

Chapter 26

What follows is a Wellington historical Tragedy, which occurred within top echelons of Wellington high-society. If you'd rather prefer reading about the romance of Wellington's heroine of this story, click: <http://snow-white.us/3-Weddings-on-3-Continents.htm>

George Colton sat at his desk, staring across his office to the door where Edwin had departed not five minutes before.

The nerve of him! Coming here, after what he did, to capitalize on a favor I owed to the very man he knifed in the back. George's jaw clenched at the thought.

When he had called Western Tanning to get hold of Lawrence Stevens, his secretary, Martha, had told him that Lawrence had been fired three days ago. He'd then called Lawrence's home—as much to offer his condolences as to find out how he'd been fired. Lawrence had answered on the sixth ring, just as George had been about to put the phone down. He remembered . . .

"Hello?" The voice was Lawrence's. He sounded awful.

"Hello, Larry, it's George, from Canada. I just heard from your secretary . . . she tells me you've been let go?"

Pause.

"Yes."

George hesitated. "I'm sorry to hear that." Long seconds of silence followed. "Are you still there?"

George heard coughing on the other end, followed by the sound of Lawrence clearing his throat. "I'm here."

"Listen, Lawrence, I've got your assistant, Edwin Smythe, here right now. We were just about to work out the details whereby my company would purchase those bovine hides that Western

Tanning is holding. Under the circumstances, do you still want me to—

"Edwin is there?"

"Ah . . . yes."

"And you haven't signed anything yet?"

"No."

George thought he heard laughter on the other end of the phone. Under the circumstances, it seemed like a strange reaction.

"Good. Don't sign anything. If you still want to repay me, all I ask is that you find some way, somehow, of paying Edwin back for what he did to me."

George's frown deepened, his brow drooping until it hooded and shadowed his eyes. "What did he do?"

Lawrence had proceeded to explain everything. George had been aghast. He still was. And now he, George Colton, had been tasked with making things right. He steepled his fingers on the desk in front of him, and glanced to Edwin's hat where it lay on the coffee table between the chairs where they'd been sitting earlier. Perhaps Edwin would come back for it, and then he'd have the pleasure of denying that he had it.

George smirked at the thought. It wouldn't be much, but it was a start. With half a world between him and Edwin Smythe, it wasn't going to be easy to effect any sort of justice, but he had time on his side and a wealth of resources to draw upon. Besides, any sort of justice he could devise would probably end up costing him far less than buying the hides would have. There were some ethical and legal considerations, but George had no qualms about those. As Edwin himself had proven, there were plenty of *legal* ways to hurt a man, and as for the ethical considerations—Edwin had wormed his way into Lawrence's confidence, pretending to be his best friend, all in order to steal his job. Who could mind repaying such treachery in kind?

* * *

Half an hour after getting off the phone with George Colton, Lawrence found himself in his study, sitting at his desk. He knew what he was going to do; he'd spent the whole day contemplating it, but before he did anything, there were some loose ends to tie.

One day, when they were old enough to understand, his daughters would deserve an explanation. He didn't want them to think ill of him. Of what he was about to do.

Opening the bottom right drawer of his desk, Lawrence took out three blank sheets of paper and three envelopes. The first two letters would be to his daughters, to be given to them . . . *much later*, he decided. Lawrence paused for a moment, thinking what he should write. Surprisingly, it didn't take him long to find what he wanted to say.

Not wanting to give cause for jealousy, he merely duplicated the letter for Julia, using her name instead of Lydia's. He placed each of the letters in an envelope, writing instructions on the envelopes for when their contents should be read. They wouldn't need to be addressed; he'd just leave them in a place where they would be discovered later.

The third and final letter would also need no address, but that was because he was going to deliver it himself. Edwin wasn't going to get away with what he'd done that easily, and he certainly wouldn't be able to forget. Taking up the third envelope, Lawrence wrote on the front of it: *A reminder*.

