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## **A FLIGHT DELAYED**

by KC Lemmer

*Placed SECOND in the 2009 Rose & Crown New Novels Competition*

### EXCERPT

This excerpt contains the first chapter only, in its original form, exactly as entered for the competition other than slight formatting changes. This excerpt is provided for your own personal perusal. No part of it may be copied, changed or utilised in any way whatsoever.

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## Chapter 1

She presided over the fireplace in death, just as she had presided over whatever room she had occupied in her life. The fact that she was incapable of speaking did little to lighten their despondent hearts. Even in the dim light, Amanda could see her sister's shoulders slumped forward wearily.

Great Aunt Marie had that effect on all those who had been in her company for longer than an hour.

The lone light in the room came from the fine china lamp on the mantelpiece. It illuminated the green alabaster jar in an eerie way, especially as the shadow of the alabaster jar fell across the portrait behind it, Aunt Marie's portrait. The whole effect was sinister.

"Just like Aunt Marie," Amanda shuddered, rubbing her upper arms briskly to rid herself of the sudden chill. She glanced over at the still Polly, pale with dark rings under her eyes. Polly wasn't handling this well, or was it the pregnancy? Aunt Marie and a pregnancy were a super-bad combination, Amanda thought, pitying her sister's misfortunes.

"So what are we going to do?" she asked, moving slowly over to the window. It was such a clear day that the Ochils looked like they were just minutes away, rather than all the way across the Firth of Forth. On a day like today Amanda would have happily driven across the bridge and gone jogging up one of the mountain paths.

She turned back to the dim room. All she could see was a dark huddle in the chair until her eyes adjusted to the lighting. As Polly stood, she could make out the familiar pointy chin, fluffy pink slippers, and bulging stomach. It was impossible to know what was going through her crazy sister's mind as she crossed over to the mantle-piece and touched the alabaster jar gingerly.

The protruding stomach turned to face her, changing the distorted shape into a slim one. From this angle, one might never know Polly was almost eight months pregnant. It was amazing how shadows and angle could hide the truth. Once again, Amanda gratefully thanked her lucky stars that she wasn't the pregnant one. Poor Polly really was unfortunate. She frowned as she watched her sister gently rub the round bulge, once again her focus on the Aunt Marie's ashes. Polly did not seem overly perturbed by her situation though, not like she was.

"Different responses for different people," Amanda muttered, flopping into the rocking chair that her sister had just vacated. It was still warm.

"What choice do we have?" Polly tapped the jar.

Was she checking to see that Aunt Marie really was dead?

"Great Aunt Marie was a tough nut, Pol, but I think she is well and truly dead,"

Amanda remarked dryly. "We no longer have to live under her wrath and dictatorship. We are well and truly free."

"Oh Mandy," Polly scolded with a shaky laugh, "she wasn't all that bad."

"Says you," Amanda exclaimed. "You never had her stalking you at every possible chance to start up an argument. She could never pass up an opportunity to begin some hullabaloo with me!"

Polly did not argue. She smiled sweetly and tapped the jar with a little more confidence, “Well, it doesn’t change the fact that we have to come to some decision about what to do with her. It’s a pity Dad and Mum weren’t here to sort this out.”

Rolling her eyes, Amanda bit back her sharp retort. She wouldn’t upset Polly further, not tonight.

“Well, they’re not and that’s all there is to it.” The words still came out in a snap.

Sighing, Amanda pushed out of the chair and paced restlessly to the window again. The little lamp made Aunt Marie too much of a focus. Growing more and more angry, Amanda crossed the room and with an open hand slapped the main light switch on. The room was flooded with sweet light; the little lamps light just a dim glow now.

Glaring at the jar, she shook a finger at Polly in warning, “This won’t be the last request from Aunt Marie; there is always something more when it comes to her!”

Polly began to shake her head in defence of Aunt Marie, but stopped as she met Amanda’s quelling gaze. The two sisters stared at each other, green eyes sharp as they bored down into the softer blue ones. They had the same curling black hair and big eyes, but after that the similarities ended.

Polly was slightly shorter than Amanda, and more rounded thanks to the pregnancy. Amanda, at five foot seven, was her senior by two years. Some of the older church folks said Amanda took after her father and Polly after their mother, but what would she know of that?

Polly was gentle and thought too well of people. It was just as well she had had a big sister who tended to become more cynical than anything else when in doubt. There were countless memories of times when she had stood up for Polly, defended Polly, and protected Polly. She had had to be tough. They all had had to, what with Dad and Mom never at home. And as far as Amanda was concerned, those two years between their ages had made all the difference in the shaping of their characters. Polly friendly and warm, Amanda reserved and

suspicious. Polly positive and enthusiastic, Amanda driven and independent. And here they were, once again, the two of them trying to make decisions that should never have been their responsibility. And, once again, Polly was looking to her for leadership.

