

Africa's
Snow White

Summer Love

Jealous Winter

by

JONATHAN ELOFF

Summer Love - Jealous Winter

by Jonathan Eloff

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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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Chapter 19

It was now Saturday morning and the end of Nicholas's first half week of school. Even though it was a Saturday, he was back in class. Instead of a teacher directing the class, however, there was a prefect, and instead of textbooks, the students had just a pen, some paper, and a few envelopes.

Since most parents wanted to hear from their children at least once a week, and since not all children were that conscientious, Saint Andrew's prescribed an hour of compulsory letter writing on Saturday mornings.

So it was that Nicholas found himself sitting in class on a Saturday, tapping his pen on his desk, wondering what he should write. He'd already finished his letter to his parents, but now he was planning to write to someone else . . .

"You won't forget to write me, will you?" Elizabeth's words echoed through his mind.

"I won't forget," he'd said.

But it had taken him a whole week to finally consider it, and then only because he was stuck in class for an hour with nothing else to do. Somehow he couldn't get excited about writing to a girl that he was never going to see again. And right now, writing to her was like tearing the band-aid off of a fresh wound—it only served to remind him that it was there.

But a promise is a promise. And with that, he began writing.

* * *

Constance was rushing around the house, dusting,

sweeping, and rearranging things. Normally she kept a clean house, but now she was cleaning obsessively. Edwin knew the reason—they had company coming—but he still didn't understand it. She was going to an unusual amount of trouble.

"Edwin," Constance began, as she dusted the coffee table in front of the couch where he was sitting. "There's a hosepipe lying on the lawn outside, would you go put it away please?"

Edwin frowned. "You know, dear, you really don't need to go to all this trouble for the Stevens family. They probably won't even notice . . ." he trailed off when he saw the sour look she was giving him. He sighed and got up from the couch.

When he got back, he was immediately given another errand: to fetch the fancy china and the real silverware from the garage. Something told him that he ought to understand why Constance was making such a big deal over the Stevens family coming for dinner, but like a prize apple, hanging on a branch just out of reach, he couldn't for the life of him pluck the reason from his thoughts.

* * *

The doorbell rang.

"That'll be them, Edwin," Constance called from the kitchen.

Edwin went to the door and opened it to reveal Lawrence, his wife, Rebecca, and their two daughters, Julia and Lydia.

Edwin smiled. "Good afternoon." He stood aside to usher them in.

"Hello, Eddie," Lawrence said, motioning for his wife and children to go in first.

Edwin tried to make eye contact with Rebecca as she came through the door. "It's good to see you, Rebecca," he ventured, but she merely nodded.

Edwin frowned inwardly, but kept his smile in place.

"Let me guess," Edwin said, looking down at Lawrence's daughters as they came in. "You must be Lydia," he said, speaking to the shorter and smaller of the two.

"Yup," she replied, smiling broadly, and nodding, her

long, golden-brown curls bobbing with the movement.

“And you must be Julia.”

Like her mother, Julia simply nodded. Edwin continued smiling as though he hadn't noticed. Turning to Lawrence and his wife, he asked, “Would you like to join me in the living room for a drink and some appetizers while we wait for dinner?”

“Sounds like a fine idea to me,” Lawrence said, and Edwin led the way. As they walked, Lawrence caught a whiff of some heavenly smells drifting out of the kitchen. “Smells good.”

“The way my wife's been cooking today, it ought to be.”

On their way to the living room, they met Hattie and Elizabeth as they were coming down the stairs. Edwin stopped to make introductions.

“You remember my daughters, Elizabeth and Hattie,” Edwin said, gesturing to each of them as they reached the bottom of the stairs. Lawrence said that he did and stepped forward to shake hands. Once introductions were over, they all continued on to the living room. Edwin motioned the Stevens family over to the long sofa in front of the coffee table and then went behind the bar counter, which stood in one corner of the room. Elizabeth and Hattie took a seat on the smaller sofa, leaving the chair for their father.

“Now then, what will you two be drinking?” Edwin asked from the bar counter, directing his question to Lawrence and Rebecca.

“A glass of brandy for me, Eddie,” Lawrence said.

“Vodka martini, please,” Rebecca added.

Edwin raised his eyebrows and whistled softly. “Stiff drinks,” he commented, bending down behind the counter. He straightened up with two bottles and began fixing the drinks. He poured a glass of the golden-brown brandy for himself to keep up with Lawrence.

“Elizabeth,” Edwin began, looking up from pouring the brandy. “Would you find out from Lydia and Julia what they would like to drink?”

Elizabeth stood up from the couch and then got down on her haunches in front of the two girls. “What would

you like to drink, Lydia?”

“Ummm . . .” Lydia appeared to think about it for a moment. “What do you have, pwease?”

Elizabeth smiled at Lydia’s lisp. “We have orange juice, grape juice—”

“That one,” Lydia interrupted.

