

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 39

“There’s no way we can finish it in time for the board meeting,” Lawrence said, staring blankly at the wall, his chair turned away from Edwin.

“We can,” Edwin insisted from where he was seated in front of Lawrence’s desk. “But you need to focus.”

There was no reply.

“Lawrence! You’re going to lose your job if you go in there with nothing.”

The chair swiveled slowly around, and Edwin was shocked again by his friend’s appearance: dark circles beneath his eyes, two days’ worth of stubble on his face, uncombed hair, wrinkled clothes . . .

Still, Lawrence said nothing.

He’s lost the will to fight. What happened? Edwin began shaking his head. “I realize you’ve been sick, but we’re just going to have to tough it out and get this done.”

Lawrence’s eyebrows elevated a few degrees. “Sick?” he asked, almost to himself. “Sick . . .” He barked a short laugh.

Edwin gritted his teeth. “Give me what you’ve got so far.”

Lawrence nodded toward the black leather briefcase on top of his desk. “The blue folder.”

Edwin opened the briefcase and dug through it until he found the folder. He grabbed it, pulled it out, and looked briefly through its contents.

Edwin gasped. “There’s almost nothing here!”

“I told you we don’t have enough time,” Lawrence re-

plied, sounding almost smug.

“Lawrence, snap out of it!” Edwin abruptly stood from his chair and began pacing in front of the desk. “This is no time to be nonchalant. What’s been going on? First you missed our game of golf, then you didn’t come in to work, and now you show up looking like this—” Edwin stopped pacing and gestured to Lawrence’s unkempt appearance. “—and acting blasé about a matter which could very well cost you your job!”

Lawrence’s eyes glittered, and Edwin watched his friend swallow hard. Edwin waited, but Lawrence seemed incapable of a reply.

“Well, whatever’s been going on, we can still do this, but I need your help.”

Lawrence sniffled and Edwin watched as he pressed a hand to his forehead and tightly shut his eyes, as if to ward off a headache. “Just forget about it, Eddie. I couldn’t help you if I wanted to. I don’t have it left in me.”

Edwin just stood there, staring at Lawrence for a long time. Finally, he said, “Well, I do. I’m not giving up on you.” Lawrence’s eyes opened—they were red and lifeless.

Edwin hefted the blue folder, turned on his heel, and started for the door of Lawrence’s office. “I’m going to take this home with me and finish it over the weekend.” He stopped in front of Lawrence’s door, his hand on the doorknob, and turned to face his friend. “I’ll brief you on it Monday morning, so you can still be the one to deliver the presentation.”

“Eddie, even if you *can* finish it in that time, it’s going to need to be bloody *spectacular* to save my job. This past month I’ve been . . . distracted.”

Edwin knew just how dangerous that was for a managing director. As a rule, even a hint of weakness, whether real or imagined, was enough to get a managing director fired. Too much of the company’s welfare rested in Lawrence’s hands for the board of directors to take a chance that he might start making all the wrong decisions—or *stop making them altogether*, Edwin thought.

“What’ve we got to lose by trying?” Edwin asked.

Lawrence cast his eyes downward to avoid meeting Edwin's gaze and then slowly swiveled his chair to face the wall again.

* * *

Constance was busy setting the table for dinner when she heard the front door open. Her brow creased in confusion, and she went to see who it was.

Of course, it could only be Edwin, but that did nothing to lessen her confusion. *It's Friday, and he's home early . . . again?* Sure enough, when she came within sight of the front door, she spotted Edwin locking it behind him. He turned around to see her standing there in the hallway, blinking at him in shock.

"Hello, dear," he said.

"What brings you home so early?"

He hefted his briefcase with a grimace. "I have a presentation to prepare for Monday. Unfortunately—" He gave her an apologetic look. "—it's going to keep me very busy this weekend." *If only I had all weekend to work on it*, he thought. Just yesterday he and his wife had made plans to spend Sunday afternoon playing tennis with Lucas Atherton and his wife.

"I see. Well, I'm just about to serve supper, so go get washed up and then come and join us."

Edwin hesitated, then nodded. "I suppose the work can wait until after dinner."

"Good," Constance said as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Edwin encountered Thandiwe, his family's part-time maid, on his way to the master bedroom and gave her a brief nod as he passed her in the hall.

"Hello, Mister Smythe. If you want to give me your suit, I can press it for you."

