

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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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 4

After work the following day, as Johann was packing his temperature-sensitive medications inside the refrigerator, he caught a momentary glimpse of his son hurrying past the kitchen, a tennis racket in his hand.

“Hello, Nicholas.”

Nicholas came to an abrupt halt. “Oh—hi, Dad. Did you have a good day at work?”

“*Baie*.^{*} The shorter the better,” he replied, and closed the refrigerator door.” Like almost everyone else in South Africa, Johann had to work until noon on Saturdays.

Nicholas grinned. “I suppose that makes sense.”

“So, where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“I was just about to bike up to the clubhouse to play tennis with Dale.”

Johann’s reply was cut off before it began as the phone started ringing, one long ring and two short rings, which meant that the call was for the Strauss family. Since Sterkspruit had party lines, all the telephones connected to the line would ring, and each person had to listen for the sound of their particular ring tone.

Johann walked past his son and into the living room, where an old hand crank telephone was attached to the wall. “Doctor Strauss speaking,” he said into the wall-mounted receiver after picking up the earpiece. “Ah, one moment. Nicholas, it’s for you.”

“Who is it?”

* *Baie*: very

“Denise,” came his father’s quiet reply as Nicholas reached for the earpiece and turned to face the telephone.

“Hello, Denise.”

“Hi, Nicholas. It’s been a while since we’ve talked hasn’t it?”

“It certainly has.” Nicholas could imagine Denise absently twirling her long, golden hair around her finger as they talked.

“I’m just calling to let you know that my family is going to the clubhouse now to play some tennis. I was hoping that if you’re not too busy we could meet there sometime today?”

“Actually, I was just headed there myself, so I guess I’ll see you there.”

“Wonderful! See you soon,” she said with an audible smile and hung up.

“Nicholas,” Johann said, “if you’re still going to the clubhouse, I could give you a ride there on my way to the Hilltop Hotel.”

“That would be great, Dad, thanks.”

* * *

Elizabeth was waiting for Pieter on a bench in the park not far from her home. Her parents were attending Benjamin’s funeral, so she had some time before her family left for Siesta.

Elizabeth’s thoughts turned to Benjamin while she waited. Her parents had forbidden her and Hattie from going to the funeral because they thought it would be too upsetting, but Elizabeth was upset anyway. It wasn’t fair; life wasn’t fair. How could anyone die so young? If there was a God—and she believed there was—how could He allow such horrible things to happen? It didn’t make any sense.

“Hi, Lizzie,” a voice said from behind her.

Elizabeth turned to see Pieter smiling down at her. “Hello, Piet,” she said, returning his smile weakly.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, picking up on her expression. He moved to sit beside her on the bench. “You look upset.” He paused, frowning at her. “It’s about Thomas, isn’t it? Look, Lizzie, if you need time to get over him, I’ll

understand.”

Elizabeth smiled more genuinely now. “It’s not that. My dad’s best friend just lost his seven-year-old son to leukemia. My parents are at the funeral right now.”

“Oh,” he said, taken aback.

“Come on.” Elizabeth stood up. “Let’s walk through the park for a while.”

Beneath the speckling shade of the trees, Elizabeth and Pieter slowly threaded their way along an old gray cobblestone path. A rolling green carpet of grass stretched out to their left, and a quiet stream to their right. Before long they came to a bridge, the entrance marked by hedges of bright pink and red bougainvillea. They walked onto the bridge and both stopped in the middle of it to overlook the stream. Elizabeth found the peaceful melody of gently running water soothing.

“It doesn’t seem fair,” she said softly.

“What doesn’t?” Pieter asked from close beside her.

“That anyone should die so young. Do you think he’s in Heaven right now?” she asked, turning to face him, her blue eyes shining with unshed tears.

Pieter looked deeply into those eyes, sparkling like two flawless sapphires set in two equally magnificent pearls, and for a moment, he almost forgot to reply.

“I hope so,” he said.

