turned again, now on shaky legs, to fetch a glass of water from the kitchen. He would have to remember never to get on his wife's bad side. She could be a formidable enemy. Of course, most of his existence revolved around pleasing her, so somehow, deep down, he'd always known that he couldn't afford to displease her.

Certain sacrifices had to be made to keep the peace. He only wished he could forget the ones he'd made tonight. He was betraying his favorite daughter in order to keep his wife's confidence. One day, he'd have to make it up to Elizabeth.

* * *

"I can't forget her, Shorty!" Nicholas said, exasperated. He was sitting in the mess hall at AFB Swartkop, eating lunch there after repairing a radar set in one of their control towers.

"Come on, Beaver, there's a whole world of girls out there!"

"Yeah, but it's not the same. They just don't matter to me anymore. None of them do. Sure there are lots of nice girls in the world, but there's only one for me. It's not about looks. I've dated girls just as pretty as her. Denise for one, Lynn for another."

"Yeah Beaver, but she didn't feel the same about you . . ."

"Okay, you may be right, but that's not the point, Shorty."

"Well, what are you getting at then?"

Nicholas shook his head while Shorty took a bite of his sandwich. "I guess I'm trying to say that I still need closure."

Shorty threw up his hands and gestured wildly with his good arm while his mouth was too full to talk. His other arm was still in a sling. Nicholas smiled at that. Shorty was lucky in a way. Until he fully recovered from his injuries he was stuck doing safe, easy jobs around AFB Swartkop rather than door-gunning for the attack helicopters. "Look, Beaver, I'm going to be honest," he said, his mouth still half full, "As your friend, I need to say this, okay?"

Nicholas nodded. "Go on."

"You can't get to see her in Siesta this year, right?"

Nicholas winced. "Right."

"You're not really planning to go to university where she's studying, anymore, right?"

Nicholas nodded again. "Right."

"So, she's just not a part of your future anymore. It doesn't matter how much she was a part of your past. Just what are you going to accomplish by seeing her again?"

Nicholas shrugged. "I don't know, maybe—"

THE QUEEN'S PROPOSAL

He was interrupted in that moment by the PA system. "Four hours ago, a cease fire was declared in Angola between the—" An immediate cheer rose up from the mess hall and Nicholas had to struggle to hear what came next.

"Leave granted . . . select few . . . see commanding officers."

Nicholas was already up and out of his chair, running from the mess hall. Jamie Beckett was calling after him, but nothing could stop Nicholas now. Suddenly Jamie came up jogging beside him. Nicholas turned and explained. "I have to hurry, Shorty. Before anyone else approaches Sergeant Koets, I need to be first in line."

Shorty nodded. "I know. Even with my one arm in a sling, I'll drive you back to AFB Waterkloof. It'll still be faster."

Nicholas grinned. "Baie dankie!" *Thank you very much.* "This means a lot to me, Shorty!"

Jamie matched his grin. "I know. You owe me one – actually, make that two."

When they reached Sergeant Koet's office, they weren't the first ones there and they had to wait in line. Nicholas began despairing. There were already five guys ahead of him. What if the sergeant gave out all the leave he was authorized to grant before Nicholas could make his case?

After what seemed like an eternity, Nicholas and Jamie were admitted to the sergeant's office. Without even inviting them to sit down, he looked at Nicholas and said, "If you get me that case of Scotch by the end of the day, your leave is guaranteed."

Nicholas could barely contain himself. He thanked his sergeant and hurried off with Shorty to buy the sergeant's Scotch. Nicholas surmised that no one else had been daring or desperate enough to offer the sergeant as much.

He returned just two hours later with the case of Scotch and his leave papers. The sergeant signed them with a flourish and they traded grins and a handshake.

"Good luck, corporal ... now go get your girl."

"I'll do my best, sir," Nicholas replied, smiling at the sergeant.

"Forget about doing your best corporal, do even better - just go and do it!"

Nicholas nodded, still grinning as he left. "I will, sir!"

