

Africa's
Snow White

Summer Love

Jealous Winter

by

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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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Love

Chapter 8

Elizabeth, hurry up, we want to get to the beach and back again before noon,” Constance called.

“I’m coming—just a minute!” True to her word, a minute later she emerged from the camper, a picture of radiance, wearing a baby blue bikini covered with a loose cotton shirt. A colorful beach towel was slung over her shoulder. “I couldn’t find my towel,” she explained as she walked toward the car.

“Silly girl. I suppose you’ll remember where you put things in future?”

“Yeah, Lizzie, I suppose you’ll remember where you put things in future,” Hattie said, mimicking her mother’s tone.

“Hattie . . .” Constance warned.

Elizabeth spared a meaningful glance at Hattie as she climbed into the car.

On the way to the beach, Hattie found that she was hungry and fished a banana from the lunch basket between her and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth thought this was fitting: still feeling mildly stung by her mother’s words and her sister parroting them back to her, she watched Hattie sitting beside her, eating a banana, and managed to see a monkey sitting there instead.

“I hope the beach is not too busy,” Constance said.

“I’m sure it isn’t, dear,” Edwin said. “The whole point in going so early is that most people don’t. I imagine we’ll have our pick of spots.”

They didn't.

"How can it be so busy already?" Elizabeth asked, looking dismayed as she surveyed the beach and its forest of colorful beach umbrellas.

"Because you took so long fretting about your towel and who knows what else," Constance answered irritably.

Edwin gave his daughter a sympathetic look. Elizabeth caught the look, smiled, and shrugged. Her good mood had surpassed her mother's ability to alter it, and besides, she had no intention of sitting on the beach, so good spot or no spot, it didn't really matter to her. She was there to swim, and the water looked more than empty enough.

"You would think that with an eight *kilometer*-long beach, people could at least *try* to spread out a bit," Constance said, apparently not noticing that she could set the precedent by walking the extra distance to the emptier parts of the beach herself.

"Over there . . . how about that?" Edwin said, pointing down and to their right with his free hand—the other was carrying a variegated beach umbrella of their own as well as their brown wicker picnic basket. Where Edwin was pointing, a young couple was getting up from the beach and beginning to pack away their things. "What luck!" he remarked and started off in that direction.

"Just a minute, Edwin . . ." Edwin jerked to a halt and turned to face her, his eyebrows raised in question. Constance shook her head. "I don't think that spot will do."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's too close to the river. There are bound to be dangerous currents there," she replied, and after casting about briefly with her eyes, she continued, "There, that's a better spot," she said, and headed off in her own direction. Elizabeth and Hattie followed their mother. Edwin watched them retreating into the distance, and started reluctantly after them, only to stop abruptly a few paces later as the umbrella slipped from his hand and dug into the sand in front of him. With a grimace, he picked

up the umbrella and struggled forward again.

When they reached the spot Constance had picked, Edwin noted that it was almost as close to the river as the one he had chosen, but he had more sense than to say so.

“All right, girls, have fun,” Constance said. “There are drinks and snacks here when you need them.”

“Okay,” Elizabeth replied, leaving her things in a bundle on the sand and then heading with her sister for the sparkling blue ocean.

* * *

Nicholas couldn't help feeling depressed. This was his vacation, a vacation which he had looked forward to all year, and it had started out with him breaking up with Karen. He sighed. As he drew near to the campsite, his mother spotted him returning.

“Are you going to be okay, Nicholas?” she asked from the folding chair where she was sitting under the awning of the tent.

“I'll be fine. I think I'm over her anyway.”

“Do you want a cookie?” Kathleen asked, holding out an open box that had been lying on the folding table beside her.

Nicholas smiled, and wondered if all mothers thought food was a panacea for heartache. “No, thanks. Actually, I think I'm going to go to the beach to collect cuttlefish bones.”

“You're going to walk?”

“Yeah, I could use the exercise.”

“Oh. Okay. Have a good time.” Her worried frown said she didn't think he would. “Don't forget to come back for lunch—and take a drink with you! It's very hot outside.”

“*Nee*, I won't need it,” Nicholas said, walking past her and into the tent to get a bag for the cuttlefish bones.

* * *

Edwin lay on the beach, feeling the sand tickling warmly between his fingers and toes. The heat was making him drowsy—drowsy enough to fall asleep, except now that he had some time to think, Edwin was preoccupied by his thoughts. He glanced surreptitiously at his wife.

