

WILD PLACES. REAL PEOPLE.
LASTING LOVE.

STAY *with* ME

**Escape to South Africa
Book One**

BARBARA
WILER

Stay with Me

Preview: Chapters 1+2

Escape to South Africa – Book One

Barbara Wiler

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Author's Note

While the characters and events in this novel are fictional, the central premise was inspired by real cases in South Africa in which people discovered they had been fraudulently registered as married. News reports of identity fraud and corruption involving Home Affairs officials helped shape the world of this story. The characters, events, and specific scheme portrayed in this novel are, however, entirely fictional.

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Book Description

She arrives in Cape Town for a two-week vacation. At immigration, she discovers she's married to a man she's never met. Until she proves the records wrong, she can't go home.

Political analyst Lara Hollis is used to solving complicated problems, not becoming one herself. Now her passport is confiscated. Stranded in South Africa, Lara watches the life she built slip out of reach. She is lost in a country she barely knows.

Wildlife photographer Morné Oosthuizen opens Lara's eyes to the South Africa he loves. Amid dramatic coastlines, rugged mountains, and wildlife rescues, he shows her a future she never imagined she'd want.

To Morné, she's never a problem to solve. She's simply a woman worth getting to know. Before long, it becomes impossible to believe they were only meant to pass through each other's lives.

But on paper, Lara still belongs to a man she's never met. A man who'll stop at nothing to protect the life he built on a lie.

To free herself from him, Lara must risk losing Morné.

Chapter 1

The new South African passport had taken six months, three appointments, and enough paperwork to satisfy a small government department. Lara intended to enjoy every advantage it offered.

Already, she was saving time. The queue for South African citizens was a quarter of the length and moving twice as fast as the visitors' line snaking across the arrival hall. After more than twenty hours of traveling, every minute saved felt like a tiny victory. Planning ahead usually paid dividends.

When the passport booklet had finally arrived in the mail, her mother clapped her hands together like Christmas had come early. "At last. You're not only American, but also South African, like me. Embrace it." Lara smiled, or pretended to. Her mother's exuberance had never come naturally to her.

Still, the passport had been a sensible decision. She needed a break after the past few months, and South Africa ticked every box: new scenery, mild spring weather, and a chance to see the country her mother talked about with affection.

Lara shifted her backpack higher on one shoulder, grateful the hardest part of the trip was almost over. A hotel room, a shower, and eight uninterrupted hours of sleep were waiting for her, and tomorrow, her vacation could officially begin.

A toddler in front of her turned around and beamed. She smiled back. The line shuffled forward another couple of steps toward the sign that read *Welcome to Cape Town*.

When her turn came, she opened her navy-blue American passport, then her brand-new green South African one. The spine still gave a faint crack as she unfolded it. She slid both across the counter. The immigration officer scanned the South African passport, then the US one. With furrowed brows, he stared at the screen. Then at her. Then back at the screen.

Maybe the system was slow. Maybe. Lara looked over at the other counters. Everyone else seemed to be breezing through.

"Stay here," the officer said, clipped. He scooped up both of her passports and disappeared.

She blinked. "I—wait, what?" But he was already gone.

Hovering in front of the counter, she tried to look casual. At all the other stands, travelers were breezing through the passport control. A few other immigration officers shot her quick glances. A nearby official was watching her openly, two cleaners paused, hands on their mops. The travelers behind her were whispering, glancing, their eyes flicked from her auburn ponytail to her zipped-up beige jacket and creased jeans.

There had to be an explanation for this. An admin glitch, maybe. It happens all the time. A name mismatch? A damaged passport chip?

She slipped her thumb over the silver ring on her left hand and turned it. Although it was a useless habit, it calmed her. She needed that now. Three times she'd checked the entry requirements before flying, most recently, the week before her departure. She hadn't overlooked anything.

Had she?

What *was* this?

The itch to grab her phone and google *South African airport security holds* was strong, but a laminated sign declared *NO PHONE USE BEYOND THIS POINT*.

