

African Dawn

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CHAPTER ONE

1 967. It was a Tuesday when the sharp shrill of the Bakelite phone cut through the wintery Milanese air. The news was shattering and numbing. It sent Ivy racing back on an immediate flight to London. It didn't matter that she was in the middle of the fashion season. Nothing else mattered except that she had just lost the most important person in her life.

She arrived in the dark, cold hours right before dawn broke over the city. The bleak early morning winter reflected her mood.

Her adopted brother, William, was at the airport to meet her, standing behind the arrivals barrier and watching her as she came through. He could see she was in shock. Her face, pale with splattered cinnamon freckles, showed no emotion. It was all dammed up behind a mask. He wanted to take her in his arms, but his own grief felt too great. He could not trust himself to keep control if he allowed any emotions through at all. He held his body rigid, controlled, taking her hand luggage from her, and gently putting an arm around her shoulders. Kissing her on the forehead he led her out of the terminal.

They drove towards the city in silence. The only sound was the swish of the wipers on the windscreen, as they wove through the early morning traffic, bumper to bumper. The rear lights of the vehicles were a red blur.

William broke the silence, “Ivy, after the service there is a tea at Grandfather’s ... uhh, I mean, your home. I know it is going to be difficult for you, but once it is over, we can drive back to the airport together. Your plane doesn’t leave until ten this evening. Sedgewick will be waiting for you at the airport in Milan. So, we will have time to chat about the most important things then.”

He turned to face her. She was staring wide eyed, straight ahead.

“Ivy, speak to me.”

“I wasn’t there for him when he took his last breath. To hold his hand. He was always there for me. He held my hand on the first day of school. Greeted all the mothers. Helped me make friends. ‘Come on Ivy, let’s go and say hello to the O’Connors.’ All the kids just stared at one another. All frightened of letting go.”

She leaned forward and looked up at the sky. The universe had turned grey, misty, and wet. Not because it was typical weather for February, but because Grandfather had gone.

“I’ve been looking through some of Grandfather’s papers and there are a few things we need to discuss.” His eyes darted sideways. She either hadn’t heard or wasn’t ready to hear. He let it go.

They arrived at the graveyard where the burial was to take place. Mist hung over all the graves; the corpses lay underneath the cold ground, in silence.

The bare, wet earth was piled alongside an empty grave. Next to the abyss, lay her grandmother. And buried alongside was Ivy’s mother. And now grandfather would lie with them. She could smell the sweet smell of death. A shiver ran down her back.

Her heart ached so much; she couldn’t swallow. When she breathed in too deeply her body shuddered. When William noticed her shudders, he placed an arm gently around her shoulders and whispered, “Ivy, hold on tight.”

The mist was so heavy, it looked as though all the spirits in heaven had descended to earth to bear witness to the rise of grandfather’s spirit and to escort him into heaven. And down from heaven came the rain, relentless, causing the earth to furrow and the water to gather, and flow down into the grave.

Grandfather's coffin, balanced on two sturdy canvas tapes, was lowered to rest in the earth below as the vicar began his sermon.

William stood by Ivy's side, half of his Burberry coat deflecting the raindrops while the other half was shielded by the umbrella that he held above her head. Gusts of wind blew the rain under it anyway. Raindrops splashed onto her face, trickled down her cheeks, mingling with her tears, creeping down into the crevice of her lips.

Her tongue slipped through and licked wet lips, tasting the salt and fresh rainwater. She could not hear the words coming out the mouth of the priest. All her senses were fixed on the coffin in front of her. Grandfather's coffin. Her eyes moved over the group gathered around the grave. Did they all miss Grandfather as much as she did?

Black raincoats huddled under black umbrellas. Between the tears and the raindrops, it looked like a field of black mushrooms.

