

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT

Africa's Snow White *Summer Love - Jealous Winter*

“A delightful read. It evoked in me memories of my own teenage years, growing up in Cape Town. My father was from the Free State Province of South Africa and went to St. Andrew’s School in Bloemfontein in the early 1920’s as a boarder. When we later went back to Bloemfontein as a family in the mid-1960’s, my father was Chairperson of the St. Andrew’s Old Boys’ Association and I got to know the school well, although I never attended St. Andrew’s. I am sure my father would have enjoyed the passages about the school and the typical schoolboy pranks. I now serve the people of South Africa as Ambassador to Panama and have had the pleasure of meeting and getting to know the author. I look forward to reading Jonathan’s sequel to this book, as I am sure there will be one.”

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

“As the title suggests, *Summer Love - Jealous Winter* is a story of innocence and treachery. On one level there is pure, innocent teenage love in a simpler time, but underneath, controlling even the innocent, is the conniving manipulation of the antagonist. From the start, I was curious to discover how the innocence and treachery would mesh. Well, I was not disappointed. The tension mounts; the suspense is gripping. This seemingly gentle novel became a page turner that threatened to keep me up all night! Eloff has cleverly woven the divergent threads into a powerful ending.”

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

“This fact-fiction fairytale is the beginnings of an amazing love story intricately woven against the backdrop of South Africa. It is textured and spirited and manages to lure the reader into its pages. I expect to see great things

from this young, new writer and am looking forward to the sequel.”

—**Geraldine Cilliers**, Qualified Librarian and Book Reviewer (worked for *Rootz Magazine* in South Africa)

“Jonathan Eloff beautifully weaves together true life events of romance, heartbreak, betrayal, and suspense all the while describing South Africa’s natural landscape and daily life at the end of the Apartheid.”

—**Jody Hussey**, ESL Teacher, B.A. in History from Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

“Tender, hilarious, captivating . . .”

—**Sue Merralls**, Special Events Organizer, Alberta, Canada

Africa's
Snow White

Summer Love

Jealous Winter

by

JONATHAN ELOFF

Summer Love - Jealous Winter

by Jonathan Eloff

www.JonathanEloff.com

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Cover image by world famous artist, Jonathon Earl Bowser
(see 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.

International Standard Book Number: 978-0-9763374-3-0

Printed in the United States of America

by The A&A Book Printing Company:
www.PrintShopCentral.com

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:

Ambassador Leslie Manley
Daniel Eloff
Geraldine Cilliers
Ian Eloff
Jennifer Eloff
Jody Hussey
Lars Diederichs
Margaret Wolf
Richard Wilde
Rick Alger
Sheena Converse
Sue Merralls

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; all those who ever found love, discovered it was out of reach, and went on reaching anyway; and to all the victims.

nnocence

Chapter 1

South Africa, 1971: the little town of Wellington was located in a profoundly scenic valley of the Western Cape. To the east, it was hemmed in by the majestic Hawequa Mountain Range, and to the west by the dark, rolling green patchwork of the *Cape Winelands*, stretching out as far as the eye could see. The town lay on the banks of the Kromme River, and was nestled at the foot of the Gröenberg, a large, extinct volcano with lush, green slopes.

December 10th was an offensively hot and dry day in Wellington. Under the infernal scrutiny of the noonday sun, Elizabeth and Hattie Smythe were walking home from school with seeming indifference to the weather. Their last day of school, a half day, now behind them, and the holidays ahead, only propriety, and their school bags, which hung weightily from their shoulders, kept them from sprinting the distance.

Elizabeth was nearly sixteen years old, with long, chestnut brown hair; a slender, curvaceous figure; and an exquisitely smooth, white complexion. She was five feet and three inches tall with deep blue eyes and an inescapably infatuating smile.

By contrast, her younger sister, Hattie, was shorter, with darker brown hair and sad, brown eyes. She was also very pretty, though barely twelve years old.

Both girls were wearing their school uniforms—blue dresses of a strictly regulated length, with white socks and trim. As was school regulation, their hair was done

up in braids and their faces free of any makeup. Their school blazers were draped loosely over their arms, every now and then waving in a warm breeze.

Suddenly, Elizabeth became aware of hurried footfalls pounding down the sidewalk behind them, and then a voice: “Lizzie, wait up!” Elizabeth and Hattie slowed and turned to see Pieter Kruger and his brother, Jacobus, running to catch up with them.

“You two seem to be in an awful hurry,” Elizabeth commented, noting the sweat pouring down Pieter’s and Jacobus’s faces.

“Elizabeth—” Pieter began breathlessly, but then stopped himself, realizing that what he was about to say ought to wait until he’d had a chance to catch his breath. His expression softened in sympathy.

“What’s wrong?” Elizabeth asked, noting his expression.

“We just saw Thomas and Sarah kissing in the schoolyard. I’m so sorry. I thought you’d want to know,” Pieter said. Jacobus nodded solemnly, a pinched expression on his face—Sarah was his girlfriend.