Edwin half turned to address her. "That would be splendid, Thandi, thank you. I'll have it for you in just a moment." He reached the door to the master bedroom and opened it with a quick turn of his wrist. He tossed his briefcase onto the bed, went over to the closet, and changed into something more comfortable. Draping his work clothes over one arm, he went looking for Thandiwe.

“Thandi?” he called, coming out of the bedroom and heading back down the hall toward the kitchen.

“Sir?” The answer came from behind him, and he turned to see her standing outside Elizabeth’s bedroom with a basket of laundry. Her hand was on the door-knob, and she was on her way out, but she’d stopped halfway through closing Elizabeth’s door to see what Edwin wanted.

“There you are,” Edwin said, striding down the hall toward her. He raised his arm with the clothes draped over it. “I’ve got my suit for you to press.” Stopping in front of Thandiwe, he handed her the clothes.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Dad?”

Edwin looked past Thandiwe to the half-open door of Elizabeth’s bedroom. He managed to catch a glimpse of his daughter before the door swung wide and she came out into the hallway, smiling.

“Hello, Elizabeth,” Edwin said, returning her smile.

“You’re home!” she said, coming right up to him and enfolding him in a hug. Edwin was taken by surprise, and for a moment he didn’t know what to do—his arms held awkwardly up and away from his sides. Thandiwe looked on, her features chiseled in amusement. From where she was standing, behind Elizabeth’s back, facing Edwin, the maid motioned to Edwin, using her arms to imitate a hug. Edwin took the cue and returned his daughter’s hug. It still looked awkward.

Thandiwe took the opportunity to leave, and as she left, Edwin heard her making faint clucking noises with her tongue. Edwin frowned, thinking, *well, what does she expect? We’re not a very demonstrative family. Why shouldn’t I be caught off guard when my daughter gives me a hug?*

Elizabeth broke the hug and looked up at him. “What’s the occasion?” Edwin’s eyebrows went up in question. “You’re home early.”

“Oh, that. I have a lot of work to do over the weekend, and I need to get an early start on it.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth’s face fell and she looked away. Edwin felt a pang of guilt and was tempted to add that it

wouldn't prevent him from spending some time with her, but he stopped himself, realizing that that would be a lie. It was bad enough that he was going to have to take time out from preparing Lawrence's presentation to play tennis on Sunday.

Elizabeth's gaze returned to his. "Will you be joining us for supper at least?"

He nodded, and she smiled. They heard the dinner bell ring, and both of them turned toward the sound.

"We'd better go," Elizabeth advised, "that's the second time mom's rung it."

"Is it? I must've missed hearing the first ring. We'd better hurry, then," Edwin said and began striding down the hall. Elizabeth hurried to catch up with him, remembering that if her mother had to ring the bell for a third time, parties absent from the table were obliged to skip that meal.

When Edwin and Elizabeth reached the dining room table, they found Hattie and Constance already there, seated and waiting. They moved silently to take their seats.

"Hi, Dad," Hattie said as Edwin took his seat at the head of the table.

Edwin looked up from spreading a napkin across his lap. "Hello, Hattie."

"Well, now that we're all seated," Constance said, "Edwin, would you say grace, please?"

* * *

Saturday morning came, and Nicholas found himself sitting in class, writing a letter to Elizabeth. *Déjà vu*, he thought. It felt like just yesterday, rather than last year, that he'd been sitting here writing a letter to Elizabeth.

What should he write? He'd already written one draft and promptly crumpled and discarded it. Part of his dilemma stemmed from the fact that he was caught in the fuzzy realm between friend and boyfriend. He was well aware of the fact that she had a boyfriend at home. That—combined with the distance between them—relegated their relationship to something that was more platonic than anything else. And yet, a week ago they'd been in Siesta, inseparable, so much more than just

friends. He remembered sitting with her in the Siestuary, looking up at the stars, both his hands holding hers . . . kissing her in the moonlight, talking until the last possible second before the clock struck nine . . . dancing at Fairy Knowe . . .

He sighed, trying to decide what would be the proper tone for his letter. If he was totally honest in what he wrote, he'd tell her how much he missed her, how much he wanted to hold her again . . . how much he wanted to kiss her again. But none of that would be appropriate now that she was back with Pieter. The most he could do would be to tell her that he missed her; the rest would have to be innocuous small talk.

He thought about his return to boarding school for inspiration. He was in *standard 10** now, and it was the start of his last year at Saint Andrew's; she probably already knew that, but it was something he could use to fill the page.

