

Chapter Three

Ed exited the freeway and navigated from the open map of Durban on the front seat. Someday they'd probably make some device that told you how to find an address, but he sure would like it now.

After making several wrong turns he found the right road at last. He drove through some questionable areas. He was now south of Durban, passing an industrial area. Had he got the address right? But shortly things appeared better. While waiting for the green light at the next robot, he studied the map. Yes, this led directly there. As he got nearer, it became obvious it was a poor neighbourhood. Well, possibly she didn't earn much as an order clerk at Bronson and Schubert's.

Ed made a right turn onto her road and counted the numbers. The houses were small and rather close together. Some children played in the streets, real ragamuffins with shabby clothes and no shoes. As he neared the right number, he began to understand her apparent reluctance for him to pick up the skates at her house.

Twenty-four, here it was. He parked at the side of the road and looked in the rear-view mirror. He ran his comb through his all too long hair. Maybe He should've had a haircut yesterday; those long sideburns were sticking out again. Licking the fingers of both hands, he tried to smooth them down. He blew out a breath into his hands. Not good.

As he got out the car, he wondered if she was watching him through the light floral curtains. Just in case, he remembered to check his feet from splaying out as they always did. He walked down the few steps from the front gate. The house was small but neat, painted white, with a green tin roof, window frames and front door. Vines grew all around the windows, adding more colour.

Ed paused at the door, raised his hand to knock but hesitated. This was it, the moment of finally seeing her. Gail, the sweetest voice in all the world. Would her face and figure match that beautiful music? He rapped a couple of times and held his breath.

The servant smiled and opened the door wider. "Good morning, sir."

"Hello, I'm here to see Miss Gail," he said, amazed that they could afford a servant while living in such a tiny house. She was a small woman, with a tight smile on her pleasant, brown face. She wore no apron, no uniform and no head covering.

"Gail is expecting you, Mr. Brent," she said, but the smile faded. "She is in her room. I'll fetch her. Please come in and have a seat."

Ed did so, wondering at the servant's well-enunciated speech. He looked around the small but tidy lounge. There were two armchairs, a couch with a low coffee table in front of it, a full dining suite and a sideboard with framed photographs on the top. Surprisingly, one of them showed the woman he had just spoken to. She must be a well-loved servant, probably been in the household since Gail was a child. Another picture stood beside it, of a man, and he ...

"Ed." He heard the voice behind him. Her voice. Hearing his heart galloping, he almost didn't want to turn around.

"Gail," he said, turning at last. He stopped, his mind freezing. She was beautiful. He hadn't anticipated such beauty to go with that wonderful voice. His jaw dropped. Quite unable to speak, he wondered if that was because he had not expected her to be so gorgeous from her flowing black hair framing a heart-shaped face of classical beauty, with reddish brown lips parted in a hesitant smile, to those stunning long legs ending in blue canvas shoes—or whether possibly—it was because she—was a Coloured.

Or was she? His mind flew into denial. Impossible. Though she was talking, she had no trace of the Coloured accent. Maybe she had a heavy suntan, she was a Durban girl after all. She had none of the dark complexion both Candy and Pamela shared. Her hair hung long, smooth and wavy, jet-black, yet a little of what Candy would call kroes at the edges. Surely, she couldn't be. She stood right next to the servant who had let him in, holding her hand. Unless the servant ...

"This is my Mom, Ed," said Gail. The woman with her smiled and raised her hand in a wave. There could be no doubt, Gail's mom had much darker skin, almost as dark as an African. No way would she pass the "pencil test" he had read about, where they would try to pass a pencil through the hair of people suspected of being

Coloured. Gail's hair would obviously pass the test, but since her mother was most clearly of that race, it meant Gail was too. She was off limits.

He turned back to Gail. "Oh, sorry, uh. Pleased to meet you, Gail, at last."

"Surprised?" She looked him in the eye, a question hanging in the air, beyond the single word she had uttered. When he said nothing, she dropped her glance. Her lips didn't form a smile but were partly opened, forming a delicate cupid's bow, the corners slightly down-turned. She glanced up again, straight into his eyes. "No need to answer." Again, her eyes dropped.