Likewise, Thomas was Elizabeth’s boyfriend, but the news seemed to stab her like a blunt knife. She felt hurt and betrayed, but she hadn’t been very interested in Thomas, so the wound was only skin deep. She was more surprised than heartbroken.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said in a subdued tone. “I’m glad you told me.”

“If there is anything I can do . . .”

There was a pause as she thought about it. “Walk with me?” she asked, her blue eyes bright and shining in the sun, made bluer still by the color of her dress.

Pieter hesitated. He secretly *loved* Lizzie. He didn’t want to take advantage of her vulnerability. But they were friends—neighbors, too—he had to be there for her. He would simply have to resist the temptation to be more than a friend.

“Sure, Lizzie, I’ll walk with you,” he replied.

The four of them broke into pairs, with Elizabeth and Pieter walking together in front.

“I suppose you’ll be leaving for Siesta soon?” Pieter asked, chancing a lighter topic.

Elizabeth was grateful not to talk about Thomas. “Yes, tomorrow actually,” she specified, her face brightening.

“That soon?” he asked. “I wish I was going. It sounds like you have a lot of fun there.” Elizabeth sent him an inviting smile, and he met her gaze openly.

“How’s Florence doing?” Elizabeth asked.

He looked away. “We . . . broke up a few days ago. She didn’t want to go to Stellenbosch University with me, and I didn’t want to go to Cape Town University with her. She couldn’t handle the idea of a long-distance relationship . . . and that was that.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We weren’t really in love. I would’ve gladly applied to her choice of university if we were.”

Elizabeth nodded. “It seems like it was for the best, then.”

“It was. Besides which, I’m in love with someone else,” Pieter said, his gaze finding hers once more.

Elizabeth looked up at Pieter, a naïvely questioning look in her eyes. He broke eye contact nervously, turning his head to stare at the ground as they walked. He had been determined not to take advantage of Elizabeth’s vulnerability, but she was sending all the right signals, and somehow, she didn’t seem all that upset about Thomas . . .

“You know, Lizzie, I was thinking, when you get back from Siesta, we could—I mean—would you like to . . . to go on a date with me sometime?” he asked, swallowing visibly.

“I’d like that very much, Piet,” Elizabeth said, smiling at his sweetly fumbled words. Pieter was handsome—six feet and two inches tall, with curly, golden-brown hair; green eyes, the color of spring; and a wiry frame—but his good looks had failed to impart much confidence.

“Really?” he asked.

“Of course,” Elizabeth said and flashed him an alluring smile. She couldn’t help being amused by his uncertainty.

As the four continued walking home, their conversations now flowing effortlessly, Pieter couldn’t keep the smile from his face. He looked up at the clear blue sky and almost sighed. Somehow, the day seemed even brighter now than it had before.

* * *

“Edwin, dear, could you get that?” Constance Smythe called down to her husband from the second floor of their home as the telephone rang again. A brief silence followed her request as Edwin got up from the couch where he had been reading.

“I’ve got it,” he replied just before picking up the phone in the kitchen. “Edwin Smythe speaking. What may I do for you?”

“Hello, Eddie.” The voice sounded flat and very tired.

“You sound terrible, Lawrence. Are you all right?”

“Ben’s dead.” Lawrence’s voice cracked as he spoke about his son.

“Oh no—” Edwin broke off in shock and was silent for a long moment. “I can’t imagine what you’re going through. He was a good kid.”

“The funeral is tomorrow. I’d really appreciate it if you could be there.” Lawrence was having difficulty speaking now.

Edwin caught a glimpse of his wife as she entered the kitchen. “Don’t worry; we’ll be there, Lawrence. What time is it?” Edwin noticed his wife give him a disapproving look, her ice-blue eyes flashing briefly at him. He wondered what she expected him to do. Perhaps she was upset that he had accepted an invitation without asking her first.

“One o’clock,” Lawrence said.

“Not to worry, we’ll be there, and if there’s anything else we can do—we’re pretty busy getting ready for our

trip to Siesta tomorrow—but I'm sure we could spare the time."

"Oh. Right. Your holiday." Lawrence blew his nose. "I forgot, Edwin. I'm sorry. I don't mean to be a downer."

"No, that's quite all right. We will see you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Eddie. I knew I could count on you," Lawrence said and hung up the phone.

Edwin put the receiver down gently. "That was Lawrence Stevens . . . calling to invite us to his son's funeral tomorrow."

Down on her haunches, Constance seemed to be fuming as she rummaged through the kitchen cupboards, banging pots and pans in a discordant racket.

"You should have told him we couldn't go," she said, still searching the cupboards.

"He was in quite a state. I couldn't exactly refuse. Don't worry, we'll have plenty of time tomorrow; a funeral isn't going to slow us down much."

"Such depressing news should have been saved for a more appropriate time. He knew you were going on holiday. He should have waited until you got back to tell you."

"He said that he forgot about our holiday . . ."

"Oh, I'm *sure* he forgot," Constance replied. "But what's done is done. There's no use crying over spilt milk."

