

# WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT

## *Africa's Snow White: Prince Charming*

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

—**Ambassador Leslie Manley**, Ambassador from South Africa to Panamá, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Perú

“An alluring tale of love and deception. Jonathan displays exceptional skills painting vivid scenes for the reader. A great escape that will have you glued to your seat.”

—**Dr. Sylvie Raymond**, English Lecturer, UAE University

“Eloff's second novel is an excellent sequel that will leave you wanting to know more about this intriguing story. You're guaranteed to lose sleep as you keep turning the pages late into the night.”

—**Jody Hussey**, ESL Teacher

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

—**KARIN FORSTER**, German Journalist and Talk Show Moderator

“In my capacity as editor in chief of a large German news organization, I often interviewed world leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Mikhail Gorbachev. My wife and I have met this talented young author and shared some wine with him, and again I find that some of the most interesting stories are found when interviewing the people affected by the decisions of these world leaders.”

—**KURT FORSTER**, Editor In Chief

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

—**Margaret Wolf**, High School English Teacher, Alberta, Canada

Africa's  
Snow White

Prince Charming

by

JONATHAN ELOFF

***Prince Charming***

by Jonathan Eloff

[www.JonathanEloff.com](http://www.JonathanEloff.com)

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Cover image by world famous artist, Jonathon Earl Bowser  
(see [www.GreatMasterpieces.com](http://www.GreatMasterpieces.com) for more of his artwork)

Cover design by Jonathan Eloff

This book is a work of fiction, but most of the places, characters, and incidents are real. The specific dialogue is a product of the author's imagination, and names have been changed to protect the identities of the characters.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Only one name goes on the cover, leading to the misconception that only one person was involved in writing this book. In reality, there's a long list of people whose input, support, and encouragement were invaluable to the process:

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Margaret Wolf

Also belonging in this list are the anonymous few who declined the right to have their names credited here.

Thank you, all of you,  
*Jonathan Eloff*



# THE TRUTH BEHIND THE FICTION

I can't take credit for this story, since it's older than I am. What you're about to read is a compilation of events which actually happened, 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 the events, and not as my imagination might have dictated. The result was a surprising mix of the laughter and tears and heart-wrenching scenes which so typify real life.

The more I researched and wrote, the more I realized that my imagination was almost superfluous to the process, which in this instance, 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 a number of years before I actually saw it for what it was, and when I saw it, I realized that it had to be written down before it died with its characters. So read on, knowing that as you do, you're turning through the pages of history.

## THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO:

All the boys who ever walked the hallowed halls of St. Andrew's School; to all the students, past and present, of Wellington's Hugenote Hoërskool in the Boland; to all those who ever found love, discovered it was out of reach, and went on reaching anyway; and to all the victims.



*Revenge*

# rologue

**C**onstance reached the open door to her bedroom, and blundered across the threshold before her brain registered what her eyes were seeing: a swiftly moving shadow, its dark outline briefly traced against the starlit glow on the porch beyond the bedroom's sliding glass doors; the shadow brushing past the curtains and into the bedroom; then, a soft, resounding *clang* as the doors closed, entombing her with the darkness and whatever it might contain. Her chest felt tight, and time seemed to be moving so slowly that it was as though she were caught in molasses.

Silence—so piercing, it hurt her ears to listen to it—then: the shuffling of footsteps, the rustling of fabric, a flicker of movement, and the barest hint of a shadow standing at the foot of her bed, just inside the glass doors.

“Who are you?! Identify yourself!” Constance yelled, her trembling voice splintering the silence. The darkness greedily swallowed every decibel. The shadow came to a sudden stop, its presence still all but invisible. “Watch it! I have a gun!” Constance said, gambling that the intruder was just as blind as she, and hoping that he/she/it would be scared off by the threat.

After a moment of deathly silence, a man's voice issued from the darkness, coming out in a toneless whisper as cold as ice:

“So do I.”

Another rustle of fabric. She saw the shadow reach into its coat. Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness. Starlight was spilling into the room through a narrow gap between the curtains, allowing her to make out the barest features of the intruder. He seemed vaguely familiar.

She saw the starlight glint off something. Her heart gave a sudden leap, and her breath froze in her chest. She might not have a gun, but he certainly did. Her heartbeat became a steady rhythm in her ears: *thump, thump; thump, thump; thump, thump* . . .

Her head swam, and the dark, shadowy world seemed to sway as all the blood rushed to the muscles in her legs with an accompanying burst of adrenaline. Fight or flight—instinctively, her body was getting ready for one or the other. Yet something familiar about that cold, dark whisper kept her rooted in place. Curiosity winning over fear, she demanded again, “Who are you?”

“You don’t know?”

“Lawrence?” Constance couldn’t quite keep the spike of fear from her voice. She’d been more right than she’d known when she’d talked to Edwin on the phone: Lawrence *was* dangerous.

Lawrence gave a short, bitter laugh. “I suppose I must be, then.”

“Wh-what are you doing here?”

“Goodbye, Constance.”

“Wait!”—*He knows I did it!*—“I can explain!”

She steeled herself for the bullet’s impact, her eyes involuntarily squeezing shut.