THE STORY CONTINUES

You're finally about to get some much needed relief – a brief respite from this real-life roller-coaster ride that is so typical of true love under siege. It's about time for the villains to get to feel some pain too! But in real life, evil doesn't just give up, then slink away never to be seen again – it lurks in the shadows, licking its wounds, just waiting for the right time to get revenge and the upper-hand, as it did in this story. Alas, any relief, welcome as that is, is just temporary. The victims of evil still needed to learn to capitalize on their victories, rather than to celebrate them too soon; else the black knight may just ride off into the sunset with the princess – while the white knight stands by looking on, in shock, powerless to stop it! But then there's also still the King

PDF Download at:

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

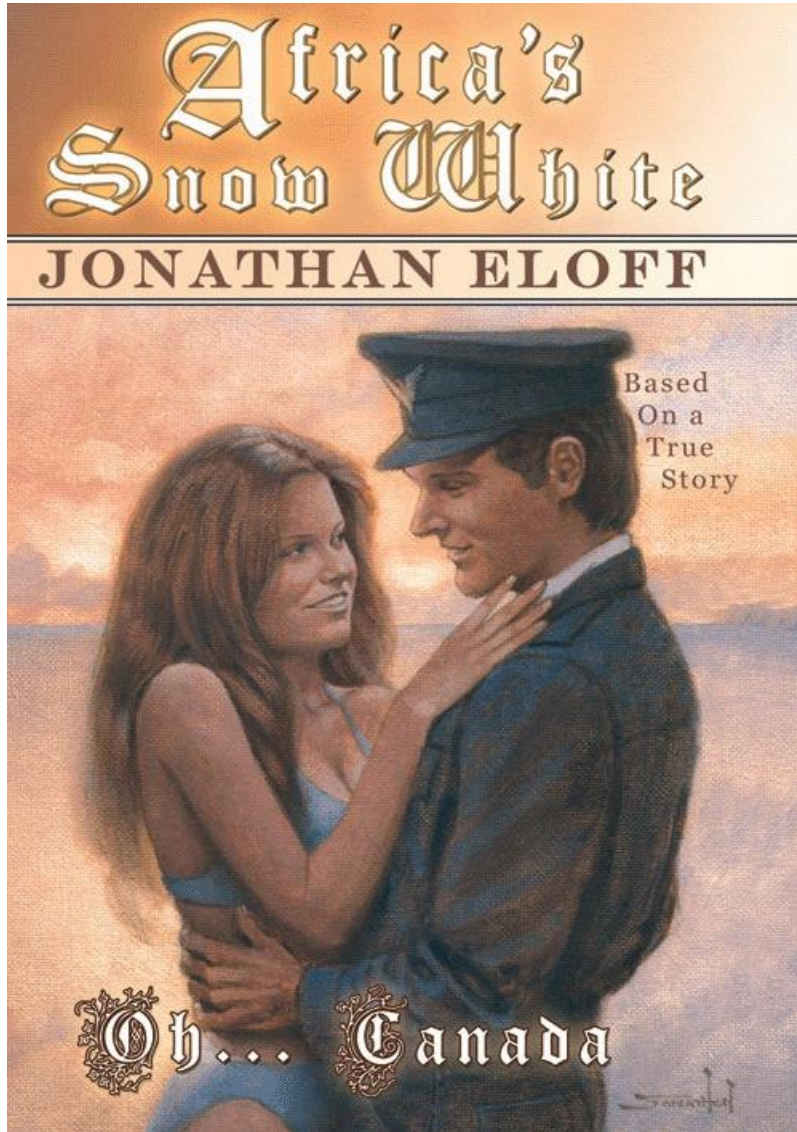
Africa's Snow White

h ... anada ... (Vol-6) **By:**

JONATHAN ELOFF (Some 2nd. Ed. Scenes co-written by Nicholas Strauss)

"Jonathan won some major concessions for these 2nd editions—the right to include some of the more private details of the real-life love story. In the next novel, we encounter healthy 19-21 year old suitors, one back from war, the other now a sophomore. Once you understand Jonathan's relationship to the characters within his novels, you'll see that this was a rather tricky decision! But truth is important for this story and, as happened in real life, truth is stranger (and more entertaining) than fiction! Thus some characters reluctantly agreed to shed the comfortably-safe veneers of "youthful innocence" that they've enjoyed, so far, in his novels, and helped him to write those loving scenes. In this next book, we're about to see Constance's covert control of Elizabeth's personal life exposed, for the first time, with a happy result for Lizzie and Nicholas; but then her control intensifies, with sad consequences for both Nicholas and Lizzie! However, maybe she's not the one really in control? Maybe some Force far stronger than her is just using her? It is said that if you really love someone enough to let them go, and later on they come back to you, then you know that they were truly yours – else they never really were. Well, let's just see, shall we ..." —**Safely Anonymous.**

Click on the cover below to download e_Book PDF Vol-6 "Oh ... Canada"



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

PDF Downloads of all these Novels, FREE at:

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

EMAIL: Eureka.Publishing@Gmail.com

www.Facebook.com/AfricasSnowWhite