She offered a tight smile to the woman behind her. The line shifted to another counter. Now she was *that* person. The one holding up the queue. Behind the glass barriers, the lucky travelers who had passed through were already collecting their luggage.

Worrying without enough information had never solved a problem. Lara inhaled, exhaled. It would be fine. A minor hiccup. As soon as the officer came back, she'd ask a few questions, get a sensible answer, and be on her way.

Finally, the officer returned and waved her toward a small side office.

Not so minor, then?

She followed the officer, her steps not as firm as she'd have liked. Inside the office, another official sat behind a desk. His khaki uniform with *Border Management Authority* stitched onto the pocket and the two stripes on his shoulder flaps suggested authority, as did his steady, assessing gaze through black-rimmed glasses.

Behind him, a wall clock showed the wrong time.

She told herself she'd laugh about this later. Maybe she'd write an email to the consulate about how inefficient the entry process was. She wrote excellent complaint emails.

"Mrs. Lara Zephyra Hollis?"

"It's *Miss*," she corrected automatically.

"Our system shows conflicting information regarding your marital status."

"My what?"

"Your US passport lists you as unmarried. The South African registry shows you as married."

"Which record takes precedence?" she blurted out. *Hold on, that doesn't matter*, she thought. *What he needs to know is*, "But I'm not. Married, I mean."

He nodded once. "Then you understand we need to investigate further. Until cleared, both your passports will be held by the Department of Home Affairs."

"You're confiscating them?"

"Yes, ma'am."

“That’s not—You can’t just—They’re my passports!” Her backpack slid off her lap. Lara didn’t notice.

The officer pushed a paper toward her. “Your receipt confirming temporary seizure.”

“This is absurd.” Since her pulse was now galloping, she closed her eyes for a minute and forced a breath. “Sir, I’m a political analyst. I know databases. You’re putting me on hold because of conflicting data?”

“It’s an irregularity.”

She pressed her lips together, then shook her head. “It must be a synchronization error. A duplicated record. A data mismatch. Fix it. Please. Don’t take my passports.”

The officer regarded her with steady patience. “Ma’am, the system has flagged your identity. The Department must hold your passports until cleared.”

Lara’s left knee bounced. The room felt smaller, the air heavier.

“Since you are a South African citizen,” he continued, “you may enter the country for as long as you want. Work here. Move around freely. But you’re not permitted to leave South Africa until the investigation is complete.”

“How long does that take?”

“A few weeks. We’ll contact you. We have your phone number.”

A hollow laugh escaped her. “A few weeks? I’m flying home in thirteen days. Back to Nashville Tennessee.”

He shrugged. “You’re under a travel ban. You’ll need to change your plans.”

Change her plans. Like rearranging a lunch meeting.

Lara bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to taste metal. No passport meant no flight home in thirteen days. Or anytime later, until they finished their investigation. The official was treating her like a criminal. But arguing was useless here. This was a machine with human skin.

The officer slid the paper closer to her. “This acknowledges receipt of your documents. You’ll be contacted at the phone number you provided.”

She stared at the paper. *Temporary Seizure for Investigation*. Under “Reason,” it read, *Irregularity in Marital Status — Cross-national Database Conflict*. She skimmed the headings first, looking for an appeal process, a contact person, anything useful. Nothing.

Looking up, she said, “I’d like your name, sir.” If this turned into a complaint, details mattered.

The man paused.

“For my records,” she added evenly. “Since you’re keeping everything else.”

He hesitated, then slid his ID badge across the desk. She noted it, making sure of the correct spelling, with controlled, measured taps on her phone. It might come in useful, who knew.

You’re married. You’re under a travel ban. The phrases kept spinning relentlessly once she’d left the little office. Panic surged hot and bright, but she shoved it down. This was fixable. Bureaucratic nonsense. A misunderstanding.

It had to be.