# Chapter 1

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

“Well?” Edwin prompted.

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

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

*“What do you mean?”*

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

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

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

“I’m Detective James Petrus.”

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

“What is this about, Mister Petrus?”

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

Edwin blinked. “What?”

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

Edwin shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

The detective frowned. “The investigation is ongoing—”

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

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

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

“Dead.”

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

“How?”

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

out of his coat pocket.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Go to your house to kill himself?”

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

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

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

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

“This is ridiculous!”

“The gun that killed Mister Stevens was owned by

him, and apparently brought with him when he broke into your home, but that doesn't eliminate the possibility of murder, quite possibly in self-defense."

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

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

"Such as?"

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

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

"Now, according to Mister Stevens's secretary . . ." The detective paged through his notepad. "He was fired earlier the same week that he allegedly killed himself. Also according to her, around the same time that he was fired, you and he had a fight in the Cape Town International Airport, which ended with you being knocked briefly unconscious."

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

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

"No. It's not possible."

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

"Get out of my office."

The detective's eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Get out."

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

Constance was sitting in an armchair by the open window of her hotel room, looking down from the second story on a liquid-blue pool that was sparkling cheerfully in the afternoon sun. She was unconsciously biting her nails as she watched her daughters, Elizabeth and Hattie, tanning on bone-white chaise lounges beside the pool. The air was still and painfully silent, but for the nearby *krrrrr*, *OO-oo*, *oo* of a pale brown dove picking its way along the windowsill beside her.

Ordinarily, the quiet would have been peaceful, but now it only gave Constance more time alone with her thoughts—thoughts which now dwelled on the

nightmares that had haunted her every night since Lawrence's death. The scene kept replaying over and over, each time subtly different, each time more frightening than the last.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She shook her head slowly, dazedly, and opened the

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

“Where are the girls?”

“They’re down by the pool.”

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

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

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

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

“And what did he have to say?”

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

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

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

“How else was I going to stop him? I didn’t have time

to worry about incriminating myself!"

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

"I know."

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

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

"That is the truth!" she said, shrugging his hand off her shoulder. "Every bit of it—except for that detective's ridiculous insinuations. Lawrence broke in and tried to kill himself. I tried to stop him. He managed to do it anyway. The end!" Constance's eyes were smoldering.

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

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

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

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

Constance was nodding. "Yes. You could have. I suppose I just couldn't bear the thought of doing

nothing.” Constance uncrossed her arms and looked down at the floor. “He was your best friend. If only for your sake, I had to try to stop him.” Constance felt Edwin’s hand on her arm, and his other hand came up beneath her chin, gently tilting her eyes up to his.

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

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

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

\* \* \*

Elizabeth was acutely aware of the silence in the car as her father drove them home. *Home*. Would it ever feel that way again? How could you feel a sense of comfort and security from a place that had seen so much sadness? So much death. First Lawrence’s son, Benjamin, and then Lawrence himself. *And how much worse for my Mom and Dad, who will have to sleep in the room where . . .*

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

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

goosebumps.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She passed her mother and sister on the way to her room. They were standing outside the master bedroom, peering in with morbid curiosity. Elizabeth was the same height as her mother, and marginally shorter than

her younger sister, so she couldn't see past them as she hurried by. But she didn't want to. She kept her eyes fixed dead ahead, focused on her bedroom door—and the sanctuary beyond.

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

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

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

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

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

Elizabeth sighed quietly. “Okay.”

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

*So much for sanctuary*, Elizabeth thought.

\* \* \*

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

“What do you mean you're not making the arrangements?”

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

“Well, who is making the arrangements, then?”

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

“You *think* that's it? You want me to repeat the number?” There was an unnaturally long pause, after which, Edwin said, “Hello . . . hello?” He shook his head angrily and slammed the receiver down.

“Who was that, Edwin?”

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

Constance frowned. “Stevens?” Edwin nodded, and her frown deepened. “Why would you want to call *her*?”

“She’s with the kids now.” *About time*, Constance thought. Rebecca Stevens had abandoned her family only months prior in order to be with the mechanic she’d been cheating on Lawrence with. “I was calling about the funeral.”

Constance blinked. “Haven’t they already had that?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As she left, a thought occurred to her, and she turned from the entrance of the living room. “When you’re done . . .” Edwin stopped halfway through dialing another number and turned to face her, his eyebrows

raised, the receiver pressed to his ear. Constance went on: "Perhaps you could make the arrangements to have the carpets in our bedroom replaced. I want the exact same ones. Make it as though it never happened. Oh—and the closet needs fixing, too."

Edwin nodded mechanically and began dialing again.

## Chapter 2

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

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

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

He was pointing it at her.

“I’ll see you in hell.”

Constance began shaking her head. “This isn’t real,” she whispered. “It didn’t happen like this.”

Lawrence’s sneer widened into a broad rictus of a grin, and then his finger twitched, pulling the trigger. An earsplitting explosion rent the air, and Constance immediately felt a warm splash across the back of her neck and the side of her face.

A wave of nausea and pain raised goosebumps on her exposed skin, and she felt herself falling. She heard a bloodcurdling scream, followed by the sound of Lawrence laughing hysterically.