Edwin was thinking about the suggestion she'd made

on the way to Siesta. *Why in the world would she want to trade homes with the Stevens family?* No, he knew why *she* would want to trade, but he wasn't sure why *he* would want to. *Not that it matters what I think*, he reflected bitterly. He didn't want to move. Besides that, there was something about the idea that unsettled him. Perhaps it was the fact that his wife had never really liked Lawrence, and now she was suggesting that they help him and his family. It didn't quite ring true.

Maybe if he came up with a good reason why they shouldn't trade homes, his wife would agree to forget about the whole idea. Edwin's eyes lit up as he thought he'd found the perfect angle of attack.

"Constance, dear, I've been thinking," he began, steeling himself.

Constance turned her head lazily toward him, her eyes masked by dark sunglasses. "Yes? About what?"

"Well . . . it occurs to me that it might look to others as though we're trying to take advantage of the Stevens family, if we try to trade homes with them now, so soon after their son has died."

There was a moment of silence in which Edwin felt sure that Constance was glaring at him beneath her sunglasses.

"Nonsense. They'll see it as an act of mercy. Which it is. By trading homes with them, we eliminate the inevitable and endless hassles with estate agents they'd have to go through otherwise. Not to mention a tiresome wait while dozens of prospective buyers traipse through their home without buying."

Edwin contemplated his wife's counter-argument.

"Try to relax, Edwin. We needn't bother about the details just yet." Constance turned her head away from him, as if dismissing the conversation.

Edwin let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Perhaps his wife was right. Maybe he should relax. He glanced at Constance again, enviously noting her tranquil features. *Besides*, he thought, *if I know Lawrence's wife, she won't be interested in trading homes either.*

Now, convinced that he'd been worrying for nothing,

Edwin did relax. He closed his eyes and allowed the warm sand to make him sleepy again.

Constance frowned as the sun went behind a cloud, turning off the radiating waves of light and heat coming through the umbrella as surely as if a switch had been flicked. Yet she wasn't frowning about that. Now that Edwin had reminded her of the Stevens family, she couldn't help thinking about the opportunities they presented. How could she ensure that the Stevens family agreed to a trade?

If Edwin were more motivated, he could be the managing director, and we would have a home like Lawrence's. She sent her husband a sideways look beneath her glasses, taking in his beer-thickened midriff. No, there's no chance of that, she thought, stifling a sigh. He's not the least bit concerned with improving his lot in life. He's even trying to dissuade me from what little means I have to do it myself! The gall of it! Her frown deepened. No, the future is best left in capable hands, and at least I am capable.

"You are not."

Constance jumped with a jolt of adrenaline, and her heart began pounding. *Who said that?*

"I am too a better swimmer than you!" Hattie insisted.

Elizabeth gave her sister a skeptical look.

Constance blinked. *Of course, who did you think it was?* She gave a nervous laugh, amazed that she could be startled so easily. She should have recognized Elizabeth's voice.

"Hello, girls. Did you enjoy your swim?" Constance asked, sitting up and lifting her sunglasses as she did so.

* * *

It wasn't a very long walk to the beach, having taken Nicholas only twenty minutes to get there, but that had been twenty minutes spent sweltering beneath a hot, morning sun, walking along the dusty, dirt road to the beach, and choking on a mouthful of sand with every car that passed him by.

Now, standing on the beach, a long way from the heaviest concentrations of people, he squinted out at the

gleaming ocean, thinking what a relief it would have been to go swimming. What had he been thinking to walk to the beach without a towel or a swimsuit? Making his way down to the water, he resolved to at least get his feet wet.

After kicking his sandals off at the water's edge, Nicholas waded in up to his knees and looked out at the long series of waves rolling in from a few hundred meters off the shore. It was a shallow beach, long and unprotected from the waves. He closed his eyes against the salty spray as a particularly large wave roared past his legs, soaking his shorts. *Oh well, they'll dry.* A second wave got his shirt, and the spray kicked up and splashed him in the face with a barrage of cool droplets. Nicholas smiled, and just stood there for a long moment, breathing deeply. *Jinne, I've missed this place!*

Reluctantly, he made his way back onto dry land and slipped his now sandy feet back into his sandals. Nicholas began walking down the beach, scouring it for the characteristically flat, white fish bones for which the witch doctors around Sterkspruit would pay twenty-five cents apiece. He walked for more than a kilometer, away from the crowds, every so often bending down to pick up one of the fish bones.