"Surprised?" he said. "I half expected you'd be plain, but you're beautiful."

Her eyes came up again, moist, and her mouth had opened more.

"Thank you. You're not so bad yourself. In fact, I imagined you exactly like you are."

"Honestly? You did?"

"Yes, no surprises ... for me." She blinked several times. "Anyway, take a seat. I'll bring you your skates." She turned and left the room.

Her mother remained behind. "Can I make you some tea, sir?"

"Thank you, yes, I would like that indeed. Thanks so much."

She turned to go.

"Mrs. Rabe." He cleared his throat and clutched his tie. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry, why?"

"I didn't realise you were Gail's mother when you answered the door."

"Oh! No problem. You thought I was a servant, didn't you?"

Ed couldn't tell whether she was amused or sorry or both. He bit his lip but didn't answer as she left for the kitchen.

He sat down again and waited several minutes, his mind in a whirl. This was South Africa. It was illegal to have any sort of romantic relationship with a non-White. Even if it were possible for him to take her out, how would people react? What would his friends say? He visualised Mark's derisive giggling. He would never

hear the end of this. The girl he was pretty much in love with turns out to be a Coloured. All that time, the hours spent on the phone and flirting, yes, decidedly flirting with her. Oh yes, he pictured the moments when he would introduce her to his friends. Perhaps they wouldn't say anything, but what would they think? Could he even get permission to visit them? Would they let her into their houses? And, oh yes, 'Mom, Dad, this is Gail, we want to get married and have children.' Sure, that would go down well. Then there would be the secret police breaking down the door at 2:00 a.m. and hauling them both off. Great!

The tea arrived at the same time Gail returned with the skate box.

"How do you like your tea?" Gail asked, settling gracefully on the sofa a fair distance from him, knees together, stretching her long legs out to the side.

Ed tore his eyes away from them. "Lots of milk, no sugar, thanks," he said. Why did the hateful racist expression "two coffee one milk" even enter his mind? It didn't belong there.

"Well, I'll leave you two with your business," said Gail's Mom as she left the room.

"You'll just have to sign this, and here is your invoice," Gail said in a businesslike voice, sounding unnatural for her. "I hope your customer knows there are no returns allowed as the blades have been screwed onto the boots already, but we have a list of people looking for discounts on such expensive boots, so she may be able to sell them if there should be a problem."

"Oh, right," he replied vaguely, sipping his tea.

"It's nice to finally meet you," she said, leaning back on the couch, her hair flowing down the seat back in graceful patterns. She appeared more relaxed, but this wasn't anything like the electric tension that always existed between them on the phone. Something had short-circuited their relationship.

"Yes, putting faces to the voices at last." He cringed at how lame it sounded. This wasn't them. The magic had gone.

Silence prevailed as they both sipped at their teacups.

“Oh, sorry. Biscuit?” She passed the tray over. He took a Marie biscuit willingly. It would be good to have something to nibble on, since saying anything was so awkward.

Gail was the first to break a rather long silence. “I’m sorry.”

“Huh! Sorry for?”

“For not telling you before. I wasn’t sure how. I always wanted to figure out some way to bring it up. After we’d become such firm friends, I mean.”

“Okay. It’s not a problem.” He gulped at his tea.

“When you said you wanted to come here, I didn’t know what to say. I’d been wondering lately if you were thinking of bringing our remote relationship to a more personal level but dreading what your reaction would be when you found out.”

“Oh.”

“I wanted to tell you yesterday but couldn’t find the words.” She stared into her teacup.

“I understand. Not to worry.”

“I never knew. That is, if you realised I was a—I wasn’t White.”

“No, I never had a clue.” He paused and gazed at her. “Please, I hope I’m not rude, but you have no accent, none at all. I mean, I work with Candy and Pamela. You probably know, I’m sure I told you about them...” Gail inclined her head. “I mean, their accents would give them away at once, but yours is about the most cultured accent I ever heard.”

“My mom, she’s had a hard life. She wanted something different for me, a better job, respect. I think she was very unrealistic.” Gail grimaced. “She worked several jobs and sent me to a private boarding school. My White father helped by investing money in it on the proviso that his daughter would be allowed to attend in spite of her race. Even then they had to inspect me first before they reluctantly agreed. It was a small school, and progressive, I suppose you’d call it. Most of the girls were friendly, the teachers too. So, just call me Eliza Doolittle.”