When he was finished with the third and final letter, Lawrence sat back in his chair and heaved a shaky sigh. He felt numb, and his eyes felt scratchy and swollen from crying, but it was done. Lawrence felt a strange warmth spreading through his veins. For a moment the feeling confused him. It felt like—

Peace?

Then he noticed the glass at his elbow. There were still a few millimeters of brandy in the bottom. He had to laugh at that. *Peace, indeed. No. There's no peace for the wicked—or so the Good Book says. Well, Edwin, if that's true, then I'll be in good company, won't I?*

Lawrence smiled grimly to himself, and with that, rose shakily from his chair. Now standing, he snatched the envelopes from his desk and turned to leave the room.

As he left, his foot caught on the leg of his chair and he almost tripped. He scowled viciously down at the chair, then gave it a kick. He was gratified to see the chair tip over, but was immediately sorry when it thumped noisily to the floor.

With a grimace, Lawrence checked his watch. It was almost nine o'clock. Mary had put the kids to bed over half an hour

ago, and he didn't want to wake them. Especially not tonight. He shuffled to the door of his study, envelopes in hand, and turned out the light. Now there was only one thing left to do—no, two.

He had to find his pistol.
And use it.

* * *

When the cab pulled up to his hotel, Edwin climbed out and almost forgot to pay. It was only when the cabbie yelled out behind him: "Hey, come back here! That's three seventy-five!" that he turned around and favored the cab driver with a dull look. Abruptly, Edwin's eyes lit with comprehension, and he paced back to the cab and passed a five through the window. He didn't bother to wait for his change before turning around again. He simply didn't care.

Lawrence had lost his job, but he had lost it because of *him*. As he thought back on it, Edwin could only come to one conclusion: the story of their fight in the airport must have made it into the newspaper. One or more members of the board of directors must have read the story . . . and that was that. No company could afford to have its managing director knocking people unconscious in airports. That was the very worst kind of publicity. Instability in a company's leadership implied and often meant instability in the company itself.

Edwin sighed and pulled open the door to his hotel. He needed a drink. Badly. If he recalled correctly, there was a bar right inside the hotel. Standing just inside the door, he looked around the lobby until he found a sign with an arrow that read: *Fox & Fiddle Pub*.

Perfect.

Edwin started forward, angling for the sign. He checked his watch. Only 2:15. He fervently hoped the pub would be open.

* * *

Lawrence strolled down the sidewalk, doing his best to appear nonchalant as he walked past his neighbors' homes. He didn't want any of them to see him and wonder what he was doing. They were all so nosy . . .

It was now quarter after nine. After going to fetch his pistol, he'd spent 15 minutes in his bedroom with the lights off, just sitting on the bed, gazing at the glistening silver barrel and turning the gun over and over in his hands. But all that

contemplation had done nothing to dissuade him.

The streetlights shone down weakly from above, casting everything in a warm, coppery glow. Lawrence felt anything but warm. It was a night like any other at the end of summer—temperatures hovering comfortably around 60 degrees, but that made no difference. The blood in his veins had turned to ice.

Step after fateful step, he drew inexorably closer. He recognized every tree, hedge, and shrub along the way. He crossed the street, turned the corner, and kept on walking. His current neighbors gave way to his old ones, and now he was in even more familiar territory. Finally, he came to the house he was looking for. There, across the street from him, all on one level, and sprawling in its size, was his old home. A bigger yard, nicer finishings—in every respect superior to the home he had now. No wonder Becky had been so angry with him when he'd agreed to trade.

Now that he looked back on it, he was angry, too. When they'd been working out the details for the trade, Edwin had said nothing in his defense, and offered no remuneration for the difference in value between the two homes. Lawrence had thought at the time that it was because his friend was too spineless to stand up to his wife. Now, in retrospect, he realized that even then Edwin had been taking advantage of him. He'd simply used his wife to take the blame—but how else to ensure that it didn't reflect poorly on their friendship? No, he needed to be squeaky clean, right up until the end.