Heart heavy, Amanda rubbed her right cheekbone. If she had her way she would smash the jar out in the backyard, or toss it over some cliff. Maybe a holiday to the white cliffs of Dover would be the perfect spot to toss the jar? What a joy that experience would be! If nothing else, at least some of her own tension would be released.

Scrutinising the tired features before her, Amanda bitterly pushed aside thoughts of her parents. They hadn't been around physically in times of need, and she certainly wasn't going to let them occupy any space in her mind either. It was her time to make the call of what to do. She tried to be gentle as she said, "Polly, there is no way we can get Aunt Marie's ashes back to Africa. It is an impossible request, and she knew it was too, the old crone."

Polly said nothing, her eyes on the red patterns on the carpet.

"It's true!" Amanda insisted, striding back to the window to glare out at the frosted grass. "The woman won't let us rest and get on with our lives. She planned this to rile us all up." An image of Polly's peaceful eyes sprang into mind. Giving a half-hearted laugh, Amanda corrected herself, "To rile me up rather."

The bird tray under the spruce tree had one lone pigeon on it. There wasn't room for any others judging by the size of the fat bird. Greedy thing.

A door banged just then, and the quick step in the hallway caused both women to turn just as a slim man, just an inch taller than Amanda, pushed open the lounge door and grinned at them both.

"Hello, hello ladies," his lively eyes were warm as he bent to give Polly a quick kiss. "You're both looking very subdued," he glanced over at Amanda, noting her fire in her eyes. "Or perhaps subdued isn't the best word to use."

“We are a little put out,” Polly admitted, leaning against him for support.

“Put out!” Amanda exploded. “I am *more* than put out,” she turned on Sam. “Tell me that you agree this is a ridiculous request. Great Aunt Marie wants her ashes taken back to Africa. For goodness sake, the woman was only there for the first three years of her life. And what’s more, she had the nerve to go as far as to quote some Scripture about Joseph asking for his bones to be taken back to Israel when the people of Israel returned there from Egypt.”

Sam’s face twitched, and then, unable to hold it in, he chuckled. He got a firm warming nudge in his ribs for it.

“I’m sorry,” his smile broadened, “but look at it from my point of view. Aunt Marie up to her usual pranks of riling up Amanda, and see how she can always do it. Why, Amanda is fairly bursting...”

“Sam!” Polly hissed. “Hush up,” she glanced cautiously at the scorching eyes of her sister and tried to be diplomatic. “I’m sure we can work this out sensibly.”

“Well, we’re going to have to contact the parents again, and Ruth and Cobs,” Amanda chose to ignore Sam’s comments for Polly’s sake. “We’ll then decide who will do the honours of going on this random trip for the old coot, if any of us goes at all.”

“Amanda!” Polly was horrified, and glared at her husband when another chuckled erupted up, “there’s no need to be so disrespectful.” She could see Amanda’s lips twisted scornfully, but decided that whatever she was thinking could be thought unsaid. “I’ll get in touch with the family and tell them about the letter, and then we will calmly come to a decision, alright?” Hands on her expanding waist, Polly dared Amanda to argue.

Shrugging, Amanda muttered, “It’s your grave.”

Ramming the car keys into the ignition five minutes later, Amanda laughed bitterly, “Poor little Polly. Beats me how you’re going to find Ruth or Cob’s address, never mind get hold of the parents!” She twisted the key and felt the car shudder and then splutter into life.

Shaking her black curls, Amanda reached for the black gloves on the passenger seat and absently pulled them on, her thoughts clouded with Great Aunt Marie's request. She just knew what was going to happen.

Ruth and Cob would both have some *very* valid excuse why they were not the right choice for Aunt Marie's mission, and Polly couldn't go, what with her being so near delivering her baby. No one wanted their smooth little lives to be disrupted by one difficult old woman's request.

"Maybe we can just post them and pay someone to bury them somewhere," Amanda mused, smiling thinly, "that'd get you hopping, Aunt Marie. Tit for tat. Or even better, let's just wait for Polly's children to grow up and we'll pass your message on to them. How about that? After all, it was generations later when Joseph's bones were finally carried to his homeland. Yip, I do know the story of Joseph, Aunt Marie, so if you thought I didn't – ha!" Amanda didn't add that she had read it up the moment she got Polly's phone call. Her shoulder's sagged as the fight slowly slid out of her. Clutching the steering wheel, Amanda laid her forehead against its cold leather and groaned.

