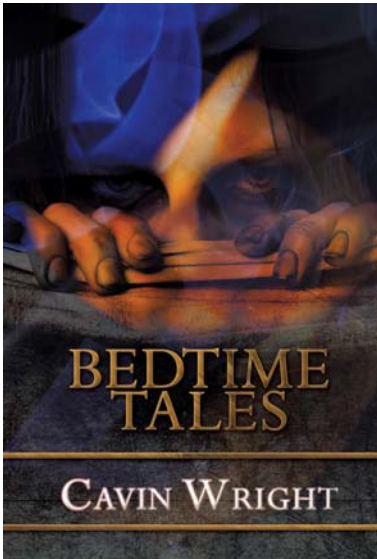




BEDTIME
TALES

CAVIN WRIGHT



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Author and master storyteller Cavin Wright presents his third book in the *Bedtime* series. This eclectic mix of 19 short stories and a novella spans the gamut, from sinister to amusing—and then some.

In *Payout*, a terminally ill young man is at the top of his game professionally. Grabbing one last chance to enjoy life with his girlfriend, they head for Brazil. But a chance meeting with an old friend plunges them into a deadly game of cat and mouse.

Night Train: A single woman, vulnerable and alone after a disastrous affair, boards a deluxe overnight train to return to her hometown. But her surroundings become quite unnerving as she realizes a horrific truth and finds that being single is the least of her problems.

In *Excess Baggage*, lucky winners of free tickets on a luxury cruise embark for what promises to be the voyage of a lifetime. But when passengers begin to die, the journey turns into a nightmare, far away from land and any hope of salvation.

As in his previous books, *Bedtime Stories* and *Bedtime Sagas*, Wright's latest contains a treasure trove of goodies to keep you awake well into the night. History, love, murder and intrigue ripple through its pages and will keep you on edge, thrilled, and amused, from cover to cover.

About the author:

Cavin Wright was born in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in 1952 and lived many years in South Africa. He now resides in England and is currently completing his fourth book in the *Bedtime* series. His other (non-fiction) works are *The Golden Prize* and *From Dust to Trust*.

Bedtime Tales

Cavin Wright



Eloquent Books

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For My Son, Dane

Contents

Sweet Surrender	1
Switchback	3
Payout	13
Chapter 1	13
Chapter 2	20
Chapter 3	26
Chapter 4	33
Chapter 5	39
Chapter 6	45
Chapter 7	52
Chapter 8	60
Chapter 9	66
Chapter 10	74
Chapter 11	79
Chapter 12	83
Gingerbread Man	91
Excess Baggage	97
Dog Day Afternoon	111
The Naked Man	123
Susan's Season	133
Who's Who at the Zoo	143
Twist of Fate	149
What Goes Around	161
Pay the Emperor	169
Color Her Blue	175
Your Servant Am I	181
Drastic Measures	183

The Way It Is	189
God's Got It Covered	199
The Curtain	207
The Trouble with Trinity	215
And the Gods Laughed	227
The Limits of Reason	235
So You Say	243
Night Train	251
Amity	261
Memorandum 237	269
Chimera	283
Eli's Legacy	301

Sweet Surrender

*Should my Father have a purpose for the winter of my years;
If His plan is set for some determined season,
Then perhaps there is a calling for the present pain and tears...
And the emptiness inside me for a reason?*

*Must I tarry yet a decade for this time to come to light?
Can I dare to build my broken life anew?
Will He give me strength to struggle to the swan song of the fight?
To the purpose that the Father only knew.*

*Has my planning and ambition been mere shadow in the night,
And my greatest of achievement been in vain?
Let me follow then, the way of truth I know to be of light...
And surrender to His loving arms again.*

Switchback

Bobby parked the black Mercedes sports coupe beneath a shady tree. The magnificently restored Victorian house seemed welcoming, like a cool oasis in the muggy heat of the Durban summer afternoon.

The central locking mechanism made a barely audible click. A brickwork driveway led directly to a less-shaded parking area fronting the wide covered veranda with its intricate metal-laced railings.

Mark Hamilton, psychiatrist, smiled as his patient settled, with a resigned expression, into the leather swivel chair. Yet Mark knew just what wonderful progress they had made, though he didn't think Bobby realized how far the previous nine sessions had brought them. With a modicum of good fortune, this might very well be the last session needed.