Ed laughed. Something of the humour between them sparked again. “Just don’t call me gov’nor, Eliza.”

They both chuckled, like they often had on the phone. But the laughter died away. Ed broke the brief silence. "They did an excellent job," he said earnestly.

She smirked. "They made me a lady in a flower shop, they did," she said in a Cockney accent.

Ed smiled. "Perhaps they did. You got an enviable job in your firm."

"There were some benefits, I suppose." She dropped her head and the smile vanished. "Some. Eliza became a lady, but I didn't become a White."

An oppressive silence ensued. Neither one seemed to have the power to break it. Awkward.

"It was jolly good of you to do this for me, Gail. Thanks so much."

"Don't mention it. It must be a significant commission for you, enough to pay for your petrol to drive down here, I presume."

"Yes, of course." He dropped his gaze and chewed on his lip. "Gail, I have to confess that it wasn't commission nor the desire to please the customer that made me decide to do this. I had to."

She beamed. "Well, I'm glad you did. It's really good to see you in person, and to get this ... secret off my chest."

Another thorny silence.

"I'd better be going."

She rose, taking the hand he offered her, shaking it silently. Her fingers trembled against his. "Very pleased to have you visit." She filled in the brutal void, holding on to his hand longer than necessary.

It was he who eventually broke the connection. "Well. I'll talk to you on the phone. Thanks again."

Ed took the skate box and walked out the door together with Gail. Gail's mother waved to him from the kitchen. "Goodbye. Nice to meet you."

"Yes, me too. Goodbye."

"I'll walk you to your car," said Gail.

She stood aside as Ed put his hand on his door handle. Why was she so beautiful? His eyes focused on the cupid shape of her mouth, just a little open as before. Gorgeous, tempting. Her face turned up, eyelashes blinking rapidly. He imagined his head moving on its journey heavenward, tasting those lips.

His head jerked up. Those lips indeed. They were not for him. What did he think he was doing? He was looking at her through bars. Dirty black bars. Were they on his cell, or hers? Or both. Of course, they would never be able to see each other through the bars, they'd separate them forever, not even allowed to talk through the phone line.

"Well." He forced his voice to behave. "I better be off. Thanks again, Gail."

"Goodbye, Ed." It seemed so final. It was. The end of the story. Nothing more here. He drove off. Were those tears that had welled up in her eyes? Those tears had been bullets, striking his heart directly. He blinked rapidly to avoid his own from running down his cheeks. He slapped his forehead with such force he had to spin the wheel to avoid hitting the curb. A solid brick wall faced him at the next corner. Should he just put his foot down and aim the car at it?

Gail lay face down, crying into her arms. She raised her head only to wipe the wet patch on the sofa.

Her mom patted her shoulder and placed a teacup in front of her. "Please stop, Gail," she said. "Here, drink this. You'll feel better."

As if she ever would. Not in this lifetime. She tried to answer but choked, unable to produce any other sound.

Her mother sighed. "You knew the man was White. I mean, what did you expect? Did you assume he would hold you tight and tell you he loves you?"

She shook her head and sniffed.

“It’s your own fault, you should have told him right from the start. Now he knows your little phone affair is over. I must admit he did behave nicely though, considering?”

Gail sat up, her feet tumbling to the floor. “I suppose so.” She wiped her eyes and took the cup, stirring the tea slowly. “Mom, things changed immediately. So ... so ... formal.”

“Why would he be anything else for a business transaction, love?”

She took a sip of tea. “Yes, but, this is Ed. I can’t face it, Mom, I truly can’t.” She banged the cup on the saucer, spilling some tea on her dress, the brand new blue one she’d bought for his benefit, his favourite colour. She didn’t care. “Ed ... he’s my phone boyfriend. I care for him. We had an affair by phone. I’m convinced he felt the same. Just because it came over the wires doesn’t mean it’s any less sincere.”

Her mom scoffed. “Affair by phone? There’s no such thing, only your fantasy. Loving you is impossible if he never met face to face.”