Well, Edwin, you're not going to have a chance to enjoy your ill-gotten gains. Lawrence smiled grimly, his eyes traveling over the length and breadth of the house. There were no lights on as far as he could tell. He'd timed it perfectly. It was after nine, so the kids would be in bed, and Edwin wouldn't be back for a few days yet, which meant that the only one likely to still be up was Constance.

It hadn't taken Lawrence much thought to realize that the perfect form of revenge had to involve Edwin's wife. It was unfortunate that she had to suffer for his misdeeds, but real justice was rarely neat and tidy. Besides, she wasn't exactly blameless. Lawrence remembered well her part in trading homes. She'd been Edwin's willing accomplice all along.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Lawrence started across

the street. It was time to finish what he'd come to do. As he reached the other side of the street, Lawrence reached into the inside pocket of his wrinkled, gray suit to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. His fingers found the letter there, then travelled down until they encountered the cold, steel barrel of his pistol.

Satisfied with that, Lawrence went up to the mailbox, which stood out front of his old home. He withdrew the letter from his pocket, opened the mailbox, and popped the letter inside. That done, Lawrence proceeded down the familiar walkway which led to the front door of his old home. He soon departed from the walkway, however, making his way instead across the lawn and around the side of the house to the backyard.

There was a curious fact about his home, which he doubted Edwin had known to fix. The sliding glass doors which led from the master bedroom to the patio outside didn't lock properly, and if one so much as jiggled the lock, it came undone.

When Lawrence reached the backyard, he saw that the lights were on in the living room. It was easy for him to see in, but from his angle he couldn't yet tell if anyone was in there. He knew from experience that it would be almost impossible to see out with the lights on, but just in case, he walked down to the pool to put some distance between him and those broad, gleaming windows.

Once there, he turned to look back up at the house. Now he could see Constance, sitting in a chair in the living room, drinking a cup of tea. She was oblivious to his presence. He stood there for a while, watching her, unconsciously buying time. He was aware of his pulse racing, of the cold sweat that had broken out all over his body, but he felt oddly detached about it—as if this were not real, and he wasn't really here.

Somehow believing that made it easier, and Lawrence found the will to continue, but before he actually started on his way again, he saw Constance's head turn. She was looking straight at him! Lawrence's heart froze. She'd seen him. He was sure of it.

But no, she wasn't looking *directly* at him—rather, it seemed, at something in the yard. And she was smiling. Would she be smiling if she'd seen someone lurking in her backyard? Lawrence let out a breath—

And quickly caught it again as Constance's gaze found his—

for real this time. Her expression changed instantly, but it was hard to tell *how* at this distance. A primal burst of adrenaline spurred him into motion, and he hurried toward the master bedroom. It was now or never. He had to act before Constance had a chance to wonder what she'd seen.

* * *

Fifteen minutes earlier: as Thandiwe was going home she'd decided to give Nicholas's letter to Constance, complete with an explanation of Elizabeth's reaction to it. Because of Constance's prior warnings about "coddling," she hadn't dared to talk to Elizabeth about the letter, but there was nothing stopping her mother from looking into things.

And that's exactly what Constance did. She accepted the letter with a smile, and as soon as Thandiwe was gone, she looked into the envelope to read its contents. Elizabeth had asked that it be burned, anyway, so she'd never know that it had been opened. Yet, the letter had shed no light on her daughter's reaction.

Puzzled, Constance had gone to the kitchen, made herself some herbal tea, and then taken both the letter and her tea to the living room for further contemplation.

At the moment, however, she sat sipping her tea and enjoying a few moments of peace and quiet before she went to bed. The girls had left hours ago to go on a school camping trip, so she had the entire house to herself. A rare treat.

Constance raised her teacup to her lips, savoring the warmth against her hands, and the therapeutic scent and flavor of the tea. For just a moment, Constance allowed herself to revel in her success. Here she was, in Lawrence's home, with Edwin coming home in a matter of days to take over for Lawrence as the managing director of Western Tanning. And now that Edwin and Lawrence were no longer friends, Edwin would be spending much more time at home with his family. Her dreams were finally coming true.