They stood there looking into each other’s eyes, each of them wondering what the other was thinking, but neither of them quite ready to take the chance. It was too soon. Instead, Pieter opened his arms and Elizabeth fell gratefully into them.

* * *

Thwack! The racket hit the tennis ball and sent it sailing through the air. Nicholas ran to greet it, braced himself to hit the ball, his mind already calculating how much force to use, where to hit the ball, and when to strike. The ball was speeding directly toward him in a high arc. Suddenly, the moment was upon him; he raised his racket and—

“Nicholas!” A girl called. Startled, he turned to look.

Thud! The ball hit him squarely in the side of the head.

“Ai!” Nicholas yelled.

“You *domkop*.^{*} You’re supposed to hit the ball with the racket, not your head,” the girl, who could only be Denise Hepburn, admonished with a smile from the entrance of the tennis court. She was wearing a white with black trim form-fitting shirt, and matching athletic shorts. He watched her set her tennis racket and tennis balls down along one side of the green chain link fence around the court.

“Ha ha,” Nicholas said, and began walking toward her.

“Nice hit, Nicholas!” Dale Van Heerdan exclaimed as he approached Nicholas and Denise from the opposite side of the court.

Nicholas turned to Dale. “Go ahead and laugh, but if Denise hadn’t distracted me, you’d be singing a different tune right now!” Nicholas felt around gingerly for the bump that he was sure must have been jutting out the side of his head.

“Awww,” Denise said, and placed her hand on top of Nicholas’s injury.

“Don’t worry, Nick; your head isn’t really noticeable with that enormous bump rising out of it,” Dale said, grinning.

“Thank—” Nicholas began, but stopped himself as he realized what his friend had actually said, at which point he turned to glare at Dale through dangerously narrowed eyes. “Something tells me you’d look good wearing a tennis racket . . .”

“Heh, heh . . .” Dale chuckled nervously and started backing away. “I’ll leave you two to catch up. I’m going to go to the clubhouse to see if any other guys are up for a match. *Tot siens, mense*,”[†] he said, and with a mock salute and a return of his mischievous grin, he turned and left.

Nicholas shook his head wearily and turned to face Denise, who was looking up at him adoringly. “It’s been a while,” he said. “How have you been?”

“Miserable,” she said playfully, leaning in toward him, standing up on tiptoes, and planting a short, flirtatious

^{*} *Domkop*: Afrikaans, meaning *idiot*

[†] *Tot siens, mense*: goodbye, people (a common farewell)

kiss on his lips.

“Wow, some welcome,” he said. “I think I could get used to that.”

“Really?” she said. “So . . . how have *you* been?”

“Absolutely *rotten*,” he said, mimicking her playful tone, and returning her kiss, but not withdrawing quite as quickly as she had.

“Well . . .” she said, looking flushed. “Now that introductions are over, how about a round of tennis of our own?” She flourished her tennis racket for emphasis.

Nicholas grinned. “Prepare to lose.”

Denise shook her head. “Always the optimist.”

* * *

“Come on, girls, quickly now. We want to reach Swellendam before suppertime,” Constance said as she ushered Elizabeth and Hattie out the door.

They all piled into the family car—a spotless white Mercedes, with four doors, a hardtop, and a rich, beige leather interior.

Anchored securely behind the car was their holiday trailer, colored white and army-gray with a rounded rectangular profile. It was a small camper, balanced on two wheels, and only 14 feet in length.

Edwin had already made the round trip to Siesta last weekend in order to leave his motorboat there so that they could use it on vacation. Now, he would be making the trip again, but would not be returning until their vacation was over, in three weeks time.

Edwin started the car and said, “Three and half hours from now, at about six o’clock, we should be in Swellendam—halfway there, in case you were thinking of asking, Hattie.”

“I wasn’t,” she said innocently.

Edwin glanced skeptically at Hattie in his rearview mirror, thinking, *Sure you weren’t*, and then he reversed out of the driveway and drove on for Swellendam. Because it was more than a six hour drive from Wellington to Siesta, they always stopped at a caravan park in Swellendam to break up the journey. The alternative, completing the trip in just one day, was not something Edwin wished to attempt with his kids sitting in the

backseat: they were terrible travelers.