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

Constance forced herself to stop massaging her neck, and clasped her hands in her lap to keep them from

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

Then she remembered: she and Edwin were sleeping in Elizabeth's room until the carpets were replaced in theirs, while Elizabeth slept in the comparatively smaller spare room. She'd told Elizabeth they were taking her room rather than the spare room because hers had its own bathroom, but of far greater importance was the fact that the spare room reminded her too much of the master bedroom . . . right down to the sliding glass doors.

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

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

closed her hands into shaking fists around the handles and impatiently wrenched at them.

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

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

*Breathe. Just breathe . . .*

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

A cool breeze swept up the steps of the porch, provoking an icy shiver when it met with the sweat trickling down from her hairline. Constance crossed her arms over her chest, lingering despite the chill, afraid to go back inside where the feeling of being suffocated would return.

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

Closing and locking the doors behind her, Constance headed for the kitchen. While the nightmare was still

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

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

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

*This is just the beginning.*

\* \* \*

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

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

and picked up where she had left off with reading her magazine.

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh—hello, Mister Petrus.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

have solved your case.”

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

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

Constance shrugged. “He was a troubled man.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

the spot where the detective had been sitting.

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

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

\* \* \*

Shortly after arriving at work, Edwin received a phone call from chairman of the board, William Gaines, informing him that the board of directors had decided to promote him to managing director in Lawrence's place. Mr. Gaines had also told him that he had to select an assistant whom he could begin training to take his place in the event that "something" should happen to him.

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

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

as his arm was threatening to buckle beneath the weight of the box. Reaching quickly around to support the box before he dropped it, he pushed his way inside the office.

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

Just as Edwin was getting up from the desk, the door opened, and Martha came in. Edwin frowned at the breach of etiquette. She was supposed to knock first, or better yet, call him on the telephone. He was just about to remind her of that when he noticed that her face was

pinched with concern. Edwin's frown turned to a sympathetic smile as understanding dawned. *Of course, a new boss means a new secretary; she's probably come to offer her resignation.*

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh. And? What does he want?"

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

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

"Tell him—"

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

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

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

"I assumed you'd be taking over Lawrence's office, so I called his old number, but never mind that." Edwin frowned. *No congratulations?* Not that he felt he deserved any, but ordinarily, he knew his wife would have said *something* about his promotion. . . .

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

Edwin's brow lifted. "That's wonderful news,

Constance!” Despite the morbid nature of the conversation, it really was good news. Now maybe they could begin to put all of this behind them.

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

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

“You mustn’t see him! I forbid it.”

Edwin frowned. “May I ask why?”

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

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

“Good.”

Edwin sighed. “Goodbye, dear.”

“Goodbye.”

*Click.*

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

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

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

Sighing again, Edwin leaned back in Lawrence’s chair

and stared up at the ceiling, not for the first time wishing that his wife were a little more even-tempered.

\* \* \*

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

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

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

"In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother, Lawrence Benjamin Stevens, and we commit his mortal remains to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

The priest opened the urn, and in accord with Lawrence's final wishes, sprinkled his remains into the

now-open grave of his late son, Benjamin. Most of the ashes fell straight down, landing with an inaudible pitter patter atop of Benjamin's small coffin, but a fair portion of the ashes were scattered to the wind. Edwin smiled sadly, watching them take flight, and hoped that it was somehow emblematic—that some small part of Lawrence had managed to escape the sorrow he'd been held captive by in life.

Unable to hold back any longer, tears began spilling in rivulets down Edwin's cheeks, making it only halfway down his cheeks before they dried in the wind. Edwin closed his eyes, shutting out the blurry scene, and followed the rest of the priest's prayer in his head.

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

firing him so soon after his wife had left him.

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

*You killed him.*

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

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

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

Constance's mouth clamped shut and she turned her attention from Edwin back to the priest. Where were these traitorous thoughts coming from?

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

*But you are sorry?*

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

*Are you sorry, now?*

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

Then, you would do it again?

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

*For your own good.*

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

*prevent it.*

Silence. Constance let out a quiet sigh.

*Then you're not sorry.*

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

Silence.

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

\* \* \*

As Constance and Edwin were walking back to the car, the funeral service now over, a large man with a full head of silver hair came over, striding over to them and offered his hand to Edwin.

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

Constance felt her eyebrows lifting. *Cape Town? Then*

*this must be . . .*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, sir, it occurs to me that Lawrence’s daughters are the real losers in this tragedy. First their mother left them, and now their father is gone. For all intents and

purposes they've been orphaned, and whether or not the company is to blame, that is going to be the ugliest part of all this in people's eyes."

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

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

The man was frowning. "That could be very expensive."

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

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

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

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

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

Constance's face flashed with shock and recognition, and she felt a cold sweat prickling her skin. *If he hears*

*my voice, he might realize I was the one who called him!*

The chairman extended a hand to her and she took it, even though hers was unaccountably cold and clammy. She concealed her fear and shock with a smile. *Maybe I won't have to say anything; I'll just smile and nod. . . .*

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

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

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

"I'll make it my highest priority."

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

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