

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 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

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

*

Nee: Afrikaans for no

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?”

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?”

*

Dorpie: little town

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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