* * *

“How much farther is it?” Hattie asked.

Edwin’s eye twitched. “Just as far as it was when you asked two minutes ago.”

“You mean we haven’t moved at *all*?”

“He means that we’ve moved so imperceptibly that your question doesn’t deserve a fresh estimate,” Constance said.

Sensing the tone in her mother’s voice, Hattie went quiet for a few more minutes, which she spent fidgeting restlessly.

The silence couldn’t last.

“*When* are we going to *be* there?” Hattie asked, inciting an irritated sigh from Edwin.

“Stop whining, Hattie. We’ll get there when we get there,” Constance said.

Elizabeth sat staring out the window. She was just as bored and tired of traveling as her sister, and she was counting cars to pass the time.

Hattie glanced impishly at her sister. “What’s *that*?” she asked in a sudden voice, leaning toward her sister and pointing to something outside.

Elizabeth strained to see what Hattie was pointing at. “What? I don’t see it,” she replied. Catching a quick rustle of movement in the corner of her eye, she turned to look at her sister. Hattie was now sitting placidly in her seat, facing forward, having seemingly forgotten all about the remarkable sight that she’d been pointing to.

“What were you pointing at?” Elizabeth asked.

“Oh, you must have missed it,” Hattie giggled.

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes, and then she noticed that her lap was freckled with bread crumbs.

“You little brat!” Elizabeth exclaimed, and whirling on her sister, she responded by emptying her own sandwich bag full of crumbs onto Hattie’s lap. Hattie began to whine piteously.

A peevish frown twitched its way onto Edwin’s face.

Constance sent an icy stare over her shoulder. “Girls! Settle down immediately! I will not have you turning this car into a circus. Sit quietly.”

The unspoken threat in their mother's voice, heightened by long years of spoken threats made good upon, was enough to impose a strict and immediate silence, but it didn't stop Hattie from pouting and casting dirty looks in her sister's direction.

Elizabeth chose to ignore Hattie and returned to looking out the window. Bored of counting cars, she spent her time daydreaming instead, remembering Pieter . . .

They'd said goodbye more than three hours ago, but she wished they hadn't had to. She wished that Pieter was also going to be at Siesta.

But he wouldn't be anywhere close. He was going to stay in Wellington for the summer, and she was going to be all alone in Siesta with so much to do and no one to do it with. Who was going to take her dancing?

It would be three weeks before she'd even see Pieter again, and to make matters worse, it felt like she'd left in the middle of something. They'd always been good friends, but now everything was changing. Suddenly, he had become more than a friend to her, and she wasn't sure how that made her feel . . . Excited? Fearful? Indifferent? *Emotions can be so confusing*, she thought, sighing to herself.

* * *

It was getting late, and people were arriving at the clubhouse by the dozen. Every Saturday during the summer, at around five o'clock, nearly everyone in Sterkspruit would turn out for a huge *braaiivleis*,* with each family bringing food and drinks to contribute.

Once everyone had arrived, they would light the bonfire and stand around drinking and chatting for the best part of an hour, waiting for the fire to die down to coals before cooking the meat.

Nicholas and Denise were inside the clubhouse, sitting together by the window and watching for their parents to arrive. Denise's family had left more than an hour ago to get changed out of their tennis clothes and to bring their own contributions for the *braaiivleis*, but Denise had opted to stay at the clubhouse with

* *Braaiivleis*: meaning *barbecue*, often a social event

Nicholas.

“You know,” Denise began, “I’ve often wondered: why is it that everyone seems to think we’ll end up together?”

Taken aback at the way she’d chosen to break the silence, Nicholas said, “What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s just that our parents, our friends—everyone really—kind of takes it for granted that we’re together and that we always will be. It’s almost like we’re destined to be together and everyone knows it.”