Edwin felt relieved that she was going to drop the subject. "Don't worry, dear. We'll forget all about this morbid business once we're in Siesta."

"I hope so," Constance said, and with that, she gave up searching the kitchen cupboards and stood up to face her husband. Constance was a small person, roughly the same height as her eldest daughter, Elizabeth, with an equally small frame and a soft, pleasant face that made her appear delicate and unassuming.

"What time is the funeral tomorrow?" she asked.

"One o'clock. I imagine the service won't be more than

an hour long, and we can skip the reception,” Edwin said, fiddling nervously with his shirt collar.

“Well then, I suppose we’ll just have to be ready to go the minute we get back,” Constance said, her long, darkly-dyed hair flaring as she left the kitchen.

Edwin heard her calling for the maid as she left. No doubt it had something to do with what she’d been searching for in the kitchen.

Now that his wife was gone, Edwin let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. He still felt dazed. *Poor Ben*, he thought. *Dead at age seven. What a life. What a world.* He was still standing next to the phone and now he eyed it accusingly. *A harbinger of doom, that’s what you are*, he thought. Edwin ambled back to the couch in the living room where he’d been reading earlier.

A minute later, the doorbell sounded and Thandiwe, the maid, ran to get it. Thandiwe was one of the local people, dark skinned and chubby, but very kind—like her namesake, which was *Xhosa* for *loving*. She came by a couple of times a week to help with chores around the house, particularly the laundry.

Thandiwe opened the door. “Oh, hello, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Hattie. Did you have a good day at school?” the maid asked with a cheerful smile.

“Very good, thanks,” Elizabeth answered.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Thandiwe said, her smile broadening. “Your father is in the living room. I suspect he’ll want to speak with you . . .” Her smile faded now. “He’s just received some bad news from Mister Stevens.” Thandiwe reached for their school blazers.

“Oh . . . ?” Elizabeth replied, absently handing Thandiwe her blazer.

“What sort of bad news?” Hattie asked.

“It has something to do with Mister Lawrence’s son; that’s all I know.”

Edwin was sitting on the couch, contemplating the front cover of his book. He was thin and slight of build at five feet, seven inches tall, with closely-cropped, ash

brown hair that was swept back from his forehead. His most remarkable feature, however, was his eyes: they were light brown and oval-shaped, slanted slightly down toward his nose and up at the corners, with his dark eyebrows naturally following the slant and heightening the effect. The look wasn't oriental, since he still looked distinctly English, but it did cause the casual observer to wonder.

Elizabeth and Hattie came striding into the living room and slowed upon seeing their father's brooding expression.

Elizabeth set her backpack down on the floor. "Hi, Dad . . . Thandi told us you have some bad news?"

Edwin looked up from idly studying the front cover of the book he'd been reading. "Oh—hello girls." He hesitated, then sighed and said, "Lawrence's son, Benjamin, died, and your mother and I will be attending the funeral tomorrow."

"That's horrible!" Elizabeth said, her eyebrows drawing together with feeling. Hattie's lower lip was quivering, but she said nothing. "This is just a day of bad news, isn't it?" Tears were forming in Elizabeth's eyes. She barely knew Benjamin, but that didn't stop her from caring.

Edwin stood up from the couch and moved to put a hand on Elizabeth's shoulder. "I know, dear, but that's life isn't it? There's no use crying about it." Edwin missed the implication that Elizabeth had received some bad news of her own. "Well, go on, girls. Dry your eyes and put your books away. You'd better do some of your packing for tomorrow."

Elizabeth picked up her books again and headed upstairs, but Hattie just stood there in shock, looking up at her dad and sniffing.

Edwin looked down at Hattie. "Well? Time is wasting." At that, Hattie charged away in a mad dash for her room.

Edwin sighed. "Don't run up the stairs, Hattie!" He

called after her, but it was no use. She wasn't listening.

Hattie ran past Thandiwe at the top of the stairs, nearly knocking a load of washing out of the maid's hands. Thandiwe looked startled, but she turned with a frown to watch Hattie run past. The door to Hattie's room slammed shut, and Thandiwe took that as her cue. She set the washing down in the hallway and knocked gently on Hattie's door.

"Is everything all right, Miss Hattie?"

* * *

Hearing all of the commotion, Constance emerged belatedly from her room, which was down the hallway from Hattie's, just in time to see Thandiwe disappear inside Hattie's room.

Suspicious, Constance ambled down the hallway. She appeared in the doorway to Hattie's room a moment later. "Thandiwe . . ." Constance said, trailing off warningly as she took in the scene—Hattie receiving a warm hug from the maid.

Thandiwe broke the hug and turned to face Constance. "Yes, madam?"

"Come to my room, would you please?"

"Yes, madam."

Constance headed back to her room, but Thandiwe lingered to give Hattie a reassuring smile before following suit and closing the door behind her. Thandiwe arrived in Constance's room a few moments later, whereupon Constance immediately leveled a reproving frown upon her.

"I don't want you spoiling my girls, Thandiwe. We've talked about this before. We mustn't encourage them to behave so emotionally," Constance said.