Nicholas glanced at his watch and noted that he was running out of time to write his letters. There was no time left to deliberate. He sighed again, and began writing.

* * *

It was 1:00 o'clock on Sunday, and instead of working on Lawrence's presentation as he'd have liked, Edwin found himself obliged to take some time off. Incredibly, he'd already finished most of the presentation, but with so little time left, he foresaw himself having to stay up late to get it done before tomorrow.

Very late.

Taking a right turn off of an old, rural road in Paarl, Edwin began driving down a long, tree-lined driveway which ended in a lasso-shaped turn-around. In the middle of the lasso was a grassy island with a cascading fountain that was crowned at the top by a pair of stone cherubs. The house at the end of the driveway was three stories high, broad and rectangular—enormous. Rows of flowers and bushes ran along the base of the home and some of the upper level windows had balconies that

*

standard 10: grade 12 in the South African system

would no doubt give a spectacular view of the mountains and vineyards around Paarl.

Parking his white Mercedes at the end of the driveway, Edwin and Constance got out of the car. Both were wearing their old tennis clothes: Constance dressed entirely in white from her cap down to her unflatteringly clingy top and over-short shorts, and Edwin in shiny black. He found himself self-consciously sucking in his stomach as he walked. His tight-fitting T-shirt was clinging in all the wrong places, making his beer belly seem twice as large.

As they walked up to the entrance of Lucas Atherton's home, Edwin was awed by its grandeur—a high set of stairs, semicircular at the base, rose to greet oversized double doors, with a pair of Grecian columns on either side, nearly rising to the full three-story height of the home.

Edwin gulped back a surge of anxiety. Lucas Atherton made him look like a pauper. When they reached the top of the stairs, Edwin rang the bell. There was a few second wait, and then a black-skinned, black-suited butler appeared and ushered them into an echoing entrance hall. The butler left them in order to fetch Mister Atherton, and Edwin found himself admiring his surroundings as he waited.

An enormous, crystal chandelier hung high above a shiny, white marble floor. Ahead of them was a double staircase that curved up and around to either side of a second floor balcony that looked down on the entrance hall. Rising from the back and middle of that balcony was a third staircase that shot straight up to the final level of the home. Beneath the balcony, in the far back of the entrance hall, was a broad wall of windows which looked out on a terrace the size of a tennis court. Edwin couldn't help gawking, and Constance had to elbow him in the ribs to get him to stop when Lucas Atherton came striding in from the left-hand side of the hall with—

Edwin almost frowned in distaste. The young, leggy woman with long, straight, blond hair, and milk-white skin who was walking beside Lucas Atherton was no doubt his wife, but she was so much younger than him

that Edwin only needed the space of a second to guess why she'd married the old industrialist.

"Welcome!" Lucas stopped in front of Edwin, his face lit by a beaming grin. "You're punctual, I see." Edwin nodded and returned the smile. Lucas Atherton extended his hand and they shook. "Good. I like that. Says a lot about a man's character."

As predicted, he introduced the young woman as his wife—Loretta. In turn, Edwin introduced Constance.

"Well, shall we go out onto the terrace for some refreshments before we play? I always find that I feel less guilty if I have my tea and biscuits *before* playing tennis. Afterward, we can all sit down to a nice, cold beer."

Edwin's eyes lit up at that suggestion. Atherton's wife gazed smilingly up at him, amused. Constance, however, was not, but she kept her displeasure to herself. "Sounds like a good idea to me," Edwin said.

Lucas gestured to the broad wall of windows at the back of the hall, then returned his gaze to Edwin, belatedly noticing that neither Edwin nor Constance had tennis rackets with them. "Did you forget to bring your rackets?" he asked, pointing to their empty hands.

"No, they're in the *boot*.* Shall I go fetch them?"

Lucas waved a hand and gestured to his butler, who having overheard, immediately started for the door. "No need."

Edwin grinned and tossed his car keys to the butler.

Later, out on the terrace, with a cup of tea in his hand, Edwin found himself admiring Lucas Atherton's sprawling backyard. He couldn't see the end of it! Besides the immaculately kept grounds, there was an enormous pool at the foot of the terrace and a tennis court to one side. Noting that Atherton's pool made his look like a teacup, Edwin turned his attention from the view and back to the conversation that had been going on without him.

"So, tell me about yourself—and your company," Constance said, her eyes on Lucas. "What's the secret of your success?"