Shell-shocked, she stumbled out of the airport, her suitcase scraping behind her. The sunlight hit like a slap. Somehow, she made it into a taxi and through hotel check-in. No passport meant complications, but at least she had a driver’s license and a receipt of seizure.

Finally, she found herself inside her room, ready to take the next step.

During the taxi ride into town she’d figured out the solution: The US Consulate could issue her an emergency passport, and she’d be on her merry way back to normal life in no time. No endless limbo in South Africa, no confusing bureaucracy. Just a neat little workaround to this absurd mess.

Before she went there, though, she needed to look like someone who deserved to be taken seriously. The bathroom mirror reflected a woman who had clearly been traveling for more than a day. Her normally sleek auburn shoulder-length bob had transformed into something resembling a storm-swept bird’s nest. Instead of their usual

warm hazel-green, her eyes were puffy, dull, and almost slate gray. And her skin, dehydrated from the long flight, was blotchy, creased and exhausted. She looked less like a twenty-eight-year-old and more like someone who had aged twelve years overnight.

Great. She'd come to South Africa to get some distance. From everything. Because she'd looked like this—pale, puffy, hollow-eyed—for too long.

Eight months ago, she'd ended a relationship that had once felt safe. Ethan had been solid, dependable, the kind of man who refilled the coffee tin before it ran out. They had been good together for more than three years, until one morning she woke up and realized that he'd spent the night elsewhere.

"It meant nothing," was what he said afterwards.

To him, maybe. To her, it shattered the illusion she'd built her life around.

The weeks after blurred. She moved into a cubby-hole of an apartment and told everybody she was fine, that *she* ended it. As if that made it easier. Sure, she ended it, but only because he'd made it impossible not to.

When she realized she still wasn't noticing the seasons, she booked a ticket to where nature was waking up again. September meant spring in South Africa. New light, new air. Maybe a version of herself that didn't still look away when she saw somebody adjusting their partner's collar.

She had planned this trip down to the hour. Healing, for her, needed an itinerary. Lara snorted without humor.

In a minute, she'd take a shower. Just after she'd written down her plan like a mantra. She grabbed a notepad and scribbled:

- 1) Call consulate. Tell them you're coming
- 2) Get emergency passport
- 3) Enjoy tour, then fly home, *on the pre-booked date*
- 4) Pretend this never happened

Simple. Direct. No unnecessary drama.

After looking presentable again, she sat at the small desk, pulled up the American Consulate in Cape Town's emergency number from the internet, and dialed.

"Good afternoon, how can I help you?"

"I need an emergency passport so I can travel back home to the US. My name is Lara Zephyra Hollis."

"Would you like to report your passport as stolen, Miss Hollis?" The voice at the other end had a pleasant southern accent. It was calm. Helpful. The kind of voice that belonged to someone who handed out replacement passports daily.

But the question threw her. "Uh, no. It isn't stolen. The South African immigration officers took it from me and said they would hand it over to the Department of Home Affairs."

"So, the authorities confiscated your passport?"

"Yes. But—"

"In this case, Miss Hollis, I won't be able to help you now. Come see us, and we will assess the situation."

Lara sat up straight. "Excellent. I can pop in now. Or tomorrow morning. Anytime, really."

"Please make an appointment. You'll find the link for this on our website. Goodbye and good luck, Miss Hollis."

Lara blinked at her phone. That was it? That was all she got? No reassurance, no emergency procedure, no nothing?

She inhaled sharply through her nose, pulled up the consulate's website, and clicked through to the appointment portal. And couldn't believe her eyes. The next available appointment was in three and a half weeks. One and a half weeks after she was supposed to fly home.

Her eyes stung.

Lara booked it anyway. Then she wrote down the address of the Consulate, pressing hard enough to dent the page. She'd show up tomorrow morning. Appointment or not.

Next problem. The passport would have to wait until tomorrow, but there was an issue she could solve immediately. She needed access to more money. Better to have it and not use it than the other way around.