Unfortunately, Constance's appreciation of all of that was dimmed by her still-lucid memory of the frightening episode she'd had early that morning—and endless thoughts of what could possibly have caused it. Upon reflection, she'd decided that she must have been dreaming. It was ridiculous to give credence to it: a shadowy creature, a crushing weight on her chest, paralysis . . .

No, those were the trappings of children's nightmares, not reality. She must have simply missed the part where she'd woken up afterward. Nevertheless, Constance felt a chill creeping down her spine. Some called her superstitious, but some things, inexplicable things like luck, fate, premonitions, and dreams were merely expressions of the supernatural. *And we ignore those at our peril.*

Frowning at herself, Constance pushed the nebulous fears from her mind, and allowed her thoughts to drift back to what had brought her to the living room in the first place—Elizabeth's strange reaction to Nicholas's letter: "*Burn it!*" There was nothing revealing about the contents, and certainly nothing objectionable, but according to Thandiwe, Elizabeth hadn't even read the letter before she'd said that. So, something had to have happened before she'd received the letter to make her angry with Nicholas. *But what?*

Perhaps she would simply ask Elizabeth when she got back from her camping trip. Then again, perhaps she wouldn't. In a way, it was truly fortuitous that Elizabeth had somehow been turned off of Nicholas. It saved her the trouble of finding some way to effect that outcome herself. Elizabeth couldn't afford any distractions from Charles. He'd be coming back to South Africa in a few months, perhaps to stay—definitely to stay, by the time Constance was done—and Elizabeth couldn't allow her heart to be torn in two directions when that happened.

While Constance had been of the opinion that Nicholas was a better match for her daughter than Pieter, Charles was almost certainly a better match for her than either of them. Constance smiled to herself and cast a glance over to Nicholas's letter on the end table beside her. *Why look a gift horse in the mouth?*

As Constance's gaze drifted away from the letter, she caught sight of her reflection in the living room windows—her still-smiling face was distorted by the reflection and mirrored in washed-out colors, making her look far older than she remembered herself. Vanity taking hold, Constance began to look away.

And that was when she saw him—just the barest glimpse of a face, and the outline of a man standing down by the pool. He was staring up at her. Constance's heart began thudding in her chest, and her face went slack with shock.

And then the man was gone, and Constance was left staring

at her own reflection again.

Constance shook her head and blinked a few times; then she peered more closely through the windows. With the light on beside her, it was next to impossible to see through the reflections.

Had she imagined it? After thinking she'd woken up that morning and finding herself confronted by a shadowy phantom at the foot of her bed that had seemed no less real, Constance couldn't be sure. Was this another nightmare? Perhaps she'd fallen asleep in her chair.

Constance pinched herself to ensure she was awake. The pain registered, so she wasn't asleep. What had she seen?

Setting her teacup down, she turned off the lamp on the end table and got up from her chair. Pacing over to the windows, she searched the backyard for any sign of the man she'd seen.

There was nothing; just the starlit patio, and the steps leading down from it to the night-black lawn and the quietly rippling waters of the pool beyond. Constance sighed and rubbed her eyes. She was tired. She must have imagined it. It was time to get some sleep.

* * *

Lawrence managed to jimmy the lock on the sliding door to the master bedroom, just as he saw the light spilling from the living room go out. *What?* Lawrence felt his blood pressure ratchet up a notch. Constance shouldn't have been going to bed so early, but why else would she turn out the light?

If she was going to bed, he had just seconds to get inside, otherwise he'd be discovered too soon and Constance might find a way to stop him.

Lawrence quickly slid the door open, stepped inside, and brushed past the curtains. He turned around, reached through the curtains, and slid the door shut behind him. The door connected with its counterpart with a soft *clang* that sounded far louder to Lawrence's ears.

It had been loud enough.

"Who are you! Identify yourself!"

Lawrence started. The voice belonged to Constance. He turned slowly around, a fresh sheen of sweat forming on his brow. "Watch it! I have a gun!" he heard her say.

In the darkness of the room, it was impossible to see if Constance was bluffing or telling the truth, but, ultimately,

what did that matter?