"Oh God, why did this have to happen? You know that it will be me that has to go. Everyone thinks: 'Single Amanda with the good-natured boss who she can wrap around her finger, she'll be available.' Please God, I *really* don't want to go trekking across to some random African country. I have my job to do, deadlines to meet, and a career to think about. I'm happy!"

Leaning back against the headrest, Amanda listened to the now smooth purr of the engine. Sighing heavily, she released the handbrake and pulled onto the road, guiding her car passed the neat family residential area of her sister's street. A neighbour waved as she pulled some shopping bags out of the boot of her car. Flashing up a hand in response, Amanda glanced down at the Bible and the thick green folder on the passenger seat. It was five-fifteen.

There was at least half an hour to run into the office before evening church. “And no Aunt Marie to whip me afterwards.” Some of the heaviness lifted at that thought.

“It’s just a pity the office is right next door to the church,” Amanda muttered, and felt faintly uncomfortable as she heard her thoughts. “Well, it *is* a little awkward if anyone sees me going into the office on a Sunday,” she argued, “even though this is crucial work that needs to be done.”

When she reached Almond Avenue, Amanda hesitated at the intersection, and then steered the Fiesta into the back parking of the church, silently explaining that there was more room at the back of the church which would make more parking spaces for the elderly at the front. It would be much easier for them to go into the church from the front entrance.

A quick glance around showed the car park was deserted. Grabbing her office keys from the cubbyhole, Amanda picked up the green folder and slid cautiously out of her car, glad for the wintry darkness of the evening. The street lights gave a pretty orange glow that created a cosy effect rather than an exposing light as in some more suspect districts.

Head held high, Amanda hopped the stairs up to the office block two at a time and punched in the door code to the office. Just half an hour of work in the office would relieve some of the pressure of work tomorrow.

“Amanda?”

Amanda silently groaned and shifted the phone to her other ear. Forcing a brightness into her voice she answered, “Polly, is that you? What’s up?”

“I never saw you at church. I thought you were coming tonight?”

The disappointment in her sister’s voice made Amanda feel like a convicted sinner. “Oh Pol,” Amanda wriggled in her seat uncomfortably, “I did mean to come, I just got caught up,”

her gaze flicked over the neat piles of paper, the desk lamp pointed onto the single sheet in front of her, and the black lap top pushed over to the right of the paper.

Trying to sound open and interested she asked, “How was church? What was the sermon on?” She immediately regretted the questions the moment they were out her mouth.

“I was a wee bit distracted,” she heard Polly admit.

Amanda fidgeted while she waited for Polly to ask Sam what the sermon had been on. She heard his deep rumbled answer of ‘Jonah.’ Just great! “Lord, this better not be You talking to me. This is not the same as Jonah’s situation. Great Aunt Marie’s ashes have nothing to do with warning a city of Your anger and impending destruction.”

“Amanda, are you still there?”

Clearing her throat, Amanda nodded, before realising Polly wouldn’t see her response, “Yeah, I’m here.”

“Look, I managed to speak to Ruth, but I couldn’t track down Cobs.”

“No surprise there,” Amanda muttered under her breath.

“Ruth is committed to her school until July holidays, but she said she really wants to be involved so she’s willing to pay for the flight.”

Amanda rolled her eyes. Ruth couldn’t care two pence about Aunt Marie and her ashes and who went except to clear her conscience and feel she was doing something. And Polly was swallowing the story hook, line and sinker.

“Good news. I also got through to Dad. They agree we need to honour Aunt Marie’s request.”

Amanda’s heart sunk at her sister’s soft words. It was all very well for Dad to say that. He was way too far away to have to worry about it.

Scooting the lap top over, Amanda opened up a Spider Solitaire game. There was no way she was going to disrupt the smooth flow of her research work for even a few days. There would be jet lag, lost time . . .

“So I’ve tentatively booked the first available flight.”

What! Amanda froze, her knuckles whitening around the phone.

“Look Polly, that’s out of the que- . . .” her sister’s words sank in, effectively squashing her response.

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Amanda gulped nervously. She just couldn’t go instead of Polly. Hand pressed over her mouth, Amanda closed her eyes – waiting.

“Sam’s agreed,” Polly’s voice was small, small and scared. “I’m leaving the day after tomorrow, on Tuesday.”

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“Amanda McCree!” The triumphant bellow had Amanda clinging to a lamp post in fright.

A diminutive figure emerged from the shadows of Amanda’s car, her cane knocking against the sidewalk as she approached Amanda.