One umbrella tilted up. Polly, her wide eyes watching, lifted the fingers of her gloved hand from around the handle of her umbrella and wiggled them in a wave of greeting. William waved back warmly, if soberly. Ivy, meanwhile, could only return a tentative wave, barely managing a lopsided smile.

She had lost contact with Polly. They had spent their school years together. Polly's black coat bulged in the middle. There was a man standing protectively next to Polly. He had to be the father of the growing bulge.

Ivy sighed. The future they had excitedly shared as girls seemed to be coming true for Polly, but not for Ivy it seemed. Her life had been on hold for a while.

She felt lost, adrift from herself, her mind unwilling to stay in this space. This space that her heart was still not ready for.

She thought back to her university days. She was studying fashion design at Goldsmith's College. William, back then, was at Oxford reading law. She had seen so little of him. He had taken his studies seriously.

London in the Swinging Sixties! The youth were all the rage. The teenagers in the neighbourhood weren't worried about old-fashioned rules. They were what mattered. They stopped scrapping with each other and moved in a gang.

In those days, the excitement and pace at how their lives were changing made them feel invincible.

The world had listened as the Russian cosmonaut, Major Gagarin had orbited the earth in his Vostok 1 spaceship.

London's clothing industry opened the market, taking Parisian formal couturier styles and redesigning them into easy to wear, off the rack clothes, for the youth, at half the price.

Mary Quant's designs were all the rage. She set up boutiques all over London. The window displays were modern, metallic, space age, with hot pants and miniskirts.

Their bodies had changed, and their hormones were racing. Ivy, from a podgy, freckled, red head had transformed and emerged into a lanky lass with lush copper hair. Ivy was soon immersed in the world of beauty and fashion, with her startling, good looks, and inimitable style.

The vicar's voice rose, and Ivy's attention snapped back to the present as his sermon ended with a passionate crescendo. He then nodded towards William.

William stood up and walked towards the lectern. He stood tall and strong under his umbrella at the head of the grave. He had loved his adoptive grandfather in his own way and was eternally grateful for what he had done for him. He looked up and began the eulogy. Ivy's attention transfixed itself on his every word.

“Hugh James was 20 years old when he joined the Royal Navy after completing an engineering degree at Oxford University. In 1915 he was given a commanding post in the East African Campaign in the Battle for Lake Tanganyika in World War 1. For those who don’t know, Lake Tanganyika lies between the Belgian Congo on the west side of Africa and German East Africa.”

Ivy thought back to Grandfather’s stories of his adventures in Africa. How his troops had transported steamboats to South Africa over the ocean. When they landed in Mombasa, cranes loaded them onto railway trucks, taking them through the African jungle to the lake. They encountered wild animals and met up with strange tribes, some hostile, others hospitable. Once they had reached the lake, they had spent their time chasing the Germans around the lake. Their orders had been to sink the German boats.

The photograph of her grandfather on the front page of the funeral itinerary had been taken on the lake. His golden hair framed his suntanned face. The bright sun had made his eyes crinkle, and his smile was wide with open charm and mischief, and his cheeks unshaven. They had only shaved on weekends when they went into the port to drink and dance with the nurses who worked in the hospital.

The photograph blurred as Ivy’s tears welled and spilled over.

William's voice came from a distance. "He returned to Africa after the war and found a niche market in the mining industry. He designed drilling machines and other materials needed that were not readily available. He later married a nurse whom he had met at the hospital during the war. They produced a baby daughter, Victoria, after their first year of marriage. But the young bride had suffered from bouts of malaria during the war years in Tanganyika. She died long before her daughter had grown into a woman."

As William's eulogy ended; his thoughts lingered with Hugh James in Tanganyika. The vicar lifted his arms. The sleeves of his cassock splayed out like an angel, as he blessed the congregation.

Ivy jerked, startled as the vicar's voice boomed out, "God bless you all."

The mourners started peeling away in small groups and saying their goodbyes. What Ivy could not fathom was why William stopped to feel Polly's bump on his way back from the lectern...

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