"Glad you could make it, Bob," acknowledged Hamilton. "How's the world of real estate?"

Bobby raised a hand and made a seesaw motion with it. "So, so. Up one day, down the next."

Hamilton offered cigarettes and then a light. Bobby watched the doctor over the flame with a smile of appreciation. For a few moments they both inhaled with satisfaction. The new smoking laws had banned cigarettes in the workplace, but Hamilton contemptuously ignored them.

There was a light tap at the door and Susan, the attractive blonde receptionist, entered bearing a tray with the familiar bright red teapot and delicate china cups, with chocolate biscuits on a small platter.

This ritual was now a comforting part of the fortnightly visits. It was all so—Bobby searched for the expression, whilst saying, “Thanks,” to Susan—so *déjà vu*. Predictable, yet pleasantly so.

Had Mark Hamilton ever personally had one really horrible, grotty day in his entire life, wondered Bobby, looking once more around the entirely tastefully decorated room. It didn’t seem possible. Even the weak rays of sunlight filtering through the expensive blinds seemed to cast a gentle mantle of warmth around the man to counter the slight chill of the ducted air conditioning.

As Hamilton poured the tea, Bobby relaxed further and studied the strong capable hands lifting milk jug, teaspoon, and sugar bowl.

Confidence. Oh, for confidence!

To the outside world, Bobby Chamberlain seemed confident enough; oozed confidence in fact. No problem too big or small.

“Short on your deposit, sir? I’m certain I can arrange a personal loan from the seller against the purchase price. He only has a small bond on the place as you know. Of course I can swing it!”

Yes, the clients saw confidence alright; but did they have any idea of what it felt like inside?

Accepting a cup, Bobby gave a slight shiver. In all probability, even Mark Hamilton hadn’t fully grasped the full implication of the terrors involved in the job; how close Chamberlain felt to a complete breakdown.

Or maybe he had?

Yes, perhaps he had, after all!

Otherwise why had Bobby returned time after time to this cozy office? *If the sessions hadn’t been doing any good, then these endless visits could not have continued, could they? They must be making progress!*

The thought gave rise to new hope.

Suddenly, Hamilton began speaking. His words cut across the silent reverie.

“...might well be our last session Bob. We’ve made tremendous progress and I want to spend today just recapping—going over everything we’ve discussed before to get it all clear in our minds. Is that alright with you?”

The last session? The last session!

Bobby Chamberlain felt a sharp wrench of panic in the lower belly. But surely...

“You...you mean...I’m...you mean you think I’m better now? But, Mark, you don’t understand!”

This was impossible. If everything was okay now, why was the nervousness and worry still there? Why the constant nagging doubt about the ability to earn a living? Estate agents earned on commission only, for goodness' sake! Didn't this fool know that? Did he have any conception, after all he'd been told? What it meant whether or not you would get a pay check at the end of the month?

Oh, yes! It looked as though Bobby Chamberlain shouldn't have to worry too much about things like that. Nice clothes. Smart car. A modern duplex in Umhlanga. All very nice. But with bond rates going through the roof and a lease on the car costing a moderate fortune each month, one had to do a lot of selling just to keep alive. It didn't exactly add up to peace of mind.

"You'll be fine, Bobby," soothed Hamilton. "I know what's troubling you and don't think I don't understand. But you know that every salesman in the world has the same kind of self-doubts about his ability at times. The fact that you've got where you are tells me you're good at your job, and I know you love it, so there's nothing at all to worry about—just go out there and sell as you've always done!"

Chamberlain reflected on what the psychiatrist said. It actually made a lot of sense. They both knew it to be true.

Bobby gave a self-deprecating smile. "I guess you're right. It's really up to me, isn't it?"

Hamilton straightened in his chair and nodded. "Okay, so let's go over it once again." He consulted his notes. "Your mother died giving birth to you, the only child. I think we've established that your father blamed you from the very start, right?"

"The death of his wife was an extreme blow to him. It seems pretty evident that he started going off the rails almost immediately. Drinking, parties, womanizing. When you were old enough for a babysitter, he left you alone more and more."