“Mrs May,” Amanda gasped, squinting through the darkness as she recognised the familiar shape.

“That’s right, Hen,” the little woman reached up and caught Amanda’s jaw firmly in her small wrinkled hand. “When I saw your car and the light on up in your office I just knew you were bunking church.”

Flushing, Amanda tried not to shift under the scrutinising gaze of her former teacher. She opened her mouth with some excuse but was instantly shut down.

“Don’t argue with me, we both know who always won the war in the end,” Mrs May clucked her tongue, as though the memories were fond ones. Amanda could only remember nightmarish fights with this strong-willed biology teacher who refused to budge one way or another. She had dreaded Biology lessons, which was probably why she had been more difficult than usual in them. The fact that Mrs May and Great Aunt Marie had been great pals had not helped raise Amanda’s regard for the woman.

Amanda backed out of the firm grip and circled around the woman cautiously to her car. “What are you doing out so late?” she queried, unlocking the back seat of her car to lay down the green folder which was now joined by a matching blue folder; her current research on children suffering from depression. The fact that Mrs May was stalking around in the dark near her car waiting for her was possibly worse than a car-jacker hiding behind her car, Amanda thought, slamming the door shut.

She turned back to the little eyes and sagging cheeks, wearily wondering what this persistent woman wanted this time. She had long since wondered if Aunt Marie and Mrs May were part of some gang whose goal was to oppress her with their opinions and concerns; usually spiritual matters.

“I just wanted to give you this,” Mrs May peered up at Amanda, leaning heavily on her cane as she held out a slim white envelope. “Open this when you have time.”

Insides churning, Amanda suspiciously accepted the letter.

“God will get you, my lassie,” Mrs May reached up in a loving gesture to touch Amanda’s cheek. Amanda jerked back before she realised what she was doing. The hurt that filled Mrs May’s eyes was awful to see.

“Mrs May,” Amanda was horrified at her own response, “I – I’m so sorry. I don’t know . . .” she stared at the pile of grey curls below her, trying to find something to say – anything to say that might explain her appalling response.

“It’s alright Amanda,” Mrs May shook her head, and then glanced up. Her eyes were watery.

“You are in my prayers, Amanda” she hesitated, as though suddenly unsure what to say, and then catching Amanda’s hand briefly she whispered, voice breaking, “I truly care about what happens to you.”

Hugely disturbed, Amanda watched the little frame shuffle along the dark car park and head up the lane behind the church. She watched until Mrs May was out of sight, and then slid slowly into the driver’s seat. Out of the corner of her eyes she could see her still zipped up Bible lying where she had left it.

“Ha – loo! Anyone home?” Amanda called, hanging up her coat in the coat cupboard under the stairs.

“In here Mandy.”

Amanda smiled as she followed the sing-song call into the lounge. “What are you up to Angie?” she asked, smiling as she rounded the corner, “I know that tone.” Her two flatmates were perched on the same in front of the flat screen computer, both turned to grin guiltily at her.

“You should come and check this out,” dark-haired Angie grinned at Amanda as she stood up. Brown eyes dancing she leant in to say, “There are some *cute* characters here, and some real duffers too!” Angie winked at Amanda before heading into the kitchen. A moment later the sound of a boiling kettle was heard. They must have just made some tea.

Pulling a face, Amanda perched on the vacant half of the seat, “What is it Sal?” she asked, studying the screen curiously. The webpage was an unfamiliar one, and at present it only showed some random bloke’s face. There was nothing particular striking or abnormal about him.

Sally shot Amanda a laughing glance, “Angie was searching for some info and spotted this webpage, I heard her laughing like crazy and came to find out what was going on,” Sally explained, clicking on the ‘back arrow’ at the top of the screen. A string of male faces slid down the screen.

“Pick your hubby,” Angie burst back into the room, sloshing dark liquid out of the mug she was carrying, as she waved her hand in a flourish at the screen. “Here you are,” she thrust the lime green mug out at Amanda and pulled up another chair, tucking her knees up against her chest. “It’s crazy,” her eyes sparkled with excited laughter.

Amanda raised a curious brow, and lifted her mug to breathe in the beautiful aroma of the coffee. Nescafe, her favourite. Just the smell of the steamy liquid soothed her fraying edges.

“It sounds like those mail order brides from the olden days that you read about,” she observed, tentatively dipping a finger into the black depth of the cup, testing to see if it would scald her.

Uttering a sharp whimper, she quickly popped her finger into her mouth to cool it down.

“Some of these guys look do - dgeee!” Angie exclaimed, pushing back her chaotic rump of curls. “There should be rules to this thing.”