*

Boot: British English for the trunk of a car

“Well, as for my company, there’s really not much to tell.” He shrugged. “We produce textiles—quite boring really. And as for myself, I’m originally from England. I moved to South Africa with my parents when I was just a teenager and lived here for a handful of years before going back to England to study. I met and married my first wife there. We had a son, got divorced, and I moved back here to take over the family business.”

“Oh dear, I’m sorry to hear about the divorce.”

Lucas took a sip of the tea that was sitting on the table in front of him, then lowered his cup to the table again. “Don’t be. The truly sorry part was the marriage, not the divorce.”

Constance was taken aback. “That’s even sadder.”

Lucas shrugged and stole a biscuit from the plate in the center of the table. “Lucky in business, not so much in love.” Belatedly, he sent his current wife a glance and smiled at her. “Until recently, that is.”

Loretta smiled back at him, and he took a bite from his biscuit, holding out his hand to catch the crumbs.

“And your son?” Constance asked. “Is he still in England?”

Lucas waited until he’d swallowed, then said, “Yes, he goes to school there. As a matter of fact, he goes to school with Prince Andrew.”

“Really?” Constance asked and saw Lucas’s wife, Loretta, nodding slowly and exaggeratedly, as though that was a particularly impressive statement. And it was—to Constance anyway. To Edwin it seemed self-aggrandizing, or at least vicariously so.

Lucas smiled. “He’s in *matric** right now, but he’s planning to come here in July, once he *matriculates*,† to spend the rest of the year with us, and to decide whether he wants to attend university here in South Africa or in London next year . . .” The owner of Berg River Textiles trailed off as though a thought had just occurred to him. “I’m sorry; I must be boring you with all of these details.”

* *Matric*: grade 12

† *Matriculates*: graduates

“Not at all,” Constance assured. “I find it quite interesting. But I’m curious—with such a great distance between you and your son, and with him going to school in England, how do you manage to see him?”

“He comes to visit during his school holidays. In fact, he gets a week off at the end of this school term, so he’s coming in just about a month to spend some time with me.” Lucas took another sip of his tea, now all but draining the cup.

“I see. Well, that’s good,” Constance said to fill the silence as Lucas drank his tea.

“And what about you?” Lucas asked as he set his teacup back down. “Do you and Edwin have any children?”

Constance smiled. “Two girls, actually. Our eldest, Elizabeth, is going on seventeen, and her sister is fourteen.”

“Interesting. Your eldest daughter is nearly the same age as my son. Perhaps we should introduce them sometime.”

The way Lucas said it, he made it sound like an idle suggestion, not a serious proposal, but Constance wasn’t about to give him that kind of latitude. “That’s a splendid idea! We could have them meet when your son—what did you say his name was?”

Lucas raised his eyebrows. “Actually, I didn’t say, but his name is Charles.”

“Ah. Well, when Charles comes to South Africa, we should introduce them.”

A reluctant look crossed Lucas’s face, as though he wasn’t sure what he’d just gotten his son into. He exchanged a brief look with his wife, then said, “That’s a possibility . . .”

Constance smiled again. “Edwin, show Mister Atherton a picture of Elizabeth.”

Edwin obliged, taking out his wallet, and then a picture he’d recently taken of Elizabeth. He handed the photo to Lucas, whose eyes promptly widened upon seeing it.

“*This*, is your daughter?”

Constance smiled. *Now, he’s interested.*

“Indeed she is,” Edwin said.

Lucas’s wife leaned over to see the photo. “She’s beautiful.”

Constance just went on smiling and watched as Lucas handed the photo—almost reluctantly—back to Edwin.

“And your son? Do you have a picture of him?” Constance asked.

“Of course.” Lucas reached for his own wallet. After a moment of fumbling, he handed a photo to Edwin, who barely glanced at it before passing it on to Constance.

Constance braced herself as she reached for the photo. In light of the other things he had going for him, it almost didn’t matter what Charles looked like, but she knew it would matter to Elizabeth.

Upon receiving the photo, Constance’s own eyes widened. *Handsome and rich! What luck!* Now Elizabeth could dump that *Afrikaner* boy she was dating. There was still the problem that Lucas had mentioned his son might decide to study in England rather than South Africa, but there were ways to ensure he’d stay. *When it comes to persuading men, there is nothing like a woman to do the job.*

Constance smiled and nodded as she passed the photo back to Mister Atherton. “I’m sure your son and my daughter will get along splendidly.”

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