"It still amazes me," broke in Bobby, "how he kept his job for so long. It was a demanding position and very well-paid. He seemed to assuage his guilt about leaving me on my own so much by buying all sorts of presents. Cars, bikes, cowboy outfits, fishing rods, guns, tents. A plethora of gifts all through my childhood."

Hamilton gave a sympathetic shake of his head. "And all things you didn't want or need. You wanted love, friends, a proper father and home."

"Well, we even lost the home in the end. When I was nine, they foreclosed on the mortgage and the Welfare called on us. Next thing I knew, I was living with a bunch of strangers. I guess Dad thought his

duty was done, because I never saw him again.” Bobby gave an eloquent shrug.

“Nice childhood,” commiserated Hamilton.

“I couldn’t relate with the kids around me because I’d never been allowed any friends.”

“Until you got to high school,” the doctor prompted.

“I forced myself to mix. Somehow, even then, I realized that to get on in the world, you had to at least have a working relationship with those around you. You had to make yourself...likeable.”

“It was important for you to get on in the world wasn’t it?”

Bobby glanced away. “The steady decline in my father and the three years of abject poverty we went through would make anyone aspire to a better lifestyle, I guess. Maybe that’s why making money is so important to me.”

“Of course it is,” murmured the doctor. He made pretence of looking at his notes again. “So you were in your first year of high school. Coed. We come to the school dance...”

Bobby stirred restlessly. “Mark, do we have to go through this again?”

Hamilton noticed a reddening in his patient’s cheeks. He forced himself to nod.

“I wanted to go to the washroom.” Bobby had begun to speak at once, as if to get it over with as soon as possible. “Geoff Barker was a senior—much stronger than I was. I didn’t know he was...like that...”

“Okay, okay. Don’t go any further.” Hamilton lit two cigarettes and passed one across. “Barker was expelled and you moved to a better school. You got on much better there didn’t you?”

“Yes. After a long time I did.” Bobby began to relax again. “But I was wary. I don’t think I ever completely trusted anyone after that. Eventually, I began to make new friends. I started doing well, both scholastically and in sport. I became head prefect.”

“Oh?” Hamilton wrote that fact down on his pad. “You didn’t tell me that before. That’s quite an honor. So you left school and went to university on a scholarship and got a marketing degree. You did very well.”

His patient gave a short laugh. “Oh yes! Best results for that year. But that was because I had all the time in the world to study. My social life was...limited to say the least.”

Mark Hamilton drained his cup. “You didn’t get involved with anyone? Understandable, I suppose. Relationships need trust and you had

lost a lot of faith in people by then. It's all very much what we expect under the circumstances Bob. But I think you've learnt enough from our meetings together to be able to overcome the blocks you've developed about your past. How do you feel about that?"

His patient frowned slightly—thoughtful.

After a short pause, "Yes. I trust you, for a start. Sometimes, I even like to think I'm ready to get involved with someone. It would be great to have a person who could really understand what I've been through. They would have to know everything about me; otherwise it would be impossible. Everything would have to be out in the open. No secrets; no finding out about that bastard, Barker, just as things start to work out. Know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean," affirmed Hamilton. "I agree with you, and especially if marriage is in the air."

"I used to think I would kill that guy if ever I caught up with him you know," continued Bobby as though not having heard what the doctor said. "I told you, didn't I, that I'm a karate first dan? I could break the little jerk in pieces. But I think I'm over that now. No violence."

Chamberlain shifted uneasily in the chair, but smiled across at Hamilton. "You really have helped me haven't you, Mark?"

"You've helped yourself, Bobby. Don't forget that. Ever."

§ § § § § §

The Mercedes sprang to life. The throaty roar of its engine seemed to tell Bobby that everything was going to be alright now. From this moment on life would be different. No more doubts. No more glancing fearfully back down the long dark road of the past. No more feeling left out of the mainstream of life.

With a slight shock of realization, Bobby Chamberlain knew that there were now things to do and changes to be made.

The values of the past no longer applied. What seemed so very important, even as recently as this morning, didn't seem half as significant now.

Switching the motor off, Bobby sat in the muted glow of the noon-day and began to analyze the amazing new thoughts that arose.