“But some look very sincere,” Sally’s gentle voice tried to bring in some fairness, rubbing her slightly turned up nose thoughtfully. She reminded Amanda of Polly in many ways. Sally never wanted anyone to hurt. She’d rather be put out of her way than cause anyone else to be.

Unperturbed, Angie rattled on, grabbing Amanda’s arm dramatically, “And all of them want a Christian bride,” lively eyes sparkled at Amanda. “Our game is to work out which ones are genuine and which ones are just playing around.”

Amanda grinned, warming up to the fun as she listened to her friends playfully debate the cause of the men who had put up their profiles for grabs. She took a quick sip of her coffee and leant forward, “Okay, which is our first candidate?”

Sally’s rounded cheeks dimpled into an impish grin, “How about that one with the bushy sideburns?”

Angie nodded eagerly, her animated features lighting up, “Alright Amanda, we couldn’t decide on this one. Sally says he’s genuine, and I say he is stalker-potential. It’s up to you to make the final call.”

“Whoa!” Amanda clutched Angie’s shoulder, “*move on!*”

Three hours and three coffees later, Amanda was fully into the swing of the new game.

Laughing, Sally clicked on to the next profile.

“Well, look-ee here,” Amanda grinned, studying the angular features of the next profile, “what’s his claim to fame?”

Angie leant in, “He’s quite a looker,” she winked at Sally who also leant in for a better look. Nodding, she nudged Amanda.

Amanda obediently studied the man’s features. She couldn’t tell what colour his eyes were, maybe brown. But his thick brown hair, clear cut features and smiling mouth were quite attractive. His profile read that he was six foot two, twenty-eight years old, and a trainee doctor. “A man devoted to doing God’s will,” Amanda silently read the single description of the man’s character. She glanced back at his face, noting the clear eyes with approval. Angie was right; there was something quite appealing about this one.

“Well?” Angie ribbed her.

“Not bad,” Amanda admitted, leaning back against the chair, hands cupped around her cooling mug. “It doesn’t say much about him though, does it? Not even a description of the kind of woman he is hoping to meet or anything.”

Sally nodded, “Yeah, not much here. It just says his name is Caleb. And his home is Africa,” she lifted a curious brow at Angie and then Amanda. “Now that is a very general description. It’s almost as though he doesn’t want to be found.”

“So you’re saying he’s shy,” Angie accused, turning back to the man’s profile, “I don’t know about that. He looks very confident; I wouldn’t have said shyness was an issue with him.”

Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, Amanda gazed into her mug. For some reason she did not feel right about verbally dissecting this man. “Anyone want another cup?” she offered, afraid she’d be asked for her opinion if she didn’t say something quick.

Angie glanced up at the clock on the wall and grimaced, “I’d love another but its 3am. If I don’t get some sleep I’ll be dysfunctional tomorrow.”

“You already are dysfunctional,” Amanda remarked dryly.

“A ha-ha,” Angie playfully punched Amanda’s arm. They both waited while Sally logged off the computer.

“You must have got home about twelve,” Angie said casually, studying the clock again. “What took you so long?”

Amanda gathered up the empty mugs, depositing the apple cores all into one mug, “I got nabbed by Mrs May,” she wrinkled her nose at Angie. “She was skulking around my car when I came out of work just after eleven-thirty.”

“Mrs May,” Angie sighed dramatically. “When I left school I thought the days of Mrs May were over.”

“It sounds to me like the days of Mrs May are never over,” Sally turned to smile at the two of them. “I’m just sorry I haven’t got to meet this infamous Mrs May yet.”

“She has already cast a spell over you,” Angie growled deeply. “She must have for you to have uttered such a wish.”

For once Amanda was unable to join in the usual mockery of Mrs May. Her response to Mrs May had unnerved her, embarrassed her. It was a topic that was too sensitive tonight. But at least Angie felt the same way about the woman. Angie had had almost as many head-on encounters with Mrs May as she had had.

When the last dripping mug was placed on the drying rack, the three friends gathered up scattered belongings and trekked up the stairs, Sally bringing up the rear switching off the lights as she went.

Lying in bed, Amanda ran through the events of the day before deciding that any further contemplation of either Mrs May or Aunt Marie would have far from healthy consequences.

The last awake thought she had as she drifted off to sleep was Mrs May handing her the brown envelope.

“Rise and shine Amanda!” The door flung open and Angie erupted into the room and plonked something down on the bedside table.

“Hmm,” Amanda stretched and covered a yawn, reluctantly peeking one eyes open to squint and the dark shape looming over her. She heard Angie groping for the lamp switch.

