

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'a' and 'b' in a white, elegant script font, positioned on a solid black rectangular background. A thin white horizontal line is drawn beneath the letters.

a&b

The Girl from Simon's Bay

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For L



Prologue

England, 1967

The letter had passed through careless hands.

Once pristine, it was now grey and randomly creased, as if it had been crushed into a ball, aimed at a waste-paper basket, missed, and been trodden upon.

How long did it lie there, she wondered, waiting to be swept up and discarded?

Or idly rescued and thrown back into circulation for one more try?

The scrawled words, in different fists, with different coloured pens, were perhaps an indication.

‘Gone’. The first annotation, in neat black capitals.

Then, ‘Address unknown’. Overwritten – gouged – in red.

And finally, ‘Return to sender!’ Impatient, underlined green, with an arrow towards the address on the back flap. (‘Don’t waste my time’ surely the unwritten postscript.)

Ella’s gaze wandered over the desk with its carefully arranged possessions, as if they might provide the answer to a question – suddenly brought to the fore by the letter – that she’d never been brave enough to ask.

An embossed leather notebook on top of a Manila folder.
A picture of her as a baby beside a brass shell case holding pencils.

A silver inkwell that was always kept full despite the arrival of ballpoint pens.

A lustrous seashell, its jagged spine rubbed smooth from handling.

‘Dad? Did she give you the shell?’

Chapter One

Simon's Town, Union of South Africa, 1920s

'Lou!'

Infant waves curled towards me over the crystal sand. Footsteps thundered from behind. I reached out both hands to seize the oncoming water with its lace of bubbles and fell forward. Cold, green liquid gurgled into my mouth, lapped at my forehead and just as it started to trickle into my ears, a pair of familiar hands grabbed me around the middle and pulled me clear.

'Lou!' my pa, Solly, hoisted me over his shoulder and gave me a brisk pat on the back. 'You can't swim before you can walk!'

From the vantage point of his arms, I could tell that the sea stretched in white-edged ridges until it collided with the mountains, or raced impatiently around them to merge with the sky overhead. I'd already met the sky. I saw its blue dome every day when Ma put me down to rest beneath the palm tree outside our front door.

This sea was far more exciting than the sky!

I twisted in my father's arms and yearned downwards.

Solly looked back triumphantly at my mother, Sheila, sitting cross-legged on a blanket well up the beach, and waved the arm that was not holding me from plunging back. ‘She wants more!’

Unlike me, Seaforth Beach was shy. It hid between massive grey boulders rounded like eggs thrust up from the ocean by some giant, divine fist. Boys, including my best friend Piet Philander, used to scramble up their smooth sides and do risky bellyflops into the shallows, praying that the water was deep enough to cushion their fall. But before the shock of cold seawater, the best thing about Seaforth was its sand. You could make perfect, five-finger impressions of your hand or your rounded tummy in its sparkling skin. It even tasted pleasantly gritty.

‘No, Louise!’ Ma scrambled to unload my fist.

At the high-tide mark, the sand gave way to a crust of shells. When no one was watching, I’d hide one in my pocket and press it to my ear in the night to bring back the rush of the waves.

It took twenty minutes to walk to the beach on my father’s shoulders from the family cottage on Ricketts Terrace. ‘Careful, that child!’ Ma shouted, as I craned dangerously around to watch her panting in Pa’s wake. Motor cars were only for rich white folk who drove from Cape Town to gawk at our views. Everyone else walked – whether it was to the beach, or the dockyard where Pa worked, or up through the proteas and *kek-kekking* guinea fowl to admire False Bay, christened by indignant seamen who mistook it for Table Bay at the northern end of our peninsula. It was a happy fact that if you visited the Cape you were never far

from the mountains or the sea – even if you couldn't quite identify your whereabouts. And it didn't matter if you were rich or poor, they swelled your heart with a bursting pride. The mountains even put up with the white-painted towns that spread up their slopes or pressed against the shore with tarmac fingers. We lived in one such town close to the spiny tip of the peninsula. Keep going south, Pa would bellow cheerily, and say hello to Antarctica.

'Who is our town named after?' my first-grade teacher used to ask.

'Simon van der Stel!' we chanted, rolling our eyes at the obvious answer. Who in the world wouldn't know that? 'The first governor of the Cape.'

When I woke up in the mornings, instead of running into Ma and Pa's bedroom and worming into bed with them for a cuddle, I'd climb onto the table by the window in our cramped sitting room to make sure the sea was where it had been the day before and hadn't been stolen from me in the night. After all, the water rose and fell, and sometimes drowned the sand completely, or pounded against the rocks and frightened the boys out of their bellyflops. Wind – that livelier version of the breath that passed between my lips – seemed to be responsible for a lot of this erratic behaviour. It whipped the swells into towering crests and drove salt spray into your eyes to make them sting. When the sea and the wind joined forces like this, it was time to bolt the door of the cottage and wait it out.

'My pa is in it,' Piet Philander whispered with a mixture of pride and fear, as we stood with our noses pressed against the windowpane and watched the palm trees

bending in half and willed his father's fishing boat back to shore. Even though Simon's Bay – our scoop of False Bay – was protected by mountains and should have been calmer, everyone knew fishermen who'd died on the water. Piet's grandfather was one, taken by waves that pounced out of nowhere like the silent leopards that hunted on the Simonsberg peak above our terrace and kept me awake at night with the imagining.

'You can stay with us if—'

I took Piet's hand, feeling the hard skin of his palm. Piet helped his father with the nets. If you've never fished, you won't know that when wet rope runs through your hand it tears the flesh like a serrated knife through a peach. Eventually, the skin learns its lesson and mends itself into a tough, scarred shell. Fishing was in the Philander family, but sometimes I felt that Piet hated fish as much as I loved the sea.

The boats that steamed in and out of the Royal Navy dockyard were much sturdier than the Philander fishing boat, and better able to cope with the Cape storms. When I was older and more sensible, Pa explained that the navy boats were warships and their job was to defend the choppy sea route around Africa from something he ominously called 'foreign powers'. This necessary exertion ensured that Simon's Town was a thriving port, with the navy at the pinnacle and the rest of us serving in layers below. Pa's steady job meant that we sat about halfway down this pyramid, below the professional navy but above the poor black labourers who lived in shacks across the mountain and couldn't read or write like we could. And we were

especially lucky, Pa used to say, wagging a finger at me and Ma as we sat at the kitchen table. Brown mechanics such as him earned far more working for the even-handed British than for mean employers in the world beyond Simon's Town. Out there – Pa flapped his arm dismissively at the rest of South Africa – they take off a discount for colour.

I admired the navy for a deeper reason than money or fairness, a reason connected to the surging tides and to Piet's grandpa's fate. Whatever the weather, the navy's warships managed to stay upright. They didn't flounder or sink, or casually fling men off their decks. Instead, they cut through the waves with dash, immune as arrows. And, as an afterthought, left behind a wake of filmy bubbles far more ordered than those tossed from the waves at Seaforth Beach.