Money. Possessions. The cornerstones of life. What was it all about, anyway? This ugly monstrosity of a car, for instance; why on earth did I want to own a thing like this? Because all the other materialistic yuppies of South Africa thought it was the car to have? Exactly! Even down to the black paintwork! What an awful color! On the hottest of

Durban days, even the aircon couldn't deal with the heat trapped under the hideous black paintwork.

And the flat at Umhlanga? That over-priced Italian-tiled, all-mod-cons box with the sea view from the second bedroom window; if you stood on tiptoes?

The long trek through the traffic each morning and evening in the yuppie car, to and from the yuppie apartment. What for? And why estate agency? Because that was where the bucks were?

Yes, and the worry and the false promises and the fussy clients. Yes, it was enjoyable—up to a point, but wasn't it time to move on now?

After a few years in sales you found a system that really worked for you. It was a successful system and the money started flowing in. But you stuck to that system because it worked. So the system became repetitive. But didn't repetition become so incredibly boring!

In the end, no matter how much money you made, you only wore one set of clothes at a time and ate just so much food in a day? How come the paper seller at the crossroads can smile every morning when he's dressed in rags? Why was it so difficult to return that smile when you were so much better off?

Bobby started the car again and drove back to the office high on the Ridge. There was a little cottage on the books which needed a lot of work done on it. It would be perfect. In fifteen minutes, the offer to purchase was prepared and Bobby entered the details of the Umhlanga property into the computer listings. The flat was now officially on the market at a price that would ensure a fairly quick sale.

"Hey, Clive," called Bobby, "here a minute."

An overfed man entered the office. "Hey, Bob! What is it?"

"If you still want to take over the lease on my car, I'm ready to do it. There's another fourteen months to go and it's just been serviced. What do you say?"

A disbelieving smile spread across Clive's features. "You sure? You haven't just blown the engine, have you?"

Bobby tossed him the keys. "Try it out, why don't you?"

As Clive lunged for the door, Bobby made the next decision. It would make sense to defer resigning until there was a firm offer on the flat. The proceeds from that sale would cover the purchase price on the cottage plus a fair sum to live on for a few months if other work wasn't immediately forthcoming. Apart from that, expenses would be far less each month from now on. Time to renovate the cottage—it overlooked the beach—and Bobby would be able to get that

golden Labrador to share it with. No more body corporate to say no dogs allowed.

Punching a number into the phone, Bobby called the seller of the cottage and arranged to meet her that evening. The full price was being offered so there shouldn't be a problem.

Two hours later, Bobby Chamberlain had arranged a new lease on a more suitable car, as well as the transfer of the old lease into Clive's name. It seemed that with every new accomplishment, more and more weight was being sloughed from Bobby's shoulders. A marvelous sense of euphoria was taking the place of the burgeoning depression that had become so familiar in past months.

By eight that evening, the purchase agreement safely signed, Bobby drove slowly home. On opening the front door, realization dawned that the flat was worse than memory allowed. Looked at with fresh eyes, the false, utilitarian rooms were obnoxious and depressing. They were typical of modern taste, though; so very sellable.

Pouring a scotch on the rocks, Bobby settled into a chair and forgot about the surroundings, dreaming of the sound of the sea outside the new cottage; early morning runs with the dog along a dawn-blushed beach, and a steady job with new friends—real people with ambitions beyond mere money. Wouldn't that be refreshing? Perhaps someone to share the future with? Nothing seemed beyond the bounds of possibility any more.

Suddenly, the sound of the telephone rent the silence. Bobby was caught unawares. It took a moment or two to register what was happening.

"Bobby Chamberlain. Hello?"

"Bobby. I'm sorry to call you at home. It's Mark here, Mark Hamilton. Hello? Are you there?"

"Yes, yes. Sorry Mark. I was just a bit surprised to hear your voice. I wasn't expecting..."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you. It's just that something very important has come up. I wonder if it would be possible for us to meet somewhere for lunch tomorrow. That is, if you haven't got anything already planned."

"No, no that's fine," replied Bobby, mystified. "But what's happened, Mark? I thought you said today..."

A brief laugh. "No, it's nothing to do with any more appointments. As I said before, you'll cope fine from now on."

"Well, that's a relief, I'll say that."

“How does the Country Club suit you? I’ll meet you in the car park at one o’clock. Is that alright?”

