

Prologue

Cape Town, South Africa
April 29, 2018

The best adventures begin when least expected, when they can lead anywhere and change everything. On this night, her farewell party at Firefish restaurant is wrapping up. The friends and colleagues who planned it in her honour need to reopen to the public for Sunday dinner. The original plan had been to head straight home, but her trusted Zimbabwean driver is running late. He had picked up some tourists last minute, and the trip across Cape Town is taking much longer than usual. The taxi man messages to ask if she can wait. “Yes,” she texts back, not in any rush to end the evening just yet.

She slips out of high-heel wedges in the bathroom, substituting them for brown gladiator flats from her Louis Vuitton purse. She walks out of the V&A Waterfront’s complex of shops and eateries alone, into the bustle of the crowd and busking jazz musicians. The gentle ocean breeze plays with her floral dress. The early evening air is cool as it passes through open white long sleeves onto her dark skin.

She pauses to absorb the now-familiar surroundings she’ll soon be leaving. She takes a breath. The woodsy nectar smell of her Lady Million perfume by Paco Rabanne is faint but lingers. Immediately in front of her, the forty-metre-tall Cape Wheel landmark spins its thirty enclosed cabins ever so slowly in a counter-clockwise direction.

Behind it, she looks up at the much larger natural shadow of Table Mountain at dusk, standing perpetual guard over the southern hemisphere's oldest working harbour. The stunning natural setting of the port city is as heartening and awe-inspiring as when she first arrived here to restart her life almost a year and a half ago.

Ferrymans Irish Tavern is opposite the Wheel, one of the redeveloped Waterfront's oldest tenants. Despite working at Firefish as a hostess for the past several months and walking right by Ferrymans most days, she has never been inside. That bar is for tourists, she always felt, too close to the workplace for comfort. On the rare occasions when she opts for an after-work drink, she prefers the security and quiet of nearby hotel lounges. But Ferrymans is right beside her usual taxi pickup point. She is in a spirited mood, soaking in the idea that this time next month she'll be in Italy on a cruise ship, embarking on a new career at thirty-one. She knows the driver will be a while. On a whim, she finds herself turning into Ferrymans, past the crowded cacophony of the patio and through the open doors.

The main floor is mostly empty, a few sports fans hanging around after the end of a big game. She does not pay them any sort of attention at first. The pub has a wood-panelled interior, with low ceilings and the stale smell of spilt lager. Not her type of place. She chooses an empty corner table near the entrance and orders a glass of Merlot and a glass of water.

A small television is screwed into the wall nearby. She notices a white tourist approaching it from time to time, his eyes fixed above her on the day's highlights. He is dressed in blue jeans, ball cap, a sports jersey, and a light blue fleece. He has brown scraggly hair down over his ears to go with a caveman-esq beard that looks like it hasn't been trimmed in months.

He walks by her without making eye contact before returning to his seat. She recognizes the red Arsenal shirt and scarf. Her closest brother in age back home in Zambia is also a big supporter of the same London-based football team. The overgrown beard seems to be drinking with a Black South African guy. She has seen that sort of

local around. I bet I know who is paying the bill for those shots, she thinks, turning back to her phone.

Across the bar, the tourist is trying not to be too obvious in glancing over repeatedly at the stylish Black woman in the corner. He had arrived in Cape Town six days earlier, on a sailing trip as a paying trainee crew member. Fifty-two days from Argentina across the Atlantic Ocean via Antarctica and South Georgia. This is his last night in town. Tomorrow afternoon he'll fly to London via Dubai. To end this latest three-month solo travel adventure, he has tickets to see Arsenal's final home game of the season in the North Bank and his favourite Shakespearean play, *As You Like It*, as a groundling at the Globe Theatre. Then it's back to Canada to resume work as a lawyer. He'll ring in his thirty-ninth birthday there next month and process whether this latest break from the office has inspired any new direction for the future.

Has it? he wonders, staring down into his empty glass. It usually doesn't. The South African he's just met is busy telling him about a failed marriage. About a relationship gradually falling apart.

"My wife says she still loves me." The guy shakes his shaved head and offers a lopsided smirk. "She's just not *in* love with me. Do you know how hard that is to hear? I mean, we have kids, man. What do I do? Hey, how about that next round of double Jameson?"

Arsenal had lost an hour or so earlier. The worst sort of defeat, a last gasp winning goal scored by hated rival Manchester United. His plan had been to head out right after the match, enjoy a final night walking aimlessly under African skies, listening to Paul Simon, Fela Kuti, and other classics. Instead, he ordered an extra beer out of annoyance over the game, then another. Now it's whiskey with this random dude, who's looking sketchier by the minute. I should have left ages ago, he thinks. Or thought, until he saw her enter the pub and take a seat alone, oddly out of place. He'd been trying to work up the courage to go over and strike up a conversation. Why does it always have to feel so hard? I'm leaving this continent tomorrow, after all. And I do need to get rid of this guy ...

When Mirriam next looks up from her phone, the tourist is walking over, looking directly at her this time. She checks her surroundings out of habit and steels herself. He has rosy cheeks and soft eyes. But that beard ... it's truly *hideous*.

"Excuse me," James says. "Do you mind if I sit down and talk with you a minute?"