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The Slavery of Flight

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For all of Africa's children

Chapter One July, 1997: Still

A wealthy suburb of Johannesburg. An empty winter afternoon. Audrey and Brenton DuPlessis, twelve and eight, giggled behind a ten-foot concrete wall.

A lifetime away. Across the street, Godwin William ‘Winnie’ Mathonsi stopped to listen to the laughter. “So happy,” he said to himself. “So free.” The man set down his blue plastic shopping bag and stood in the shade of a shedding eucalyptus tree. “Not right.”

Twelve-year-old Audrey’s champagne-blonde hair clung to the sides of her oval face. She curled a sprig around one finger and tossed the volleyball to her younger brother. “Let’s play over the pool. First to ditch it loses a point, first to ten points loses the game.”

Brenton nodded and wiped his raspberry fringe out of his eyes. “Done.” The boy bounced the white-

stitched ball on a chunky wrist. “Double demerits if it goes over the roof, and winner gets to pick three TV shows in a row.”

The mid-afternoon sunshine was warm enough for shorts and scruffy t-shirts. A disputed shot ricocheted from Brenton’s wooden arms to Audrey’s cocked fist and splashed into the pool.

“Rock/Paper/Scissors,” Brenton shouted across the water.

Audrey agreed. “First to three.” They counted together and Audrey crowed victory. “Don’t be a baby, Brent! Use the net, like last time.”

Her brother peeled off his socks and duck-walked along the shallow steps. “Nope. I’m going in. Water rescue, all the way.”

“You’re completely mad. No way you can do it without going in over your head.” His sister rolled her eyes and shrugged.

“Watch me.” Balancing with one hand on the edge, Brenton kicked a tidal wave of water.

Audrey scooped up the volleyball from the deep end. “Could’ve done that myself, genius.”

Her brother laughed and retrieved his shoes.

“Lucky for you I didn’t fall in.”

From the breakfast nook window, Elyse glanced at the scene. Five-month-old Liana sat propped on her mother’s lap and pounded a green enamel safety spoon on the table with a tight fist.

Elyse reached for the Tupperware of puréed cling peaches. “Now, Li-Li, let’s see if you like these.” She tucked Liana’s arm under the counter and reclaimed the spoon.

Driving home to his family in Eden Meadows after a Saturday afternoon at work, Warren ignored speed limits and stop signs. He practiced not rubbernecking the growth of hovels beside the motorway. Warren squinted into the rear view mirror as he veered off the four-lane ring road, using a free thumb to dial his security company.

“Please enter your six-digit clearance and press the star key.” The computer voice coached Warren through a familiar routine. He punched in the all-clear code.

Driving in an unmarked black sedan, the uniformed trio of security personnel crossed their

client's BMW at the off ramp. Warren waved, flashed his dome light, and dimmed his brights. The other car followed him to Twenty-Eight Wild Pear Crescent, Eden Meadows. The Cape Dutch house's floodlights guided Warren through the gate.

"Home, sweetheart." Warren reset the alarm and kissed Elyse on the cheek.

"Good day?"

"Starving. I'll just say hello to the kids."

Warren tiptoed into the baby's room. Leaving Liana to dream of wet warmth, he found the other kids curled up on the settee, watching cartoon reruns and munching post-dinner, processed cheddar cheese twigs. Brenton saddled himself against his father's waist, the child young enough to bear-clutch his absent parent and old enough to let go first.

"Dad, we have to work on my passing tomorrow—I've got soccer starting again next week."

"Tomorrow it is." Warren leaned over the top of the couch. "Hello, Audrey."

His daughter submitted to a peck on the crown and mumbled a greeting. "Hi."

Warren slid his briefcase under the coffee table

and made the offer. “What do you say to ice-skating before bed tonight?”

Audrey flicked her head towards him. Her eyes glinted. “Can I practice my pirouettes, and maybe teach Brenton to figure-eight?”

In the swanky shopping center, Warren escorted the two oldest onto the ice.

Elyse bundled Liana up in a hand-knitted cardigan with matching hat. “I’ll be watching you,” she said from the first row in the gray metal bleachers. “Be careful.”

Audrey laughed and spun. She pin-wheeled her arms over her head and pulled Brenton onto the ice. “It’s easy. All you have to do is skate forward for three, lean left, hop to changeover feet, and skate backwards three.”

Her brother held tight and crunched his brow in concentration. “Don’t let go.”

Their father coached from the sidelines. “That’s it, steady arms, now on three jump, ready? One, two—”

The boy turned. His ankles wobbled, but his

knees propelled him forward and into the air. As Audrey and Warren watched, Brenton splayed against the misjudged side bumpers.

“Ow-ow-ow.” He landed with a shriek and a thud.

The rush to the doctor was a false alarm. With Brenton’s crying piercing their ears, the family swallowed a frenzied explanation.

“I’ve taken an x-ray. All clear.” The doctor pointed to the charcoal backlit wall. “It’s a nasty sprain, but should be fine in a week or two. See me again then if it’s still sore.”

“Can I play soccer?” Brenton asked, swallowing his disappointment that his arm wasn’t broken. “I’ve got practice and a game next weekend.”

The doctor nodded and spoke to the DuPlessis parents over Brenton’s head. “I’ll prescribe some medicine to help him sell the next few nights. Should be alright to play by Tuesday.”

Home from the hospital by half-past nine, the DuPlessis family waltzed through rituals of bath and bedtime. All thinking the day’s drama behind them. All

wrong.

Winnie strolled past the house as Brenton fished for the volleyball. As the outsider walked, he scoured the ripped stitching of his jacket to keep his hands warm and pricked his ears at the children's play. Winnie slowed to listen to the two voices behind a sage-green thicket protecting the Cape Dutch house. Beneath the galloping laughter, Winnie heard the minor key of his mother, forced into maternal surrogacy for a white family while Godwin William "Winnie" Mathonsi languished in neglect and dirty water.

A statue cast in lengthening shadow, Winnie crouched and pretended to retie a broken shoelace. The flux of Saturday afternoon pedestrian commuters from the suburbs to the townships parted and re-meshed around him. No one noticed how long he stayed there, shifting to bend the other knee while his ears traced the phantom play of invisible children's voices.

Under his breath, Winnie sketched in the details of the lives on the other side of the wall. "Bet their mother stays home to look after the children. Sure they've never been hungry a day in their lives."

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