"But, madam, everybody needs some comfort from time to time."

"I've said my piece, Thandiwe. Don't let it happen again. You're a good maid and I'd hate to lose you over such nonsense."

"Yes, madam," Thandiwe replied, sounding crestfallen.

“It won’t happen again.”

“Good, I’m glad that we could reach an agreement. You may go, Thandiwe—oh, and don’t forget to iron my beige dress,” Constance said as she went to her closet to retrieve it. “I’ll be wearing it for the journey to Siesta tomorrow,” she explained, handing the dress to the maid.

“Yes, madam,” Thandiwe said, taking the dress and leaving the room.

Constance watched her go with a sigh lying dead upon her lips. *Grief is a strange sort of thing, she thought. It makes people behave so improperly.*

She considered for a moment that Lawrence Stevens and his family would be grieving far more than her daughters. Apart from his late son, Benjamin, Lawrence had two young daughters and his wife, Rebecca. They would all be missing Benjamin terribly.

A thought occurred to Constance then: the Stevens family might be interested in moving someplace where they wouldn’t constantly be reminded of what they’d lost. Constance nodded absently. *Interesting . . .*

Chapter 2

Earlier that morning: golden rays from the rising sun were slanting into the dormitory through tall, lattice windows, and little clouds of dust were dancing down through them like snowflakes. Outside, the sprawling, grassy campus was broken neatly in places with majestic, green trees, rising like watchtowers from in-between the large, colonial stone buildings.

St. Andrew's was an old, English, all boys boarding school, located in the city of Bloemfontein. Today was the last day of school before summer and Christmas holidays began. Many *Afrikaner** families had been looking forward to this day all year; it was an opportunity to get away from the maddening monotony of work, home, and school. One such family was the Strauss family.

Nicholas Strauss was the middle child of three, 16 years old, with thick, wavy, chestnut-brown hair. One inch shy of six feet tall, blessed with a good complexion, a naturally athletic build, a striking smile, and piercing green eyes, Nicholas was the kind of guy who could make a girl blush just by looking at her.

As Nicholas lay in his bed, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, a cacophony of roaring erupted in his ears. His eyes shot open. His heart began to pound.

Lions.

Nicholas blinked a few times, then connected the sound to meaning. He groaned, buried his head beneath

* *Afrikaner*: African; a South African of Dutch and European descent

his pillow, and went back to sleep. The city zoo was barely a mile from campus, and early morning was when they fed the lions.

Nicholas dreamt that he was standing on a verdant plain with a broad, blue sky overhead and lush, tropical mountains soaring in the near distance in front of him. A cool, winding river was flowing from between the mountains and gently hedging the plain on one side. Half a mile behind him, the river bisected a sprawling, white sandy beach, just before it emptied into the warm Indian Ocean.

It was Siesta, the caravan* park where he and his family spent their summer and Christmas holidays each year. Nicholas found himself wishing he could see the ocean again, and his subconscious accommodated by sending him whirring across time and space to walk barefoot along the beach. His senses were bombarded by a blessed recollection: the clean, white sand tickling warmly between his toes, the rippling azure water frothing a brilliant white as the waves crested and rolled to a crashing stop upon the shore—

Clank clank, clank clank, clank clank. Nicholas awoke to the cold, brassy sound of the Twells Bells, which were two pieces of iron railroad track strung up next to each other in the courtyard below.

By now sunlight was streaming into Nicholas's dormitory—an uninspired, rectangular room with old, scuffed wooden floors, dull brown walls, and white trim for the windows.

Nicholas sat up in his bed and surveyed a scene of unusual disorder through reluctantly opening eyelids. Where normally there would have been a neat double row of gray steel-frame beds and lockers traversing the length of the dormitory, this morning everything was out of place.

The last day of school! Nicholas recalled. *They may as*

* *Caravan*: British English for an RV or camper

well call it prank day, he thought, as he surveyed his surroundings. His schoolmates were waking up all over the dormitory only to find that their shoelaces had been tied together, or that their hands had been filled with shaving cream—which had subsequently migrated to numerous other places during the night. Being the last day of school, no long-term punishments were possible, and the result was mayhem.

The pranks were all done in good fun, Nicholas reflected, unless the victim wasn't very well liked, in which case he'd better be somewhere else on the last day of school.

Nicholas noted with a smile that Bakkies Baker had had his bed raised up onto four lockers while he slept. Even as he watched, Bakkies sat up, and apparently not having noticed his predicament, swung his legs over the side . . .

A second later, Nicholas heard the boy's startled cry and watched as he nearly fell from a dizzying height. Unsurprisingly, the Beckett brothers—Jamie Beckett, known as *Shorty* for his stature; Billie Beckett, or *Muffy* as he was called for his often clumsy nature; and Harry Beckett, known as *Checkers* for his pervasive freckles—were standing there at the foot of Bakkies Baker's bed, laughing hysterically at the effects of their prank.

Bakkies Baker glared daggers down at the Becketts as he carefully calculated a jump to the floor. It never paid to be a deep sleeper at boarding school.