Deep breath. She dialed her bank's customer service line and stared blankly at the hotel's generic painting of Table Mountain while enduring six minutes of hold music.

Finally, "This is Brenda speaking. How can I assist you today?"

Lara straightened and used her calm voice. "Hi, Brenda. I'd like to raise the limit on my credit card. I'm traveling longer than expected and need more access to funds."

"Certainly, ma'am. We can send you the authorization form right away."

Relief shot through her. "Perfect. You have my email address, right?"

Pause. "I'm afraid we can only send it via postal mail to your registered address."

Lara blinked. "My US address?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She let out a sharp exhale. "I'm currently stuck in South Africa with no passport, no way to leave, and very limited funds. I need this limit raised as soon as possible."

"I understand, ma'am. But for security reasons, we only use postal mail. There are credit considerations involved."

Lara gritted her teeth. "So, email is a security risk, but letting me starve abroad isn't?"

Silence.

She forced a breath in. "Is there any alternative?"

"I can temporarily raise your credit card limit for four days, ma'am."

Lara closed her eyes. Disaster, averted. At least for now.

She'd find the closest ATM now and withdraw as much cash as the daily limit of her temporarily raised credit card limit allowed. Then, she'd do it again tomorrow and the two days after. Having emergency cash with her would make her feel better prepared for whatever the next weeks brought.

By early evening, she sat cross-legged on the hotel bed with her laptop. Her Garden Route tour was prepaid. Accommodation, meals, and transport for the next twelve days. Even though she had no appetite for sightseeing now,

she wasn't going to waste money by skipping the trip. Besides, sitting in a hotel room waiting for the phone to ring wouldn't solve anything.

Her tour started after lunch tomorrow. So she had time to visit the consulate first thing in the morning and apply for an emergency passport.

There was nothing more she could do today. She set her alarm for tomorrow.

Only after the lights were out did the tears come. They slid down her temples, soaking into the pillow. She didn't bother wiping them away.

One question followed her into sleep: Somewhere in a database, beside her name, someone had typed a word she hadn't earned.

Married.

Why?

Chapter 2

Lara stepped off the dusty path, taking a few careful steps toward the rocky outcrop. The view was spectacular. Below, the Indian Ocean stretched endlessly, its waves crashing against jagged cliffs. A few seagulls screeched above, but otherwise, it was quiet. Peaceful.

She needed that. A bit of quiet, after having her life up-ended the day before.

It was the first day of her tour. They had left Cape Town an hour ago. Now the bus stopped at a rest area outside of Gordon's Bay, giving everyone a chance to stretch their legs. Her group was a few hundred yards back, next to the bus, but she had wandered a little farther. Just for a moment of solitude.

Hands on her hips, she let out a slow breath. South Africa was something else. The air smelled like salt and sunbaked earth, and even though her life had been turned upside down, the beauty of this place was undeniable.

She pulled out her phone to snap a photo, but as she lifted it, a rustle sounded behind her. Then, a flash of movement. Before she could react, something yanked at the strap of her backpack. Hard.

Lara stumbled, a startled yelp escaping her lips, and fell flat onto her butt. Sharp pebbles bit into her behind as she was spinning around to understand what had happened. Just in time to see a large baboon lumbering away on all

fours, her backpack clutched in its hairy little hands. Correction: big hand.

“Oh my God—hey!” She lifted her hand. A useless gesture, of course.

The baboon scampered up the rocks, its tail stretched out horizontally, clutching her backpack like a prized treasure. Her *only* bag. The one with all her money, her credit card, her laptop.

“No, no, no—come back!”

She got up and lunged forward, but the baboon only climbed higher, pausing just out of reach to open the zipper. *It knows how to open a zipper.* Then it started rifling through its new possessions.

Her breath came in short gasps. This wasn’t happening. This could *not* be happening.

She spun in place, pulse thudding, searching for the rest of the group. They were out of sight. No one was nearby. No one to step in. And she sure as hell didn’t have a plan for baboon-related theft.