“No, not the desk lamp,” Amanda squawked, trying to block Angie’s hand. Too late, the focused light splashed right down into her eyes.

“Too bright! Too bright!”

“It’s already 7.30 lazy bones. We both know how your boss would respond if you arrive late,” Angie warned severely.

Amanda giggled softly, her eyes still closed, “You’re just jealous that he couldn’t care less if I was there at seven or eleven.” She peeked open an eye, “Is that coffee I smell?” The lime green mug with the daffodil was sitting beside her bed, steam rising out of it. “Hmm – thanks. You’re a pal,” Amanda whispered, licking her dry lips as she leant on an elbow and sipped at the drink.

“Sure thing,” Angie made no move to go, but instead sat down on the edge of the bed.

Amanda hid a smile in her mug as she watched her friend try and tuck a wayward curl back into the main body of hair which was pulled back into a pretty pile.

“There’s some clips in my top draw,” Amanda offered. She waited well Angie fixed her hair, knowing that Angie had something on her mind. Sure enough, the moment the clip was firmly in place Angie turned knowing eyes on her.

“Now we’ve known each other since the day you beat me up in the school gym,” Angie folded her lean hands onto her lap.

Amanda felt her chest squeeze up in concern as she saw the veins in her friend’s hands so clearly today. Was it her imagination or were Angie’s cheekbones more pronounced than before? And were eyes looking larger against her narrowing face?

“And I know something’s up,” Angie shook a finger at Amanda.

Smiling, Amanda cut in smoothly, knowing Angie’s familiar pep talk off by heart, “And you don’t need to be Mrs May to work out I’m a sinner.”

“Quite right, I couldn’t agree with you more. You took the words right out of my mouth,” Angie smiled; she arched a shaped brow, “Well?”

“You’re right,” Amanda nodded, trying to observe her friend discreetly. She could see the dark marks under Angie’s eyes, and the usual spark in the dancing brown eyes had definitely grown dimmer in the recent months. If only Angie would talk to her about this thing! It was destroying her. Couldn’t two bear the load better than one?

As though reading her thoughts, Angie turned away to stare at a poster on the wall; a map of Scotland. There was a red drawing pin on South Queensferry to mark their flat.

Unwilling to start a rumpus right now, Amanda gulped down her fears about Angie. Clutching her mug close, she tried to arrange her thoughts. The bed creaked as Angie shifted her position. Downstairs Amanda could hear the sound of the broom knocking against cupboard doors. The dirty kitchen floor must have finally got to Sally.

“It’s Aunt Marie.”

Judging by the enlightened look on Angie’s face, Amanda guessed she would not have had to say much more for Angie to have understood what she was feeling. But she explained anyway, “Polly was sorting through Aunt Marie’s stuff yesterday and found a letter that Aunt Marie had written requesting her ashes be taken back to Africa when she dies. She specifically requested that *I* would take them,” Amanda wrinkled her nose at Angie, not offended by the grin that briefly touched her friend’s face.

“Oh Mandy,” Angie reached out a sympathetic hand which Amanda gratefully took. “She always did have it in for you.”

“I don’t want to go Ang,” Amanda pleaded, tears so suddenly filling her eyes that Amanda was taken aback by the depth of her conviction. “Aunt Marie *did* always have something in for me, but not so much for the others. She always was ordering me to do something or other. And now another task from the dead,” she squeezed Angie’s hand. “How many more letters will we find stashed away somewhere?” The tears flowed in earnest now.

“Oh Mandy,” Angie said again, scooting over to wrap a comforting arm around her friend.

“I’m just so tired,” Amanda whispered, “and this is just another thing adding on to everything else. There’s the family disunity, the busyness of work, the Mrs May’s of this

world,” she tacked on, and laughed brokenly through her tears, silently adding, “And I’m worried about you Angie.”

“And you also afraid to go to Africa,” Angie said perceptively.

Amanda felt a jolt inside of her at Angie’s remark. It took her a moment to respond before nodding, marvelling at how well her friend knew her.

“Yeah, I am scared to go. Africa seems such a – a wild place. I’ve heard statistics of the crime rate in South Africa. It’s horrific. I feel like I’ve been handed a suicidal mission,” her voice faded away.

Angie waited a moment before saying, “And Africa stole your parents, huh?”

The hardening inside of Amanda was answer enough. She didn’t deny Angie’s pointed question. “Aunt Marie was born in South Africa. In Cape Town to be exact,” Amanda skirted Angie’s question. She traced the Winnie-the-Pooh picture on her duvet cover miserably. “It’s apparently a pretty city,” she added, unconvinced, “so it could be okay?” Amanda talked on, disheartened, “Polly says she’ll go.” Silence again, broken only by the sound of the shower running. Sally must be running late today.