Feeling suddenly nervous, Nicholas checked himself over to make sure that he hadn't been the victim of any pranks last night . . .

And found a sticky knot of toothpaste in his hair. "All right, who was the weasel who pranked me last night?" Nicholas asked above the clamor of people laughing and yelling as they got out of bed and began going through their morning routines.

No one answered.

Figures, Nicholas thought.

* * *

As Nicholas walked down the long, stone corridor, he heard indignant shouts coming from the shower room. With a sinking feeling, he turned the corner.

Everywhere he looked, there were more people standing outside the shower stalls than in. The vast majority of the students were toweling off prematurely, and with vigorous enthusiasm. Some of the guys still had glistening white suds in their hair. Most telling of all was the fact that there was no steam floating about the room.

Nicholas slowly undressed, setting his clothes and towel down on one of the wooden benches. Finding a free shower stall, he tentatively stepped inside. Cringing, he braced himself for the inevitable as he reached for the shower knobs—

“*Jislaaik*,* man! That’s cold!” Nicholas’s deep, baritone voice echoed from his shower stall, drawing knowing smiles and chuckles from the guys standing safely *outside* the shower stalls.

“Yeah, it really takes the mickey out of you, doesn’t it?” Jamie Beckett said just outside Nicholas’s shower stall.

After a flurry of activity, there was a short pause as the sound of running water stopped, and Nicholas hopped eagerly out of the shower.

“I guess old Mister Benson forgot to stoke the boiler again, huh?” Nicholas asked as he toweled off.

“That would be my assessment,” Jamie said. Grinning, he pointed to the sticky knot of toothpaste still lodged in Nicholas’s hair. “I think you missed a spot.”

Nicholas scowled. “Shorty . . . it was you, wasn’t it?”

“You wound me, Beaver,” Jamie said, using Nicholas’s nickname—so named for his two front teeth, which had appeared a little too large for his eight-year-old head when he’d first arrived at St. Andrew’s. “Why am I always the first to blame?”

* *Jislaaik*: Afrikaans for wow

Nicholas shot Jamie a narrow-eyed look. "Maybe because you're always grinning like an idiot when these . . . *unfortunate incidents* occur."

Jamie's grin widened. "A bloke can't help being happy, can he?"

"Hah," Nicholas grunted, wincing as he tried to massage the toothpaste out of his hair with his towel.

* * *

The boys of Twells and Chandler House congregated in the courtyard for morning roll call, chatting excitedly as they waited for their house prefect to call the roll and inspect their uniforms, which were clean and neatly pressed as usual, consisting of navy blue blazers and gray pants, topped off with stiff straw hats, affectionately known as *Cheesecutters*.

The boys heard Mr. Benson, a kindly, lean old man, with a dark, weather-beaten skin and a regrettable lack of hair, whistling merrily as he rode slowly by them on his bicycle.

"Enjoy your morning shower, boys?" Mr. Benson asked with a toothy grin.

Conversations were abruptly suspended as the boys turned to watch Mr. Benson ride away, their eyes narrowing in suspicion. One by one, their mouths dropped open as the puzzle pieces snapped into place.

"That rotter!" Jamie Beckett exclaimed. "He pranked the lot of us!"

* * *

Nicholas's parents arrived to fetch him from St. Andrew's at just after nine o'clock—the time when lessons would normally begin.

Nicholas saw them arrive from his place at the dormitory window. After saying his farewells, he grabbed his suitcase and left the dormitory. When he reached the stairwell, he encountered the Beckett brothers at the top, holding their suitcases two-handed in front of them. They were energetically chatting amongst themselves, every now and then giving Billie Beckett a gentle shove

toward the stairs. Billie was shaking his head, his eyes wide. Nicholas shot them a curious look, but thought better of asking them what they were doing.

When Nicholas was about halfway down the first flight of stairs, he heard Billie raise his voice.

“Fine, I’ll do it!”

This was followed by a loud scraping noise which grew rapidly in volume, giving Nicholas his first warning. Then he heard Jamie yell, “Look out, Beaver!”

And that was his second.

Nicholas turned around, his eyes bulged, and he dove to one side just in time to miss Billie Beckett skidding down the stairs on top of his suitcase. Billie hit the bottom of the stairs with an *oomph* and sprawled out like a beached whale. Nicholas sat blinking in shock on one side of the staircase and heard Jamie and Harry laughing raucously behind him.

“So? How was it, Muffy?” Jamie called from the top of the stairs.

Billie hauled himself off the floor and stood, swaying for a moment. Then he raised his fists into the air. “Bloody awesome!”

“Sweet! Come on, Checkers, let’s go!” Jamie said, and launched himself down the stairs atop his own suitcase. Harry followed suit.

Nicholas scrambled to his feet just in time to dodge again as Jamie rocketed through the spot where he’d been sitting, and then came to an abrupt stop as Harry came whirring down right in front of him.

“*Jislaaik* man! Watch where you guys are going!” Nicholas called after them. They gave no response. He shook his head with annoyance and walked to the bottom of the stairs. He passed a pile of laughing Becketts on the landing, turned, and then started down the next flight of stairs.