“Orange juice?”

Lydia shook her head. “Gwape juice.”

“Okay,” Elizabeth said. She turned to Julia.

“I’ll have the same,” Julia said before Elizabeth could ask.

Elizabeth nodded and went to fetch the drinks. She already knew what her sister wanted. Hattie would be happy to drink *anything* so long as it wasn’t water. Elizabeth couldn’t agree more. They were rarely allowed fruit juice, and soda was almost unheard-of.

Elizabeth returned with a tray of drinks, her mother coming behind her with a plate of appetizers. She noted that her father had finished pouring drinks and was now seated in the armchair opposite the Stevens family.

“Sorry I couldn’t say hello when you arrived,” Constance said, setting the plate of appetizers on the coffee table. “I’ve been terribly busy preparing supper.”

Lawrence waved a hand. “Don’t worry about it, Connie.”

Constance froze for a half a second, then abruptly busied herself with handing out napkins and coasters. Edwin grimaced around a sip of his brandy. His wife wouldn’t even let *him* refer to her as “Connie.”

Lawrence caught Edwin’s look and remembered a conversation they’d once had. “Oh, sorry, I forgot that you don’t like to be called Connie.”

“What ever made you think that?” Constance asked.

Lawrence looked stumped. He glanced to Edwin for support, but found Edwin looking equally baffled.

“Well . . . I seem to recall Edwin saying something about it once.”

“I think what he meant to say is that I only allow my *friends* to call me Connie,” Constance replied, smiling thinly at Lawrence. “Please, help yourselves,” she said, and gestured to the appetizers. With that, she turned

around and headed back to the kitchen.

“Well,” Lawrence began, once Constance was back in the kitchen, “it looks like you don’t know your wife quite as well as you thought, Eddie.”

“Looks like,” Edwin agreed, nodding absently and taking another sip of his brandy.

When dinner was ready, Constance directed them to the dining room. As Lawrence took his seat, he balked at the china and silverware. “Wow, Eddie, you sure rolled out the red carpet for this one. Is this *real* silver?” he asked, holding up his knife.

Edwin nodded and grabbed a bottle of wine from the table. “Red or white?” he asked, addressing Lawrence.

“Red, please,” Lawrence replied. Edwin took a corkscrew from the table and uncorked the bottle. Lawrence held his glass out to Edwin.

“Rebecca?” Edwin asked, turning to her now.

“I’ll have white,” she replied.

Edwin repeated the process with the other bottle of wine. Then, as Edwin was pouring a glass of red wine for himself and his wife, Constance brought out the first course—soup—and set a bowl in front of Lawrence and Rebecca. Constance motioned for Elizabeth to help her with bringing out the rest.

Edwin took his seat, and those at the table busied themselves by tucking napkins into their shirt collars, or spreading them across their laps. They waited in silence until Constance and Elizabeth returned with the rest of the soup. Once everyone was seated, Edwin said grace.

When grace was over, Lawrence said, “This looks absolutely delicious, Connie.” Then, with exaggerated care, he took his soup spoon from the table, making sure he gave Constance enough time to start eating first.

Elizabeth heard Lydia begin slurping her soup and stifled a laugh. The slurping lasted as long as the child’s appetite for the soup, and Elizabeth saw her mother suppress a grimace each time she heard it. Table manners, particularly for formal dinner occasions such as this one, were strictly enforced in her family. If it had been either her or Hattie . . . Elizabeth doubted her

mother would have endured the breach of etiquette so gracefully. In fact, despite Lydia being someone else's child, Elizabeth found it strange that her mother hadn't found a way to say something about it.

After the soup, the main course swiftly followed. Elizabeth had already known what her mother had made, but she still marveled at it. Roasted rack of lamb, marinated in a lemon, honey, and garlic sauce. The dish was topped with finely-chopped pecans and accompanied by sweet potatoes, salad, and rice. She couldn't remember the last time her mother had cooked such a spectacular meal—she hadn't even known her mother was capable of it.

Lawrence said, "Wow, Connie. This looks like a feast fit for a king . . ." he trailed off as he recognized the dish. "Is that rack of *lamb*?"

Constance smiled as she placed the rack of lamb in the middle of the table. "Yes, it is. I hope you enjoy it."

"Well, no doubt there! Rack of lamb is my favorite meal. I can't even remember the last time I had it."

Rebecca looked away from the food, taking up her wine glass and half emptying it in a long gulp.

"What's wack of wamb?" Lydia asked.

"You remember Little Bo Peep?" Julia whispered. "That's one of her baby sheep," Julia said, pointing to the steaming platter in the center of the table.

Lydia's eyes went wide, and she looked to her father. "That's not twue, is it, Daddy?"

Lawrence gave his older daughter a hard look. "Julia, don't bother your sister."