“Fine,” replied Bobby automatically, still baffled by the call. “Are you looking for a house, Mark? Perhaps if we met at my office?”

“Country Club. One o’clock. I’ll sign you in. Bye.”

Replacing the receiver thoughtfully, Bobby picked up the neglected glass. *What sort of house could you offer an established psychiatrist? Something with real class. Like that gem that came onto the books last week. Now, that was a house! The commission on that would be...*

Annoyed at the old train of thought, Bobby got up, poured another drink, and slipped a TV supper into the microwave. An early night was in order. And a day off, for once.

§ § § § § §

There were certain advantages to the holiday season in Durban after all. Clive found a buyer for the flat the next day—a visiting Freestate farmer who wanted a holiday getaway at the coast.

His buxom wife obviously liked the Italian tiling and décor, so the husband made a cash offer there and then. Bobby held out for the full price and got it.

“You see, the car’s bringing me luck already,” whispered Clive, as he hustled them out.

Bobby smiled after him.

§ § § § § §

They sat in the cool dining room. Mark Hamilton gave their orders and raised his glass.

“Well, here’s to you, Bob. I must say there’s been a complete metamorphosis in you since yesterday. When you move, you move fast don’t you? All the trappings of the rich shaken off in less than twenty four hours! Yet I think you’ve done exactly the right thing. I must congratulate you.” He drank a toast, and then looked steadily at his guest. “Bobby, I’m not in the market for a house, just in case you were thinking that.”

“Mark, I’m sure you’re not in the habit of treating your patients to lunch for the hell of it. If you’re not buying a house, why did you want to see me? Is it to do with my treatment? Perhaps you want to get me committed?”

Hamilton gave a wry smile. “In a manner of speaking, yes.”

The steward arrived with laden platters and Bobby was forced to endure a few moments of panic. *Had the man gone mad? An institu-*

tion? What the hell? They were left to themselves again and Hamilton raised a placating hand.

“Bobby. I don’t quite know how to tell you this. It’s never happened before. So please bear with me.”

To Bobby’s surprise, the unflappable Mark Hamilton looked slightly flustered, even a bit...shy?

“Bobby,” he cleared his throat and pressed on determinedly, “Roberta! I think you’re the most wonderful woman I ever met! Will you marry me?”

Payout

CHAPTER 1

“Look, Dr. Andrews, just tell me the truth. I’m as good as dead, aren’t I? How long would you say I have left?”

The man behind the desk studied his patient guardedly, disinclined to commit himself. “Well no, Mr. Stone...Jason, I wouldn’t like to let you think that. Not at all.” He was avoiding eye contact. “Just because...”

“The truth, Doc! How long? I want you to be absolutely honest with me.”

Now Andrews looked directly into Stone’s eyes. “Six months. A year if you take things easy. I’m sorry, Jason. You asked for the truth. You are welcome to get another opinion, of course. But that is my estimate.”

Jason Stone sat silent, his mind in turmoil. At last he said, “I see. Thank you.” He picked reflectively at a fingernail. “I thought maybe a little longer. Perhaps two or three years.”

“You’ll have to watch your way of living,” warned Andrews. “No smoking, no alcohol, And no heavy exercise. The quieter your life-style, the better. I’ll make up a chart for you—diet and so forth.”

Jason held up a hand.

“No, please don’t go to that sort of trouble. I wouldn’t stick to it anyway. It would be a complete waste of time. Thanks for the offer, but if I’m not going to make it to Easter, I don’t intend sitting around

doing nothing or giving up my vices either. Give me an estimated survival time on real living.”

Andrews wiped wearily at his eyes. *Why*, he asked himself, *had he kept the last appointment of the day for Jason Stone? If he had seen him first thing that morning, this would have been long over and the rest of the day would have seemed a breeze by comparison. But the man deserved an answer.*

“In that case, I wouldn’t put my faith in anything more than half the amount of time. Three to six months.”

Stone nodded. He stroked his dark moustache with a thumb and forefinger.

“Six months,” he smiled at the specialist. “We’ll go for the maximum, right?”

Andrews didn’t return the smile. “I cannot impress on you enough the need to ease up as much as possible, Jason.” He looked into Stone’s twinkling green eyes. “If you don’t mind me saying so, you seem to be taking this all very casually. Perhaps you don’t yet realize the seriousness...”