The laughing quieted a little. “Hey, Beaver! Your parents arrived?” Jamie asked. Nicholas paused and glanced back over his shoulder, nodding once. “Take

care!” Jamie said, his words echoed by his two brothers.

Nicholas looked them over for a second—uniforms no longer neatly pressed, limbs entangled, chubby faces smiling impishly at him—and then grinned in spite of himself. “You too, guys,” he said, and continued down the stairs.

Nicholas marveled at how good it felt to be going home again. The prospect of sleeping in his own bed, having his *own* room, and of eating *home-cooked* food again was overwhelming. Self-consciously, he noted an additional spring in his step.

Halfway through the parking lot, he met his parents on their way to the dormitory. They stopped in front of each other, everyone smiling. Kathleen rushed forward to give her son a hug.

“You were well-behaved, I hope?” Kathleen Strauss asked, holding her son at arms length, her short, artificially dark hair waving in the warm breeze. Dark hair was in fashion, since everyone wanted to look more like Elizabeth Taylor, and though Kathleen didn’t bear much resemblance to the famous actress, she was very good-looking in her own right—a one-time cover girl, tall and slender, with a clear complexion and vivid blue eyes.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I was very well-behaved,” Nicholas replied, grinning. Kathleen smiled back, and they turned and began walking toward the car.

“Of course, he was well-behaved,” Nicholas’s father, Dr. Johann Strauss agreed. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he thought to add, “All harmless fun aside, right, son?”

Kathleen looked shocked as possibilities ran through her mind. “You didn’t get into any harmless *mischiefs*, did you Nicholas?”

“No, Mom,” Nicholas chuckled.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

Nicholas noticed his father straighten his suit, a self-satisfied smile lurking at the corners of his mouth. Every bit the aesthetic equal of his wife, Johann was six

feet tall, with a long, masculine face, and hair the color of charcoal with veins of silver running through it, worn habitually swept back by a liberal dab of Brylcreem.

Nicholas and his parents arrived at their car, its distinctive pair of triple taillights glinting various shades of crimson in the sun. It was a muscle car—a two door, dove gray, Chevrolet Impala, with the barest hint of fins on the back. His parents opened the doors, and Nicholas climbed in behind his mother’s seat.

As Johann was driving through the school gates, Kathleen said, “Oh! By the way, Nicholas—” She opened the glove compartment, brought out a white envelope, and turned to her son. “You got a letter from Karen yesterday.” She held the envelope out to him. “I thought you might like to read it in the car.”

Nicholas’s eyebrows scrunched together as he took the letter from his mother. “Thanks . . .” *That’s odd*, he thought, gazing down at the envelope. He and Karen had met and briefly dated during his family’s summer vacation at Siesta last year. Afterwards, she had insisted on visiting him at his home in Sterkspruit, complicating his life immensely, as he already had a girlfriend there—Denise, a sweet, blond-haired girl whom he had grown up with and with whom he had been friends with for as long as he could remember.

While Karen was visiting, Nicholas had introduced her to his best friend, Reggie Muir. Months later, he’d found out from Reggie’s brother that Reggie and Karen were sending letters to each other from school. It had been obvious to Nicholas what that had meant.

So why was she writing to him now?

Chapter 3

“Edwin,” Constance called as she reached the landing. There was no reply, so she turned and descended the next flight of stairs. *Where is he?* she wondered.

She walked down the hallway to the living room and found him there, sitting on the couch, reading a book.

“There you are.”

Edwin looked up, his eyes dull and out of focus. She gave him a brief smile, then walked over to the armchair opposite him and took a seat.

“What do you think of the Stevens family’s home?”

Edwin blinked once, slowly, then his eyes squinted shut and he shook his head, as if disbelieving what he'd heard. “What do you mean?”

“Just answer the question, dear.”

He gave an eloquent palms-up shrug. “It’s a home.”

Constance raised an eyebrow. “Don’t be abrupt, Edwin. Do you like their home?”

A frown creased Edwin’s brow. “Yes, I suppose. It’s a very nice home. Probably the best in Wellington.” His wife began nodding, and a smile touched her lips. That smile faded with what Edwin said next. “But what does this have to do with anything? And what on earth made you think to ask such a silly question, now, of all times?”

Constance crossed her arms over her chest. “Silly question?”

Edwin felt a flutter of trepidation; perhaps he’d gone too far, but for goodness’ sake: *their son just died!* And

she's asking my opinion of their home, as if it's even possible to make small talk about their lives right now.

His wife's frown turned back into a smile, like a chameleon changing its colors to avoid being seen. "Well, never mind, dear. I suppose the question would seem silly to *you*." She got up from the armchair. "Nevertheless, you've given me my answer." With that, she left the room.

I did? What answer? Edwin wondered, confusion wrinkling his forehead.

* * *

The car was kicking up clouds of reddish-brown dust, and jostling its passengers with every bump and rock in the road. The sound of loose gravel grinding under tires was a constant background noise.