His bag now full, Nicholas started back. He had unbuttoned his patterned, white and gray shirt, and it was flapping behind him now as he walked into the breeze. It, along with his shorts, had long since dried. With the sun beating down mercilessly overhead, it was almost a pity. He wouldn't be feeling the heat so much if his clothes were still wet. Nicholas grimaced, and picked up his pace—the cream-colored canvas bag full of cuttlefish bones in his hand was going *clink-clink, clink-clink* in time to every step. Now he really *was* thirsty, and it was going to take some time for him to make it back to camp. He hadn't intended to go quite as far as he did.

Nicholas's mouth grew drier just thinking about the long, hot walk back to camp. With a rueful smile, he asked himself, *Why didn't I listen to my mother?*

* * *

“Elizabeth, Hattie, come on! Hurry up! It's time to go

back for lunch!" Constance called down to the water's edge. The only reply she got was to see her daughters pick up their pace.

A minute later, Elizabeth and Hattie arrived.

"It's time to go already?" Hattie asked.

"Yes, and not a minute too soon. Look at you! You're as red as a tomato."

Elizabeth helped pack their things into the wicker lunch basket they'd brought, and then watched as Edwin took down their beach umbrella and closed the lunch basket.

Edwin turned to his wife, waiting for her to signal that she was ready to leave. Constance responded by leading the way back to the car.

As her father drove them back to camp, Elizabeth found herself thinking about Fairy Knowe, a hotel downstream from Siesta. Dances were held there every Friday and Saturday night, and tomorrow was Friday. The problem was, now that she had broken up with Charley, she had no one to take her to the dance. She supposed that maybe she could go anyway and see if there were any single guys there, but she discarded the idea as being too awkward. *Well, there will be other dances, so I might still have an opportunity to go.*

If only she could find someone to take her.

* * *

Nicholas was about halfway home, his shirt now buttoned to prevent the dust kicked up by passing cars from sticking to him. He tried to keep his pace as brisk as possible—his bag of cuttlefish bones going *clink-clink, clink-clink* in time to every crunch of gravel beneath his feet. Every step was an agony of unquenched thirst.

Coming from behind him, Nicholas heard the distant rumble of a car. A few moments later, a white Mercedes sedan roared past and left Nicholas amidst a spreading brown cloud of dust.

* * *

Deep in thought, Constance was only vaguely aware of the passing scene—a handsome young man with light brown hair, walking along the road to Siesta and carrying what appeared to be a heavy, white canvas bag in

his right hand. Seeing the boy made her lose her train of thought, and she found herself idly wondering about him.

She considered her two daughters sitting in the back of the car, remembering that it was her job to find them each suitable boyfriends. It was an important matter, not to be left to the inexperienced—such as her daughters themselves. *That would be a recipe for disaster. After all, boyfriends eventually turn into husbands, and husbands become a part of the family. It would never do for us to allow just anyone into the family.*

As young as they were, Constance knew that they would need her help to wade through the morass of dating and come out ultimately triumphant, having found the perfect husband—or *as nearly perfect as possible*, she thought, remembering her own husband. *What else are mothers for?*

“Edwin, stop the car,” Constance said.

* * *

Nicholas felt like coughing from all the dust he'd inhaled, and his mouth tasted full of the gritty, salty flavor of earth. Then, he noticed something strange. The brake lights of the Mercedes that had just passed him were lit and shining crimson through the hanging brown curtain of dust. Even as he was trying to figure out why the car might have stopped, Nicholas heard the car start spitting gravel as it reversed down the road and pulled up alongside him. The passenger's side window rolled down, revealing a sophisticated-looking, middle-aged lady.

“Young man, would you like a ride back to Siesta?”

He was surprised by the offer, but greatly relieved. “I'd like that very much, thank you,” Nicholas replied. She nodded once, and then the back door of the Mercedes opened for him, as if by magic.