A low chuckle sounded from behind her. She whipped around. A man leaned against a boulder. A tall man, arms crossed, steady as if nothing could rattle him.

Amusement played in the stranger’s sharp blue eyes. Tousled straw-blond hair flopped over them, and a light layer of stubble covered his wide chin. About thirty, maybe, he had the easy confidence of someone who’d stopped trying to impress anyone. His boots were dusty, his khaki shirt rumpled, and he looked like he’d been born to exist in a place like this.

“Ambushed?” he drawled.

Lara gaped at him. “Did you *see* that? He stole my *bag*!” She gestured at the baboon, as if she had to make a point.

He pushed off the rock and stepped closer, eyeing the baboon’s perch. “They like shiny things,” he said. “And food. Anything good in there?”

“Yes! No! I mean—*everything* is in there. My wallet, my laptop. So basically, my whole *life*. But zero food.”

The baboon, as if in response, pulled out a pair of sunglasses, inspected them, then tossed them aside like trash.

She let out a strangled noise. "Oh, come on!"

"Relax. I can get it back." The guy seemed to bite back a grin.

She turned to him, eyes wide. "You can?" He *did* look athletic. And rugged. Those wide shoulders and muscled arms... But would he really stand a chance against that—that *monster* baboon?

"Ja." He crouched, rummaging in his rucksack. Sunlight flashed off a silver ring on his middle finger before his hand disappeared again. "Gotta trade him something better."

"Better than my entire life's contents?"

Without answering, the man pulled out a muesli bar and tore open the wrapper. The scent of raisins filled the air. The baboon's head snapped toward them. Its flat nose twitched.

"That's right, boykie. Look what I've got."

Lara gawked as he put the bar back into his backpack and removed a red bandana. He took a slow step forward, holding out the piece of fabric. The baboon let out a questioning grunt, momentarily torn between his stolen goods and the new object.

Then, with a calculated *whoop*, it sprang down, tossing her backpack aside. The guy dropped the bandana, and the baboon swiped it up, before disappearing into the rocks.

She gasped, sprinted forward to grab her bag and clutched it like a treasure. Whirling around, eyes wide, chest heaving, she asked, "You—*how* did you—?"

The stranger shrugged, slipping his hands into his pockets. "They like to play with colorful objects."

"Why didn't you give him the muesli bar? He seemed to be interested in that."

He shook his head. "Never feed a baboon, or you will sign his death sentence. If they get fed, they become entitled, attack people to try and get food, and then have to be shot. I just opened the wrapper to get his attention."

Lara blinked at him, still catching up. Then, suddenly, she laughed, half of relief, half about the sheer absurdity. "You—are some kind of baboon whisperer."

"Something like that," he chuckled. "Depends on the situation."

She exhaled, brushing windblown hair from her face. "Thank you. Really. I think I might've cried if I lost this. Not might. I would have."

"Would've been a shame." His gaze flicked to her, something unreadable in his expression. "You a tourist?"

She hesitated. "Sort of."

His brow lifted slightly. "Sort of?"

"It's complicated." She chewed her lip, then offered a hand. "Lara."

He took it, his grip warm and firm. "Morné."

They held the handshake a beat too long. She felt a current of heat moving up her arm. Something flickered in his eyes. Interest? Curiosity?

Morné. She'd never heard that name before.

He was a stranger. A helpful, wild-looking, ridiculously attractive stranger.

What are the odds we ever cross paths again? she thought. And wished, just a little, that they weren't so low.

• • •

The way her lips silently shaped his name sent an unexpected flicker of something through Morné.

He felt the warmth of her palm. Her grip was firm but careful, like she wasn't sure if she was supposed to shake hands here. They held the handshake a fraction too long. Shame he had to eventually let go of her hand.

"Well. Thanks for, uh, saving my entire life." Lara shifted her backpack higher on her shoulder.

"Would've been fun to see you try to wrestle it back."