“Well, people in olden days had relationships by letter without ever seeing each other. Anyway, you can’t understand, you’ve never heard our conversations.”

Her mom brought a wet cloth from the kitchen and wiped Gail’s dress. “Well, if you’re lucky, you’ll still have them. Nothing’s changed, dear, he has to phone you to order from Bronson and Schubert’s. He can carry on imagining he’s talking to that White-girl image he carries in his mind.”

She sat up straight. “You think so?”

Her mom left the room, cloth in hand, without answering.

Maybe things would stay the same. Her mom was right. Ed did still need to phone through those orders. Surely it wasn’t a forlorn hope he would continue flirting the way he always had. That would be better than nothing. After all, she had never expected to meet him, hadn’t wanted to in fact. But now that they had ... how would things change?

She had liked what she saw, yes indeed. So much. His eyes, blue like a winter sky, a startling contrast to his jet-black hair, looking her over with breathless

surprise, hardly blinking. His handsome face outlined by thick sideburns and marked with that dark shadow of a beard that some guys had no matter how clean-shaven. She'd had to look up to see his wide-eyed, open-mouthed stare, several inches higher than her own. The intensity of his sweeping gaze had made her heart pound so hard that he must have heard it across the room. He had a sturdy build, with strong arms a girl wouldn't mind getting lost in. At least, she wouldn't mind, not at all. She'd imagined such a thing a couple of times during long drawn-out orders that turned personal, when he'd shifted from laughing and flirtatious to soft and compassionate.

Out by his car, during that horribly awkward goodbye, his eyes had repeatedly dropped to her lips. She'd seen longing in them, hadn't she? If he had tried to kiss her, would she have let him? She'd often imagined them kissing, when his affectionate teasing had caused the fluttery sensation of a kiss. His voice would sometimes become low and intimate, like a caress. "Aw, Gail," he'd say, and she'd melt. Yes, it would have been very natural for him to kiss her. She wouldn't have stopped him.

But then he'd jerked his gaze away, evidently having second thoughts. Realising he'd be kissing Coloured lips, no doubt. No, it wasn't prejudice – she couldn't believe that of him – but probably fear. And rightly so.

She grabbed a cushion from the couch and hugged it tightly. Who had the right to decide who should kiss whom? A foul, odious, abhorrent government, that's who. They pick their own chosen ones, some of whom are even less White than her Coloured friend, Elaine. Elaine could pass as White anywhere and did. She played White, going out solely with White guys. Some of them knew she was a Coloured, but did that stop them? No. They'd probably marry her if she wanted. *But I can't marry Ed.* What exactly was the difference between Elaine and her? They were the same race. A slightly different skin tone, that's all.

She threw the cushion on the floor and dragged her nails up her arm, hard, leaving white streaks. If she could only get rid of this darker skin, she could have whatever she wanted. She drew a deep breath, then groaned. It was illegal even to date a White guy in this country. So, having a White boyfriend definitely wasn't an option. Yet for nearly a year, she had yearned for him. Would those calls ever be

enough, now that she'd seen him, looked into those sky-blue eyes? Sensed his appreciative gaze on her?

Her mom returned and interrupted Gail's thoughts. "You must stop moping, my girl. A phone affair, as you call it, is safer than a real one, I guess, but any relationship with a White man is out."

"Why not, Mom, you had one yourself?"

Her Mom's jaw set and her brows ruffled. "It was different back then. We got married in church in 1945. We had you the next year, and he ran off a couple of years after that. In any case, four years later, the Nats brought in that awful new law, the prohibition of mixed marriages act, making all mixed-race ones null and void. Not merely new marriages mind you, but fully legal ones like ours were suddenly prohibited." She swallowed and stared down, eyes vacant. "It meant the breakup of so many families." She frowned at Gail. "And that horrid law is still valid, in case you believed it possible to marry Ed."

"I know, Mom, but I believe we have something real and special between us. I feel it in my heart, and I'm sure he does too. Don't we deserve a little happiness? I'm not giving up. Before leaving he stood so close, and looked at me as if..."

"That," her mom said, folding her arms up high, "is not love."