Stone laughed. “Oh but I do! I’m dying—I know that. But then we’ve all got to die sometime, right? I sort of feel I now have an advantage over other people because I know approximately when it will happen to me. I can make plans—enjoy what’s left to me. Know what I mean? It will be a challenge to see how much living I can cram into a hundred and eighty days.”

Andrews at last gave a rueful smile. “Well, you’re thirty-three years old. I guess if I were you, I’d opt for your choice too. I’d enjoy every damned minute until they led me, struggling, to the graveyard. Forgive me for being cautious. It was just my professional conscience that made me warn you to slow down. My human logic tells me otherwise. Don’t quote me though, will you?”

When Stone reached his car there was a pink parking ticket tucked under the wiper blade. He retrieved it with care, tore it in half, then half again, then again, until there were just tiny pieces. Then, with a joyous sense of abandon, he threw them into the light breeze and scattered pink confetti all over Musgrave Road.

Ignoring the disapproving looks of passing motorists, he got behind the wheel of his five-year-old, three-liter Ford and started it up. There was a thunderous roar from the rusted exhaust and Jason realized with delight that he would never have to worry about getting it replaced.

He made his way to the karate dojo in Umbilo Road. He knew this evening would be the last time he came here. A plan was already taking shape in his mind as to how he would spend the next six months. There would be no time for martial arts or his long distance swimming—and no reason to keep them up.

He would definitely miss the strict discipline of karate. Jason was a blackbelt, second dan, and had enjoyed every minute of attaining to that level. But it was time to stop. One last session, then out.

As he got into the rhythm of his katas, he reflected on the news that Andrews gave him. It was not unexpected. He had rheumatic fever at age ten. The resultant weakening of the heart and tests over the years had shown a progressively deteriorating situation. He had followed medical advice to the letter because his parents insisted. Penicillin tablets until he was twenty-one, no over-exertion, and regular check-ups. The only sport he was allowed to partake in, during his childhood years was swimming—but not competitively.

Two months after his twenty-first birthday, his parents were shot dead in their car during a hijacking attempt. Jason started to train in karate a week after their funeral.

When he left the dojo that evening, he did not tell anyone he was leaving for good. He agreed he would see them at the next training session, but knew he would not. With regret, he made his way to his car once more.

It was a quarter to seven when Stone arrived home. Louise would not be back from the hospital for another half hour. His girlfriend was a nursing sister at St. Augustine's Hospital, in Glenwood, a three-minute-walk from their home in Cato Road.

Jason got himself a beer from the fridge and lit a cigarette. He wanted a shower, but decided to wait for Louise to get home first. They could take a long, hot bath together, and he would take her to the Spur steak ranch in Davenport for dinner.

That would save messing around in the kitchen. These late shifts of hers were tiring and she would appreciate the break.

He wished he could take her out more often, but his job at the bank wasn't the most highly paid, nor was nursing. Between them, they made enough to live fairly comfortably, but they were certainly not well off.

Stone had managed to buy the house on the reduced interest rates he enjoyed as a bank employee, but in the seven years he had been paying it off, the mortgage bond hadn't come down by more than a couple of thousand rand.

He still owed two hundred thousand on it. It was always a major concern to him. But now, if things worked out as his nebulous scheme was shaping up, all that would be in the past. It was now time to start living.

Stone heard Louise at the front door, and went to meet her.

“Hello, sexy!” she greeted him cheerfully.

He could see she was tired and he loved her for the effort she made to hide it.

“Hello, my babe.” he took her in his arms and hugged her to him. “Missed you!”

She kissed him on the lips. “Missed you too. Very much! How was your day?”

What? Besides being told I’m going to croak before Easter? Yeah, great—and yours?

“Fine. Usual bullshit. How was yours?”

Louise put her bags down in the lounge and turned back to hold him. “Fine. A bit exhausting, but otherwise okay.”

“Would you like to eat out? Spurs? Save cooking. Are you up to that?”

She smiled with genuine appreciation. “*That* sounds wonderful!”

“Great! Can I get you a drink?”