"I was about to." She shot him a look. "If you hadn't shown up, I'd probably be halfway up those rocks by now."

"I don't doubt it." She had spunk, for sure.

She must have been on the tourist bus that lost him the jackal buzzard shot. Minutes earlier, he had his lens focused on the bird, when a minibus rumbled into the rest stop. A swarm of pale tourists spilled out. They were loud and eager, snapping pictures and posing over the cliffs below. The buzzard took one look at the commotion and launched into the sky, disappearing over the ridge.

Morné had let out a slow breath. *Damn noise*. Once he had his gear packed up again, something caught his eye. A woman, standing further down the path, apart from the group. She wasn't posing, wasn't talking. She was just standing there, hands on her hips, gazing out over the ocean. The wind lifted loose strands of auburn hair from her ponytail, the afternoon sun catching hints of copper. A body with just the right curves in just the right places.

Something about her struck him. The tension in her shoulders. The way she held herself, as if bracing against something unseen. Like she didn't quite belong.

Then, movement. He spotted the baboon before she did. It was a big male, moving with lazy confidence, shoulders rolling as it crept toward her bag. Casual. Unbothered. Morné had seen this play out a dozen times before. Tourists were oblivious to how cunning these bastards could be.

He opened his mouth to call out—too late.

When she had spun toward the animal, he had been hit by an unexpected jolt, low and sharp.

She was beautiful.

Not in the polished, high-maintenance way some tourists were. No perfect hair, no designer sunglasses perched on her head. No, hers was a natural kind of beauty. She had striking features, huge hazel eyes in the pale wide oval of her face, and a full, lush, yet delicate mouth. It wasn't classic beauty, her face was too wide for that. But arresting, oh yes. Photogenic for sure.

Those eyes were currently locked on his. Something about her made him want to linger. But she was a tourist. Here now, gone the next moment.

Focus, man. There was enough going on in his life. He couldn't spend any bandwidth on American tourists with thoughtful eyes.

He took a step back, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. "Hope the rest of your trip is less eventful, Lara."

She opened her mouth like she wanted to say something more, but instead, she just smiled. "I—yeah. Thanks again."

He nodded, then turned and walked away.

Still, curiosity gnawed. Why *sort of* a tourist? Why that flash of panic behind her humor?

He told himself it wasn't his problem but lingered anyway. Before the minibus pulled onto the road, he snapped one shot, a wide composition of road, ocean, distant bus. Later, scrolling, he'd probably crop the frame to the tiny figure of a woman gripping a backpack like a lifeline.

Just a stranger.

Yet as he stowed the camera, he caught himself thinking that her tour would probably stop in Hermanus next. Did he have any reason to drive to Hermanus this afternoon?

Ridiculous.

He had work to do.

Dear Reader

Dear Reader,

Thank you for downloading this preview of *Stay with Me*.

I hope you've enjoyed meeting Lara and Morné.

Writing this story has been an incredible adventure, and I can't wait to share the rest of their journey with you. As a subscriber, you'll be among the first to know when *Stay with Me* is available. I'll also send occasional updates, behind-the-scenes glimpses, and exclusive extras.

Until then, thank you for being here.

Warmly,

Barbara Wiler

Escape to South Africa

Travel to breathtaking places of South Africa, where unforgettable landscapes, resilient people, and unexpected love stories await.

Stay with Me

Available for pre-order now

Release date: September 22, 2026

Hide with Me

Available for pre-order now

Release date: November 17, 2026

Stand with Me

Coming in 2027

Thank you for being among the very first readers of the *Escape to South Africa* series. I hope you'll enjoy the journey.

About the Author

Barbara Wiler collects stories, dusty roads, and far too many wildlife photos.

A South African by choice, she believes every great love story deserves an unforgettable setting and at least a little trouble. Her contemporary romantic suspense novels weave together adventure, danger, and matters of the heart.

She lives in Johannesburg with her husband, who has learned to ask whether the latest drama involves someone they know or one of her fictional friends.