At last Angie asked, “So what are you going to do then?”

Heart trembling, Amanda’s eyes met her friend’s, tears trickling miserably down her cheeks, “I guess I go.”

After the other two had left for work, Amanda pulled on her green caterpillar slippers and padded down the stairs to the kitchen. It sparkled with cleanliness. Slipping her mug into the soapy water in the sink, Amanda dug out a cereal box and some yogurt and then went in search of her cell phone.

“Please help,” she breathed, wondering just who she was talking to as she punched in her boss’s number.

“Hi Doug, this is Amanda here,” she nodded, listening, “Yes, I stopped in yesterday evening, it seemed a good time to do some catching up. No that’s alright; I definitely will be in today because I want to carry on with my research on the area of child depression in girls under twelve.”

Angie would be bristling mad to know Doug had offered her a day off. He thought she worked too hard. “Doug, I’m – uh, I’m phoning because my Aunt Marie has asked if her ashes could be taken to South Africa,” she gave an embarrassed laugh. “Yeah, Cape Town.”

Amanda’s eyes widened with horror as she listened to her boss’s response. Pushing the cell phone away from her ear, she stared at it a moment, Doug’s voice still gurgling on. Cautiously, she raised it back to her ear and her eyes fluttered closed as Doug spoke on.

This was absolutely crazy! She knew her boss was relaxed, but this was *outrageous!*

“Do you think such an idea is valid, Doug? I mean, there will be cultural differences that could hide the symptoms we are used to. Perhaps they don’t even get the same psychotic disorders there.” Shaking her head, Amanda gritted her teeth, “This is a bad idea. I need to be in the office.” She hesitated, searching for an escape route. Why didn’t Doug just tell her she had a project to finish and a trip away was out of the question?

“Yes, I have a paper and pen here,” she heard her dull response as she picked up the black ball point pen from beside the kettle. “Psychotic disorders. Stresses. Symptoms. Treatments,” she scribbled down the words as she repeated Doug’s suggestions. Drawing an arrow off the words, she added a note, “Research social and cultural factors, environmental influences, and any other relevant factors that contribute.” She fiddled with the pen, wondering how to stop the excited flow of ideas that was pouring down the phone.

“When do I leave?” she repeated stupidly. “Wait a moment. Just hold on there. I understand that this could be an interesting research line but I just don’t think this is a good idea, Boss. Well yes, but. . .”

Gulping, Amanda tried to get some grasp on this fast unravelling situation, “No, you don’t need to sponsor the trip. Why not?” she stared at her distorted face in the silver of the kettle, black tresses spilling over her shoulders, green eyes wide with worry, her slender jaw taunt. Her usually pert nose looked bulbous in the reflection. “Well, because my sister Ruth has the ticket covered. But . . .”

Despite all her efforts to get a word in that would clear up this awful misunderstanding, Amanda found herself listening to dial tone two minutes later, in the possession of pocket money and research funding, and her unspoken arguments still sitting on her tongue waiting to be said. The smooth calm voice of Doug was still ringing in her ears.

“This was not meant to go this way,” Amanda glared at her reflection, and then up at the clock. Groaning, she cupped her head into her hands, “God, this is not working out right! What have I done to deserve this punishment?” There was no booming answer in reply, although she hadn’t really expected any. Sighing, Amanda looked back up at the brown teapot clock again. Eight-thirty.

“Eight-thirty Monday morning and I’m getting shipped off to Africa in less than forty-eight hours. What a nightmare! This is when I’d trade Doug for Angie’s boss any day.”

Shuffling into the lounge, Amanda fumbled for her work bag, “Add an extra dimension to my research,” she muttered, mimicking Doug, “Yeah right Doug, you’re just an opportunist.” For a brief moment the thought that Doug was trying to get rid of her flashed through her mind, but just as quickly flicked back out. She knew she was a valued employee and did more than her share of her work. Perhaps this really was a great opportunity?

“But why me?” Amanda stuffed the green and blue folders into her bag. “Research child depression in Africa,” she breathed, and her hands stilled. “Research it? That means weeks of sitting out there, not just days. No, no, no,” she wailed, “no! God, what is going on?”

Flopping down in front of the television, Amanda absently picked up the television remote and flicked through the channels hoping to find some distraction from the turmoil inside. She paused on the news channel to check the weather. The frosted UK map switched onto news headlines, displaying the latest upheaval in Kenya? Amanda shuddered, how far away was Kenya from South Africa?