He saw a flash of one slender, white hand and arm as someone opened the door from the inside. Curious, he hesitated before climbing in, and squinted into the relative darkness of the car, trying to determine who was in there. But his eyes wouldn't adjust fast enough and he didn't want to delay, so he climbed in and closed the

door behind him. He caught just a glimmer of long, brown hair as he did so. *A girl?* he wondered, as he set his bag of cuttlefish bones on his lap with a heavy *clank*. Turning from the door, he hazarded a glance and saw that there was not one, but two girls sitting on the back-seat next to him. Nicholas noted that the girl sitting closest to him, the one who had no doubt opened the door, was about his age—and shockingly beautiful. She had long, straight brown hair, similar in color to his own, and she was wearing only a light blue bikini with a loose-fitting cotton shirt, open in the front, and draped delicately across her shoulders. Given how little she was wearing, Nicholas couldn't help but also notice her incredible figure. Noticing his scrutiny, the girl smiled shyly at him. He smiled back.

"What's your name?" this from the passenger's seat in front of Nicholas—*unfortunately*. He would have preferred if the question had come from the girl seated next to him, rather than her mother.

"Nicholas." Reluctantly, he tore his eyes from the girl.

"A good name. Where are you from?"

"Sterkspruit, in the Transkei, but I go to school in Bloemfontein," Nicholas replied, catching a glimpse of the younger girl on the other side of the back seat. She was trying very hard, but failing, to stifle her giggling as she pointed at him and whispered something to her sister. The older girl began having similar difficulty. Nicholas frowned and shifted self-consciously in his seat. *What are they on about?*

"That's interesting," the girls' mother said. "What does your father do there?"

"He's a doctor."

"*Really?*" So *this is the doctor's son*, Constance thought, now very glad that she'd asked him if he wanted a ride. "That's even more interesting. I used to be a nurse. Does he work in a hospital, or general practice?"

"Well, it's a small town, so he's a traveling doctor. He treats the natives and traders who live in the area."

"I see. You speak English very well. Is your family British?"

“No, actually we’re *Afrikaners*, but I go to an English boarding school in Bloemfontein.”

Constance paused to mask the disappointment from her voice. *Points for being a doctor’s son, but you just lost some for being an Afrikaner.*

Nicholas didn’t infer the reason for the pause, but felt a need to fill the silence. “My mother thought it best that we go to an English school, since the whole world speaks English nowadays.”

“*We?*” Constance asked. “You have siblings?”

“Yes, an older brother and a younger sister.”

“What are your ages?”

“I’m sixteen, my brother is nearly twenty, and my sister is eight.”

“Oh, well, then you’re just a little older than my eldest daughter, Elizabeth.” *So that’s her name*, Nicholas thought, taking the opportunity to steal another glance at her. “She’s turning sixteen in February. Is your brother in Siesta as well?”

“No, he’s spending Christmas holidays with some friends from university.”

“I see. What is he studying there?”

“Medicine,” Nicholas said. “He wants to be a doctor.”

“Like your father.”

“I guess so,” Nicholas replied, noticing that they were now coming to the entrance of Siesta. “Could you drop me here, please? My family’s caravan is parked nearby.” He pointed in the direction, but Constance already knew where his family was. It was common knowledge that the doctor was given the best spot in Siesta, and that that spot was right inside the entrance.

“Stop the car here, please, Edwin,” Constance directed, and the car promptly ground to a halt.

Nicholas opened the door with one hand and grabbed his bag of cuttlefish bones with the other. He climbed out of the car and hesitated with his hand on the door, about to close it, yet hoping for one last glimpse of Elizabeth before he left. His wish was granted, and he found himself hesitating for a second longer as he watched her tentatively grasp an empty banana peel between the thumb and forefinger of one hand and removed it from

the seat where he'd been sitting. *So that's why they were laughing at me!* Nicholas grinned. He'd sat on that banana peel.

He closed the door, turned to the still-open passenger's side window, and said, "Thanks again for the ride."

"You're very welcome. I hope we'll see you again soon," Constance said, and meant it. He was, after all, the *doctor's* son.

And then the car drove off, again leaving Nicholas in a spreading brown cloud of dust. He watched the car depart for a second, then crossed the road, heading for the grassy riverbank and the glade of trees where his family's caravan was parked.

As he walked, Nicholas couldn't help feeling dumbstruck. *Elizabeth . . .* he repeated the name silently to himself, committing it to memory. *What just happened? Where is she from? Why didn't I say something to her?* The answer to the last question struck him as obvious. Her mother had kept him busy answering questions about himself from the moment he'd entered the car. *Well, I can always go looking for her. The park is small enough that I shouldn't have trouble finding her.*

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