Nicholas wasn’t sure what she was getting at, but she was right. He’d noticed it, too. Everyone did seem to take it for granted that he and Denise would end up together. Yet, somehow, she felt more like a friend than a girlfriend. She was the girl next door, except that *next door* meant nearly a half an hour’s drive away.

“It does seem a little that way, doesn’t it?” Nicholas replied.

“It wasn’t like that when you were dating my sister.”

He turned to her, shrugged, and was about to reply when, through the window, he saw a white flash of movement in the corner of his eye. “Hey, look—there’s my mom,” Nicholas said, pointing at the white pickup truck that was pulling into the parking lot. “Let’s go see if she needs any help unloading the food.”

When they reached the truck, Kathleen was already busy helping Emily retrieve the food from the covered back of the truck. “Can we help?” Denise asked, pointing to some of the food that Emily had piled onto the tailgate.

Kathleen turned to see them standing there. “Oh, hello there, Denise. That’s nice of you to offer. Here, take this,” she said, handing Denise a large bowl of salad. Nicholas held out his hands to take something as well. “No, Nicholas I want you to go fetch your father from the hotel. Run up there and tell him that we’re going to light the fire shortly. Tell him to hurry down so that he can help with the meat.”

“All right, I’ll be back soon,” Nicholas said, and then ran off in that direction.

* * *

Five minutes later, Nicholas was walking through the

front entrance of the Hilltop Hotel. He made his way from the small lobby to the smoke-clouded bar which curved off to the right of it. Low, yellow lighting was shining through the swirling gray smoke to reveal dark wooden walls, tables, and chairs. Nicholas strode across the room to one table, where his dad was sitting with his friends: the bartender, mayor, magistrate, and chief of police. Johann had his back turned to his son, but Sergeant Wepner saw Nicholas coming.

“Hello, Nicholas,” the sergeant greeted. “You look warm,” he said, noting the beads of sweat on Nicholas’s forehead.

“I *am* warm. I just ran up from the clubhouse.”

Johann turned to look Nicholas up and down. “Hello, son. Why the hurry?”

“Mom wants you to come down to the clubhouse now. They’re going to light the fire soon and you’ll be needed to help with the meat.”

“Ah,” Johann replied. “Well, just let me finish my drink and we’ll head on down there. Here—” He gestured to an empty chair behind Nicholas and then at an open spot next to him. “—sit down with us while you wait.”

Nicholas pulled the chair up next to his dad and sat down. Johann picked up his drink and placed it on his lap. Nicholas followed the motion with his eyes, noticing with some dismay that his father’s beer stein was more than half full. He hoped that his dad would hurry up and finish the drink so that they could go—so that he could get back to Denise—but Johann just left it there in his lap, as though he had no intention of drinking it.

“Have I ever told any of you the story of Herbrant and the lion?” Johann asked.

“*Ja*, I’ve heard it,” Sergeant Wepner said, chuckling with the memory, “but I don’t know about Dallas and Jimmy.” They shook their heads.

Johann grinned. “Well, you see, it was like this . . .”

Nicholas tuned out the story, having often heard his father tell it, instead keeping his eyes glued to his father’s drink, waiting impatiently for his father to finish it so they could go. He imagined Denise all alone down by the clubhouse, waiting for him to return . . .

He'd far rather be spending his time with her, after all, this was the first and last day they would have together for the next three weeks; he would have to say hello and goodbye all in the span of a few short hours, and he wanted to make the best of that time.

Nicholas watched his father take a short sip of his beer, then set his mug down and resume his story. Nicholas stared pensively at his father's mug. *Still half full, so much for, "I'll be back shortly,"* he thought.

The next five minutes passed with agonizing slowness, but then there was a round of raucous laughter from those seated at the table, and Nicholas realized that the story was over. *Good.* Sensing that he had an opportunity to remind his dad why he was there, he said, "Well, we'd better get going. They've probably lit the fire by now, and they'll need your help to cook all that meat."

Johann looked over at his son and gave him an apologetic smile. "My drink is still half full," he replied. "We'll go as soon as I finish it. The fire takes a while to die down to coals anyway, so we still have plenty of time before they start."