Julia's expression grew sullen and she looked away.

Upon finishing his second helping, Lawrence said, "Connie, that was positively the best meal I've had since . . . well, suffice to say, it's been a very long time."

Constance just smiled and began collecting plates from the table. Elizabeth got up to help her mother. They disappeared into the kitchen and Constance returned with dessert in one hand and a pot of tea in the other.

When Constance set the dessert on the table and began slicing it, Lawrence's eyes lit up. "Apple crumble!"

he exclaimed, and then he saw Elizabeth returning from the kitchen, carrying a bucket of ice cream. "À la mode!" Lawrence shot Edwin a suspicious look. "I don't suppose you had anything to do with this, Eddie?"

Edwin smiled and shrugged. "I may have let something slip about your preferences."

"You sure do know how to treat your guests, Connie." Lawrence watched eagerly as Constance sliced the dessert. Rebecca was watching, too, but she was frowning and drinking greedily from her glass of wine.

After dessert, everyone made their way to the living room again. This time, since Constance was joining them, Hattie was forced to find an extra chair for herself.

Elizabeth noticed that Lydia's eyes were blinking slowly and heavily as she sat leaning against her mother on the living room couch. Sitting beside her sister, Julia also appeared tired, but not as noticeably.

"So," Constance began, "how have you been doing at work, Lawrence?"

"Well, it's stressful, but I'm getting by."

Constance nodded. "Of course, I wouldn't know, but Edwin sometimes tells me about the sorts of things he has to deal with at work, and I can only imagine your job must be even more difficult."

Lawrence shrugged. "If it weren't for Edwin helping me . . ." he trailed off, casting an appreciative glance to his friend.

Rebecca was silent, much as she'd been all night, her faculties barely present for the conversation. She'd poured herself another glass of wine before leaving the dinner table, and had brought it with her to the living room. Constance wondered how many glasses Rebecca had had and lost count at four. She'd been the only one drinking white wine, and the last time Constance had looked, the bottle had been nearly empty.

"You know, Lawrence," Constance began, "Edwin and I have been thinking that there might be something we could do to help your family."

Lawrence swallowed visibly, but cocked his head to one side and raised his eyebrows.

"It's occurred to us that you might like to distance

yourselves from your . . . painful memories. One way of doing that would be for you to move out of your house.”

Edwin shot his wife a look, his face registering surprise. He'd forgotten all about her plan to trade homes with the Stevens family, and now, suddenly, the puzzle pieces were clicking into place. It all made sense now: the good china, the real silverware, the furious cleaning . . . and why she had taken the trouble to cook all of Lawrence's favorite dishes.

Lawrence began nodding slowly, but soon he was shaking his head. “I'll admit, it's occurred to me, but—” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “—there's no way we could handle moving right now. And besides, where would we go? There isn't a nicer house in all of Wellington than ours, and there aren't many people here who could afford to buy it.”

Constance smiled thinly. “Actually, that's where Edwin and I thought we might be able to help.”

Rebecca, who until now had been paying most of her attention to the dwindling supply of wine in her glass, now gave her full attention to Constance, and her eyes narrowed fractionally. Elizabeth and Hattie were also looking at their mother, confusion registering on their faces.

“What if we traded homes with you?” Constance said. Shock travelled around the room, making itself known with the ensuing silence. “Our home has a bigger pool, more levels, it's about the same size as yours, and most importantly—” She paused, affecting a sympathetic tone. “—there won't be anything here to remind you of Benjamin.”

More silence.

And then Rebecca gave a soft snort and returned her attention to her wine. Some of what Constance had said was true: the Smythe family did have a bigger pool, but their grounds were by far inferior, and their home—both inside and out—was equally so. Moreover, to say that the two houses were a similar size was an enormous stretch of the imagination. Rebecca drained her glass and then fixed Constance with a narrow-eyed glare. Constance pretended not to notice, devoting her full at-

tention to Lawrence, waiting for *his* reaction. She already knew whose decision would carry the most weight.

Lawrence was not nearly as opposed to the suggestion as his wife. Once he had recovered from his initial shock, possibilities began to whirl through his mind.

Elizabeth and Hattie were still staring at their mother, too stunned to move. Lydia had completely missed the conversation, having fallen asleep, but Julia's brow was pinched in a thoughtful frown.

"Of course, please do take some time to consider the offer before committing to it one way or the other," Constance said.

Lawrence was nodding slowly, his eyes unfocused. "We'll give the matter some serious thought. But—" He paused, looking around him, taking in the details of the living room as if they were representative of the house. He met Constance's unblinking, blue eyes. "I feel certain that we'll be more than happy to accept your offer."

Edwin almost choked on his own saliva. He cleared his throat noisily, and Constance scowled briefly in his direction.

Rebecca was also scowling at her husband. After a moment, she turned to face Constance, who was all but smiling. "I think what my husband means to say is that we'll need to *talk* about it."