Johann Strauss was slowly winding his old Chevrolet Impala through the rocky Drakensburg Mountains, not far from the Strauss family home in Sterkspruit—a small town in a very rural part of South Africa, with a non-native population of about five hundred people.

As he looked out the window, Nicholas saw that the road and mountains were lined with nothing but a few pathetic shrubs and dry-looking grasses. Occasionally, a short, scruffy-looking thorn tree would sweep into view.

The car rounded a corner and began descending into the river valley where Sterkspruit was located. Even in the valley, the altitude was five thousand feet, high enough that snow was not unheard-of in the winter.

As they descended, they drove past a local woman trudging up the road. She was dusty and sweating profusely through her short, black hair. Topless, covered with nothing but a red piece of cloth draped around her waist, the woman brazenly emulated the nakedness of the land in her way of dress. The large bundle of sticks she was carrying on her head looked painfully heavy, but she looked tough.

Nicholas shook his head: this was rural Africa, a striking contrast from the city of Bloemfontein where he lived

and went to school for most of every year.

The car hopped through a particularly large pothole and jarred Nicholas out of his contemplation. He saw his mother trying vainly to anchor herself to her seat.

“Couldn’t you go a little slower, Jan?” Kathleen asked.

“*Nee*,* I need to be at my clinic by two o’clock and it’s already half past twelve. As it is I’m going to be late.” Johann made his living as a traveling African doctor, and he had a series of clinics around the countryside that he took turns visiting.

“You’ll really be late if we lose a wheel in one of those potholes.”

Johann smiled at his wife’s discomfort. “Kate, I need you to write a letter to Kwasi today to tell him we’ll be leaving on the twelfth.” Johann saw another pothole and prudently steered around it this time.

“But why? You know he can’t read English very well.”

“Well enough, but you can get one of the other servants to write it out for him in Xhosa.”

Kwasi was Johann’s male nurse, translator, and assistant. He’d gotten sick recently, so he didn’t know when the Strauss family would be leaving for Siesta.

Nicholas remembered his own letter then. He picked up the envelope and studied it, as though the envelope held more clues to the letter’s contents than the letter itself. Something about what Karen had written was troubling him. He gave up scrutinizing the envelope and opened it to read the letter again.

Dear Nicholas,

I had so much fun last year. I was hoping that we could continue where we left off. I’ve missed you. I know you will probably be leaving in a few days, so don’t bother replying to my letter. I’ll be waiting for you in Siesta. You know where to find me. XOXOXOXO.

Love, Karen

* *Nee*: Afrikaans for *no*

Nicholas had read the letter more than three hours ago, just as he was leaving boarding school, but after reading it for a second time, he was no closer to formulating a response. The letter indicated that he didn't have to reply, but in a way that made responding even more difficult, because he didn't have the luxury of collecting his thoughts and then sending them out to reveal themselves with the safety of distance and a piece of paper to bear the brunt of Karen's response.

Yet maybe there wouldn't be a brunt to bear.

Belatedly, Nicholas realized why Karen's letter was troubling him. She was acting like nothing had changed. Maybe she hoped that he didn't know about her and Reggie . . . Nicholas sighed quietly. He would be able to judge the situation better when he was in Siesta and could speak with Karen in person.

The car's engine stopped, and Nicholas looked up, surprised. He'd been so absorbed in his thoughts that he hadn't noticed when the car had pulled into the driveway.

"There we are," Johann declared, as he removed the keys from the ignition. "All home safely—and we didn't even lose a wheel," he added with a wink in Kathleen's direction.

As he exited the car, Nicholas took a moment to appreciate his surroundings. At last, he was home. Boarding school was a poor substitute. In the distance, broad, grassy plains swept up into rocky hills and grew from there into the magnificent Drakensberg Mountains. Not far below Nicholas's house, a vegetation-lined river could be seen winding its way through the valley. A good part of the stream was actually on the Strauss family's property, as they had five acres of land.

Nicholas eyed the cool waters of the stream almost longingly. Still dressed in his school uniform, he was feeling like a marshmallow that had been dropped from its roasting stick into the fire. The river would be wonderfully cool and refreshing, but muddy brown that it

was, it would make more sense to cool off in his family's swimming pool.

Turning from the view, Nicholas saw Matata, the gardener, digging up weeds in front of the house. The Strauss family employed six such natives to take care of their cooking, cleaning, gardening, and other various tasks. They received a modest wage for their work and two of them lived on the Strauss family's property in the servants' quarters—a round sandstone hut with a thatched roof, known by the *Afrikaners* as a *rondavel*.

As Nicholas reached inside the car to retrieve his suitcase, he spotted a flurry of sound and movement coming from around the corner of the house. He turned to look and saw Bobby and Scampy, the two family dogs, racing each other to greet his parents.

Bobby was a Boxer with big, droopy jowls, floppy ears, and a stump of a tail; his short fur ranged from white on his chest and one front paw to black and brown everywhere else. He was grinning broadly and drooling as he ran toward the car. By contrast, Scampy was a Fox Terrier, small and energetic, with a pointy, triangular face. He was patched black and white like a milk cow, and masked black around the eyes like a raccoon.