He went to the kitchen and poured a glass of white wine. When he returned to the lounge, Louise was sitting on the couch. He knew she was going to ask how the doctor’s appointment had gone. He didn’t want to speak about that as soon as she arrived back from work, so he asked her about something else. He managed to keep off the subject until they had had a couple of drinks and he was running the water into their double bath—one of the features that had attracted them to the house in the first place.

Louise lit some candles and extinguished the bathroom light, adding salts and oils to the water. They undressed in the cozy light. Jason admired her firm and tanned body for the millionth time. Each curve of her exquisite torso and limbs was perfection in his eyes and he thanked his maker once more for having let them meet.

There were times when he just could not believe that Louise could feel as she did for him. There must be so many men in Durban who were ten times more attractive, financially secure, suave and sophisticated, less temperamental—yet she had chosen him. Some things were beyond comprehension. But he wasn’t complaining about that.

Jason had been involved with a number of girls before he met Louise, but had never considered marriage to any of them. Eight years

ago, when he and Louise had fallen in love, they had seriously discussed marriage, but they had never quite got around to it. Now Stone supposed there would not be much point to it.

He knew that he could not put off his news much longer. It would hardly be fair to bring it up at the dinner table so he waited for her to join him in the bath.

He kissed her gently and said, "Andrews told me something today, babe. I think you'd better know about it before we go out."

God! What a way to start! Why don't you just tell her to go shopping for a coffin? But he realized there was no easy way to break the news. Just be straight.

"What did he say?" Louise was sitting bolt upright in the bath now, her proud breasts a wet golden-shimmer in the candlelight.

Despite himself, Jason could not keep his eyes from them. He forced himself to meet her gaze.

"I think you know, honey. We both knew the time would arrive. Six months."

Her eyes filled with tears as he watched her. The huge sacs of moisture clung for seconds, then spilled over onto her silken cheeks, coursing slowly down to the tip of her chin, and dripping down into the water, as if ticking off the moments of life left to him.

Jason thought he had never seen anything quite so beautiful—or tragic—in his entire life as this lovely, naked woman in her grief. He reached out for her and she slid into his arms, pressing herself against him under the hot water.

"Hey! Shush, my love," he told her gently. "Enough of the tears! No crying. We are going to be strong, you and I. We both knew this day might come. We were prepared for it. Now I want you to accept what is happening. We can make this a sad and depressing six months, or we can make it the happiest time of our lives together..."

He spoke to her until she stopped crying. Then he washed her whole body with his hands. When he was finished, he let the water out, and they made love in the empty bath.

It was slow, tender, beautiful. When it was over, they held each other close for a long time.

"I've got a plan," Jason told her, as they dressed to go out. "I'll tell you over dinner. You'll probably think I'm crazy, but it will work."

Jason had snails and Fillet Grande while Louise had a Calamari main course.

Over whiskey Dom Pedros, Jason outlined his thinking: “We are going to need money. Lots of it. I work in a bank. Banks have lots of money. I’m going to get some of it for us. Ten million bucks or so.”

Louise’s mouth dropped open. Then, “You mean *steal it*?”

Stone pursed his lips. “More like a long-term loan.” His eyes twinkled merrily.

“You’re joking! How on earth would you pull that off? Jason! Are you serious?”

He nodded. “Dead serious. Sorry. Slip of the tongue,” he smiled. “I’ve been sort of toying with the possibilities of it ever since they sent me on that fancy computer auditing course, about a year ago. Remember it? I had to go up to Jo’burg where we learned all about overcoming computer fraud? That was one course that impressed me out of all the stupid ones the bank insisted I go on. You know why, love? Because it gave me a great insight into how to pull off a computer fraud involving millions.”

“And you think you can hack into all that and bypass the audit controls?”

“Yes. There are obvious risks, but by the time they figure it was me we’ll be long gone. How does that grab you?”

Louise looked at him, impressed. “Do you honestly think you could do it, Jason? Where would you divert the funds?”

Stone lit a cigarette. “Switzerland. Channel Isles. Anywhere. Yes, I’m pretty sure I could pull it off. As I say, I’ve thought about it a lot. Not that it’s been necessary until now. But under the circumstances, I’m willing to give it a go. Are you?”

“Why ever not? Life has handed us a lemon. Let’s turn it into lemonade!”