"So do I," he replied, and drew it from his pocket.

* * *

As Edwin drove back through Paarl on the way to Wellington, he anxiously considered his options. His flight from London to Cape Town had been canceled, but the airline had managed to squeeze him aboard an earlier one. Unfortunately, that meant he had arrived in Cape Town two hours earlier than expected. Constance wasn't going to meet him at the airport, so there were no complications there, but now he was arriving home early, and he had no desire to do so.

The sooner he got home, the sooner he'd have to tell Constance all the bad news—how Lawrence had lost his job, and how the business trip had all been for nothing because George Colton could no longer repay the favor he owed Lawrence by buying Western Tanning's bad investment. It didn't matter that it wasn't his fault. Edwin knew his wife would blame him anyway.

She'd be disappointed, and her disappointment was nothing to trifle with. Delaying *that* as long as possible, was high on his list of priorities. So, as Edwin drove home, he found himself stopping off at the tannery to collect his wits first. It was Monday, so the tannery was open. He wasn't expected there until tomorrow, but that just meant that he wouldn't have to do any work. It struck him as strange to be taking refuge from home at work, but then again . . . what was normal, anyway?

Edwin pulled into his parking space, right beside Lawrence's, and tried not to notice that Lawrence's space was empty. Putting his white Mercedes in park, Edwin turned the key, killing the idling roar of the engine, and then left the vehicle.

It was then that he noticed the squad car in the parking lot. Edwin frowned, wondering, *What are the police doing here?* It didn't make any sense. His brow pinched in thought, Edwin walked up to the entrance of the tannery, passed straight through, and headed for the elevator at the back of the entrance hall. Offices were on the third floor. He punched the button in the elevator, watched the doors close, and waited patiently for it to open again.

The doors opened, revealing a short, brown-walled stretch of hallway that turned left around a corner. Feeling faintly apprehensive, Edwin walked from the elevator, down the hall,

and turned the corner.

The sight that greeted him was both shocking and expected. He'd already known from the squad car parked outside that there were police at the tannery, but to see them questioning Martha, and to see that one of them was wearing a suit rather than a uniform, meaning he was probably a detective—that was unexpected.

Edwin tried to steady his suddenly shaking hands and legs as he continued down the hallway toward the desk where Martha sat. There were uniformed policemen standing in front of her desk, their backs turned to him; the third man, the detective, was standing beside them, with a pen and a pad of paper, taking notes. Martha was looking up at them, her expression blank with shock. As Edwin drew nearer, she noticed him, and her head turned his way. There wasn't even a glimmer of recognition, as though she hadn't seen him at all.

The detective caught Martha's gesture first and turned to see Edwin coming down the hall. The two policemen turned their heads now as well and fixed him with grim looks. Edwin stopped in front of the trio and tried to ignore the sniffing he heard coming from Martha's direction.

"May I ask what's going on here?" Edwin asked, his frown heavier than ever. Something was definitely wrong.

The detective offered a weak smile that might have been intended to look sympathetic. "Certainly," he said. "But first, perhaps you'd like to help us."

Edwin nodded. "If I can."

The detective subtly shifted his grip on his pen and pad of paper, and then asked, "Who are you? And what's your connection to Lawrence Stevens?"

Edwin shook his head, unsure where this line of questioning was going. "I'm Edwin Smythe, Lawrence's assistant—or I was, until he was fired."

The detective's face flashed with shock, and he exchanged a slow glance with the policeman nearest him. After a long moment, his eyes found Edwin's once more. "Edwin *Smythe*?"

"Yes, that's what I said."

The man hesitated. "I'm afraid I have some very bad news for you, Mister Smythe."

Edwin gave the detective a hard look. "What do you mean?"

The detective was frowning again. "I think we'd better

discuss this in your office."

"If you insist," Edwin said, and led the way to his office. As he left, he heard Martha's composure suddenly slip as she broke into loud sobbing. Edwin felt a cold slice of fear slither into his gut. He opened the door to his office, walked in, and held it open for the police.