Suitcase in hand, Nicholas rounded the side of the car to greet his dogs, but before he could get there, they both crashed into his dad. Johann responded with a smile and a pat on the head for each dog before heading to the garage.

Nicholas took over for his dad in receiving the dogs' welcome, which became all the more frenzied when they recognized him. "Hey guys, did you miss me?" Nicholas asked the dogs as they vied for his attention—Bobby shuddering with excitement, his whole hindquarters wagging with his stump of a tail, and Scampy bouncing up and down for lack of Bobby's height.

By this time, Nicholas's eight-year-old sister, Kristina, was bounding out to greet him, too. Nicholas also had an older brother, Philip, but he had made plans to

spend the summer with friends from university.

“Hello, Krissy,” Nicholas said, turning from greeting the dogs to say hello to his kid sister. She was slightly chubby, with a round little face, a small mouth, and boyishly short blond hair.

“Hi, Nick! Did you get me anything special?” she asked, her round, blue eyes squinting up at him.

Nicholas’s face went suddenly blank. “Oh . . . uh, hmmm . . .”

Kristina’s face fell.

Then he reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out a yo-yo. Pretending to miss the way his sister’s eyes lit up, he frowned down at it. “Well, I did get this thing, but it’s not really *special*, so I suppose we’d better just throw it away . . .”

He heard his sister gasp, and he looked up from the toy, grinning wryly. He shrugged. “Or you could have it, I guess.”

“Wow, thanks!” Kristina exclaimed and ran back to the house. Nicholas smiled and started after his sister, the dogs following close at his heels. As he approached the house—a large, one-level design with white cement walls and a red, corrugated metal roof—Matata looked up from pulling weeds in the garden.

“Welcome back, Master Nicholas,” he greeted.

“Thank you, Matata. It’s good to see you again.”

“And you, sir.”

On the way to his room, Nicholas came to the kitchen, where he stopped and greeted Jane and Emily. Jane was thickset, with dark eyes, skin, and hair, and a perpetually happy expression. Emily had equally dark features, but was tall and skinny and had a hard face that made smiling look painful. They were responsible for the cooking and cleaning around the house.

“Would you like me to take care of that for you, sir?” Jane asked, gesturing to his suitcase.

“No. Thank you, Jane, I believe I can handle it,” Nicholas replied, and excused himself with a smile and a

nod. He continued to his room, planning to pack his things away as quickly as possible and then cool off with a quick swim before lunch.

* * *

Elizabeth was sitting across from her best friend, Dilly, in one of the red vinyl booths of Sandy's Diner. Between news of Thomas cheating on her, and Benjamin's death, she'd really needed to get out of the house for a while. Fortunately, she had already done most of her packing for the trip to Siesta tomorrow.

Their waitress returned with their order. Noting the somber silence at the table, she said nothing as she placed a Coke float in front of Elizabeth, and a vanilla milkshake in front of Dilly. She gave them the barest hint of a smile, and then left.

"So . . ." Dilly began, struggling to break the silence. Elizabeth had just told her all the bad news. "Well, first of all, Thomas is a rat, not even worth crying about."

Elizabeth was staring into her Coke float, stirring it slowly with her straw. She took a sip and nodded. "I know."

"Good." Dilly was going to say something about Benjamin next, but seeing that Elizabeth hadn't even looked up from her drink, she decided to lighten the mood instead. "I guess you're going to be in Siesta tomorrow—"

Elizabeth shook her head. "—oh, that's right, Swellendam first. Well, the next day, then. You lucky fish."

Elizabeth looked up now, and smiled. "You sound jealous."

"Because I am! You're going to be spending the summer in the most romantic place imaginable, while I'm stuck here in this silly *dorpie*.* Imagine all the guys you'll meet." Dilly shook her head and took a sip of her milkshake.

"Well, I suppose there's always Eric . . ."

Dilly frowned. "The tooth fairy?"

* *Dorpie*: little town

Elizabeth smiled at her friend's nickname for the guy she'd met in Siesta last year. "So he was a little concerned about his teeth."

Dilly arched an eyebrow. "Concerned? From what you told me, *obsessed* would be a better word." She shook her head. "You can do better."

Elizabeth shrugged. "Maybe. He *was* handsome, though."

"Sure, handsome like a fruitcake," Dilly said under her breath.

Elizabeth laughed. "You're terrible."

Dilly smiled. "All I'm saying is Siesta is the kind of place that belongs in a fairytale, so your guy should, too."

Elizabeth quirked an eyebrow over her Coke float and smiled wryly at Dilly. "Isn't the tooth fairy from a fairytale?"

Dilly gave an involuntary snort of laughter and her milkshake almost came out of her nose. She took a napkin from the center of the table and wiped her mouth. "Not funny, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth just smiled.

"Well, cheer up, Lizzie. I've got a feeling you're going to meet someone amazing at Siesta this year."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "Is that a prediction?"

Dilly shook her head. "It's a bet."

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