“Way to go, babe!” He leaned forward and kissed her across the table. He raised his hand, and their waiter came over with the bill. Stone paid with his credit card and added a double tip knowing he would never be called upon to pay it.

Sitting at his desk the following morning, Jason Stone carefully contemplated the information on the computer screen in front of him. He took a sip of coffee, and punched in a few instructions on the keyboard. It had always fascinated him that humanity’s destiny relied on words and numbers printed on a sheet of paper.

A check, for instance, allowed its holder to draw whatever amount was printed or written on it. A summons to court could change that same man’s life. The written word in a novel could influence the entire

world. A simple letter could tell the recipient that love was eternal, or past.

Everything that affected peoples' lives came down to ciphers on papyrus, or a movie or computer screen. But even these relied on thoughts first, represented in the written word.

Symbols on a two-dimensional field. Humanity, three-dimensional beings, took their orders from the second dimension. Incredible!

On the two-dimensional screen before him, Stone typed in the instructions for his three-dimensional future:

'Transfer ex acc. 100 687 2127, ABSA, Smith Street, Durban, South Africa, i.n.o. AMEX. R 10 000, 000.00. . .'

The message ended with the details of the receiving bank in Switzerland with an account-linked American Express credit card to be issued in the name of a Lauren Chase.

Jason spent a further quarter of an hour typing instructions into the computer that included; a postal address for delivery of the card, foreign exchange authorizations, electronic banking details, traveler's checks, and PIN codes. There were a dozen and one things he needed to consider if he was to cover his tracks effectively.

Eventually, he was satisfied that he had thought of everything. It was just a matter of waiting for the credit card to arrive in the post now. It would be posted as a registered article. Louise would be able to collect it using a false identity document at the post office. That should take about a week to ten days with luck.

Obtaining the false IDs and South African passports he saw as the hardest part of the whole exercise. After a few discreet inquiries, he was able to get the phone number of someone who was supposedly a master in the field.

"I'm really itching to chuck up the job," Stone admitted to Louise that evening, as he explained his progress, "but until everything is in place, I think I must keep going there. Just a few more days, okay? I'll go and have some photographs done at lunchtime tomorrow. Would you be able to get yours before you go on duty, do you think?"

"Yes of course. Is there anything else I can help you with? My working hours are more flexible than yours."

Jason lit a cigarette. "There will be, yes. But until we get the passports and IDs sorted out, we can't even buy airline tickets. Everything depends on those and the credit card arriving."

“Would there be any sense in changing our appearances? I could dye my hair dark. You could shave your moustache off,” he saw that Louise was getting excited about the possibilities.

He gave her a fond smile. “I don’t think so, honey. We’ll be using our own British passports once we’re out of South Africa. It wouldn’t do to look too different from our pics in those, would it? If anyone needs your ID when you use the credit card overseas, you’ll have to show them the false South African passport. You’ll have to look the same as the photograph in that.”

Louise nodded. “You’re right. And you’re very clever, too!”

“Oh yeah? Well, I just hope I’m clever enough, that’s all.”

He poured her some more wine, and opened his second beer.

“So have you given any thought as to where we should go?” queried Louise.

Stone nodded. “How do you fancy South America? Brazil.”

Her eyes lit up. “Are you serious? Jason! You know I’ve always wanted to go there! Could we, do you think?”

“Yes! The reason I thought of that as well is that there doesn’t seem to be any extradition treaties between South Africa and Brazil. Used to be, but not anymore, apparently. That may prove to be useful, wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, there’s something I can do tomorrow besides get my photos. I’ll get some brochures on Brazil from the travel agents!”

“Okay. But get some on other countries as well. European ones, so that you don’t stick out in their memory later on. We must be careful to cover our tracks each step of the way now, baby. After all, I’m already a criminal.”

She pondered that for a few seconds, then, “Maybe. But you’re a very sexy one!”

Stone gave a laugh and pulled her closer on the couch. “Oh, really?”

“Yes, really!” she managed to say, as he kissed her on the mouth.

CHAPTER 2

The following evening, Jason and Louise drove to a rather seedy-looking block of flats near the beachfront. Parking in the street, Jason was not overoptimistic about the car still being there when they got back. He put the gear-lock on and hoped for the best, as he guided Louise into the building and into graffiti encrusted lift.