"Of course," Constance replied.

* * *

"I feel *certain* that we'd be happy to accept," Rebecca parroted Lawrence's words back to him. "What were you thinking? Were you even planning to ask me what I thought?"

Lawrence was frowning at his wife. Almost as soon as they'd gotten home, she'd flown into him. Now they were in their bedroom, his wife pacing unsteadily about the room. Lawrence just stood by the bed, watching her. *She's drunk*, he thought.

"*Becky*," Lawrence said, his voice coming out more harshly than he'd intended. She stopped pacing and turned a scathing look on him. "Settle down," he finished, his voice softer now. "You'll wake the kids."

She began shaking her head slowly and continued pacing. He wondered if those were tears he saw glinting in her eyes. And if so, were they from anger or sadness?

"No, Lawrence, I *won't* settle down," she said, but lowered her voice anyway.

"What would you rather have us do? If we put our home up for sale, who will buy it? Wellington is a small town, and no one here has the money to buy our home. If we have to go through an estate agent we might never get rid of this place."

Rebecca stopped pacing. "Get *rid* of this place? This place is our *home!* Why should we want to get rid of it?"

His eyes grew suddenly damp. "I just thought . . ." he swallowed. "That maybe, if we could get away, go someplace else . . . then . . ."

Rebecca was incredulous. "What? You think that will somehow *change* things? You can't run away from *yourself*, Lawrence. This *place*," Rebecca gestured to the walls around her, "has nothing to do with what happened."

He scowled. "No, but it sure does a good job of reminding me."

She met his scowl and tapped her head. "Your *memories* are what remind you, not these walls."

He shook his head. "No, you're wrong, Becky. And I'm not going to let you hold on to death in a dying home. We're moving and that's that."

Rebecca was silent for a long moment, studying the thick, white carpet of their bedroom. Her sniffing periodically broke the silence and Lawrence was suddenly tempted to cover the distance between them and give her a fierce hug—to say he was sorry, and to tell her that everything was going to be all right. Just as he was taking a lurching step forward, she broke the silence and stopped him cold with what she said next. "You don't want to be reminded of him . . ." Looking up from the carpet, she met his gaze, tears streaming down her face. "But I don't ever want to forget."

He looked away, unable to stand it any longer. "I'm going for a walk," he said, heading for the bedroom door.

She stared after him, unable to move or speak, need-

ing desperately for him to understand, but instead seeing him disappear through the door, leaving her all alone.

* * *

“Can you believe her?” Constance asked of Edwin. Hands planted on her hips, she was facing him from the entrance of the master bathroom. “She all but rejected the proposal. Out of hand! She might as well have spat in my face.”

Edwin had affected a sympathetic frown and nodded gravely. Inwardly, however, he was smiling. He had predicted this. But after Lawrence’s reluctance to go home on Tuesday night, he had also known that Constance would receive strong support from his friend. Now, Edwin frowned inwardly, too, wondering who would ultimately get their way.

“Are you even listening to me?” Constance demanded.

“Of course I am, dear,” Edwin replied. He almost sighed. “Perhaps you simply read her wrong. After all, it is a big decision. She was probably just shocked by the proposal.”

Constance shook her head, scowling. “No, that’s not it. I caught the look she was giving me. I heard the tone of voice she used. She was being *deliberately* difficult.”

Edwin felt suddenly tired of standing in front of his wife, of being the only breakwater in this storm. He went to the armchair in one corner of their bedroom and took a seat. Feeling starved of air, he loosened his tie.

“And can you believe the way she didn’t even notice her daughter slurping her soup?” Constance continued, her eyes still finding Edwin in his chair. “Probably because she was too *drunk* to care. Did you see the way she was drinking tonight? It was disgraceful.” Constance crossed her arms over her chest as she waited for Edwin’s reply.

“Lawrence didn’t stop Lydia from slurping her soup, either,” he pointed out, choosing just one part of his wife’s tirade, hoping to deflect her attention from Rebecca.

“He shouldn’t have to. That sort of thing is a mother’s responsibility.”

Edwin's frown deepened. "And just what is the father's responsibility, then?"

Constance narrowed her eyes, sensing more than idle curiosity behind his question. "To work, to pay the bills, to provide for his family, and to have the *sense* to hold his tongue in everything else."

"In other words—to work," Edwin replied.

"From each according to his ability," Constance said.

Edwin raised his eyebrows, recognizing the words as belonging to Karl Marx and wondering briefly if his wife knew whom she was quoting. He also noted how she conveniently forgot the other half of the quotation—*to each according to his needs*.

He watched his wife start pacing, and heard her start ranting again. This time he just tuned her out, falling back on absent nods, and noncommittal replies. There was no reasoning with her when she was in one of these moods. He should have known better than to try.

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