Nicholas frowned and glared at his dad's abominable drink. This wouldn't do. At the rate his father was drinking, Nicholas figured that he could be there long enough to hear yet another well-remembered anecdote from start to finish. *Still half full . . . he mused. Roughly half a pint. Should be possible. Definitely worth it.*

In one sudden, fluid motion Nicholas stood up, grabbed his father's mug from the table, and gulped ferociously. A second later, he slammed the mug down on the table in front of his father—empty. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he said, "There, your drink is finished! Now we can go."

There was a moment of stupefied silence in which Johann was looking up at Nicholas with an expression of sheer disbelief. He turned his head to look at the empty glass standing defiantly in front of him, then back to his son. Suddenly his expression cracked into a crooked grin, and laughter thundered out uncontrollably. Reverberating from one person to the next, it quickly spread around the table.

Nearly a minute later, still almost paralyzed with laughter, Johann got up from the table, placed a hand on Nicholas's shoulder, and said, "All right, son, lets go."

* * *

After they had finished eating supper, Nicholas and Denise excused themselves and made their way down to the river below the clubhouse. It was the same river that flowed past Nicholas's house.

Upon reaching the river, they located their favorite spot—a long, flat rock on the river's bank which extended part way into the water and was shaded by an old willow tree. Removing their socks and shoes, they sat down on the rock and let their feet dangle in the water.

"So," Denise began, while gracefully tracing the point of her foot across the surface of the water. "I heard you got a letter from Karen."

"How'd you hear about that?" he asked.

"Mothers talk," she said, alluding to the fact that their mothers were best friends.

"Ah, and apparently you listen," he said, smiling.

Denise shrugged and returned his smile. "From time to time."

"Well, that's all right. I probably would've told you anyway. Karen wrote to tell me that she wants to get back together with me at Siesta this year."

"Didn't she cheat on you with your best friend?"

"Yes. I suppose they've broken up now."

"She said that?"

"No, she didn't."

"Hmmm . . ."

"I know what you're thinking. I've been thinking it, too. Honestly, I don't know what happened. She might just be looking at me as a fun way to pass the time while she's on holiday."

Denise turned to face him. "Well, you'll never know if you don't give her a second chance."

Nicholas nodded. "So, what about you? Any guys waiting for you in East London?"

"None in particular, but that doesn't stop them all from trying," Denise said with a wink in his direction.

Nicholas smiled, knowing just how true that was.

It might have been strange that Nicholas and Denise talked so openly with each other about their other relationships, were they not such good friends, and were it not for the fact that having several girlfriends or boyfriends was commonplace in South Africa. Until a certain age, children were encouraged by their parents to date a lot of different people and often forbidden to be exclusive with anyone. Even once they were old enough, a relationship only became exclusive if it was very serious.

Nicholas and Denise were sitting and watching in silence as the sun set gently on the horizon and splashed the sky with fire. The clouds were flickering slowly, in shades of red and yellow, like embers beneath a dying flame, casting the whole valley in a candlelit glow.

Nicholas watched out of the corner of his eye as Denise twirled a strand of golden hair around her finger. Normally, she was very pretty, but just now, in the fire-like glow of the sunset, she was *stunning*. He watched her long, smooth legs splashing softly in the water.

"You're so beautiful," he said, unable to resist.

She turned to look at him with bright emerald eyes that caught and reflected the fiery hues around them until they burned with a subtle light of their own. She smiled. "Thank you." She leaned close and whispered into his ear, "So are you, handsome."

Nicholas grinned roguishly and turned his head toward hers. The space between them now confined to mere inches, they drew steadily closer until finally, their lips met and they kissed, long and passionately. His hand moved up to touch her hair, and gently tuck a few golden locks behind her ear.

Sitting there, framed by the hanging leaves of the willow tree, the scene tinged in hues of amber and rose by the dying rays of the African sun, they shared a moment—a fond farewell.

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