“I’ll book a fixed return flight for one month,” Amanda leapt to her feet, “and no one will convince me otherwise!”

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“Excuse me lady, you’re blocking the way.”

“Oh – sorry,” Amanda hoisted up her bag and staggered over to the right of the exit to let a barrel-chested man past. He glared over his bristly moustache at her as he passed, his brown coat swaying behind him.

The airport was hectic. The security check she had just come through had long strings of people crammed into roped rows. Fumbling for her passport in her jacket pocket, a couple of coins were knocked out and rolled across the white floor. Amanda scampered after them and just as she was bending to pick them up, a passer-by elbowed her in the head by mistake. She heard a vague apology but they were already scuttling away by the time she had picked up the coins and turned to confront them.

A group of five rumbled past, all talking at once with voices turned to top volume. They obliterated the voice of the woman over the airport intercom who was announcing the next flight. A couple of ski bags swung dangerously at Amanda’s head as one of the young men in the group readjusted his hold on them.

Feeling shaky inside, Amanda gathered up her kitbag and slung it over her shoulder, pulling out her body warmer that had got caught up in the bag’s strap. Hopefully her main luggage would arrive with her on the other side. She had heard stories of how luggage was

sometimes never found again after that initial check-in. She wandered along past different departure lounges until she came to the Costa Coffee. It was a small comfort to see the familiar maroon sign of Costa. She was still in Edinburgh, even if she felt as though she could have already been shipped off to Africa.

“A cappuccino please,” she croaked through the tear clog in her throat, digging in her bag for change. She carefully placed the two pounds and ten pence on the counter, taking her time while she tried to control her emotions.

“There you go; your cappuccino.”

Amanda nodded her thanks and scanned the tables for an ideal spot to hide in. The corner table, away from the smiling man who was watching her, looked like the best option. It had families shielding it from any unwanted attention. Sliding into the seat, Amanda slowly stirred the sugar in and then checked her phone. She tapped out a quick message to Angie and then tried to absorb herself in her coffee. Fear bubbled up again the moment her thoughts began to settle. Amanda immediately began to dig restlessly through her kitbag and lighted upon her tickets once again. She must have checked them at least ten times already. She pulled them out the front pocket of her bag and studied them mournfully, rubbing a finger over the seat numbers to memorise them. All of the flights were window seats.

“I wonder why Sam looked so concerned about the second flight,” Amanda mused, scrutinising the ticket in fascination. “Twenty-thirty hours from London Heathrow, arriving at Joshua Nkomo Airport at thirteen zero five hours,” Amanda read, hesitating over the foreign airport name, silently mouthing it to herself again. She flicked over to the third ticket with Zimbabwe Airways printed across the top. The Zimbabwe flag was spread across the top of the ticket, an array of bright colours. This flight took her from Joshua Nkomo airport in Bulawayo, to Johannesburg Airport, leaving at fourteen-thirty hours and arriving in Johannesburg forty-five minutes later.

“And then from there to Cape Town, a two hour flight,” Amanda flipped over to the last out-going ticket, her eyes glazing over. “I wonder if Dad or Mom will remember to come and meet me?” The thought of seeing her parents again made her stomach churn. Was it really only seven years since she had last seen them? It felt so much longer.

“I doubt they will remember,” Amanda tucked the tickets back into her bag and scowled across at the openly gazing man who had a clear view of her table now that one family had moved on.

She gulped down some of her cappuccino, scalding her throat as she did so.

Polly said she had got this flight on a good deal, and that it had also been the only flight plan that was available so soon. Had it really only been three days ago that Polly had found Aunt Marie’s letter?

“Well Aunt Marie, I hope you’re enjoying your free ride,” Amanda smiled grimly at the thought of her Great Aunt tucked amongst her clothes in her hold baggage. She refused to share her flight space with her aunt. If the bag made it to Cape Town, then great, so did Aunt Marie. If the bag didn’t make it, then tough, that was just the way it was. Some poor blighter could decide what to do with Aunt Marie’s ashes.

“This is the second boarding call for Flight 1201 to Heathrow, London,” the announcer’s voice blared out through the speaker phones just as mirage of people scurried past with bags bouncing behind them, wobbling recklessly on tiny wheels. They overtook an elderly man who stopped in his tracks to let them pass. He caught her gaze and gave her a friendly wink, one bushy brow lowering, before moseying on his way.

“Well, here we go God,” Amanda breathed. “Between Aunt Marie and Doug I’m getting shipped off to fight in the trenches. If You’re up to it, I wouldn’t mind some help.”

**END OF EXCERPT**