

Savannah's Secret



Charlotte Mayo



A "Young Adult Tv" Novel



Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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For information address
Reluctant Press
P.O. Box 5829
Sherman Oaks, CA 91413
USA

Call toll free (800) 359-2116

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Love,

Ms. Chrissie
Editor in Chief

SAVANNAH'S SECRET

BY CHARLOTTE MAYO

Preface - Friday, 24th July, 1953

Jamie got off the train and debated whether to use the red phone box by the entrance of the station and phone for Gibbs to come out and collect him or to tough it out and carry the heavy tan leather bag the two miles to his house. Jamie was of an age when the idea of giving himself physical challenges was appealing so he decided to walk. After all it was a lovely July day, the sun was out, bees were buzzing in the hedgerows, there was the soft smell of flower scent in the air and the thing that really put Jamie in a good mood – it was the first day of his long, school holidays.

So Jamie left the station and started to walk home along the country lane; he moved his bag from his left hand to his right and less than half a mile into the

journey he regretted the decision not to phone Gibbs. Still, there was no going back, he had committed himself to a course of action and, like the man he was rapidly becoming, he would stick to the task. Not that that there were any manly hairs on Jamie's fourteen-year-old chin and his voice had not broken and become croaky like some of the boys in the dorm.

Also, much to his chagrin, Jamie was of slight build which made him unfit to play rugby. Even so Jamie felt he was developing fast. He wanted to be a good athlete and a white handled, willow cricket back laid across the top of his leather bag.

One thing was certain, he was going to get some practice in over the holidays and make sure that, at the start of the next academic year, he would make the first team – he was already in the first team for cross country running as he was thin and carried no excess weight but that did not have the same kudos as cricket and rugby. Jamie placed his bag down and took a breather. He imagined the look of surprise on the faces of his parents when he arrived: he imagined Mrs. Gibbs, the cook and house keeper, saying,

“Oh, you are old enough to walk now, Jamie, George was expecting a phone call.”

Jamie smiled at the reflection – he really was becoming a man and was able to make his own decisions. He knew that one day he would marry and have to make decisions for his wife as well but for now he was content with the progress he was making into manhood.

With renewed vigour, Jamie picked up his bag and set off for home again. He didn't mind boarding school but he liked being home more. Home with his glamorous mother and his mild-mannered father who was some years older than his mother. Then,

there was Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs and the young maid, Nancy, who had just been taken on. Being home meant he was free from bells and homework and lessons and punishments and he could relax and do what he wanted to for the seven weeks of the summer holiday.

Mrs. Gibbs would see to his every need and, rather than being subservient to the masters and the prefects at the school, Jamie would be able to order the serving staff around – he liked that idea. It made him feel important - like a proper man. And, of course, there was his mother, Madeline. Jamie was close to Mother. She looked after him and protected him, and being the only child, he was spoilt rotten – he was at an age where he knew that.

His mother was affectionate to him in her letters and, when he was home, she often cuddled him. The letters had led to some gentle teasing at school and goading that he was a “mother’s boy” – a phrase Jamie hated. He was a man... or at least he was becoming one. And next academic year, when he reached the dizzy heights of a batsman for the school cricket team, he would prove it. That was his one ambition: then he would get kudos and adulation from his peers and, instead of being friendless, his classmates would look up to him.

Jamie was hot and flustered when he pushed open the large wrought iron gates of his family home and walked up the gravel drive to the wisteria-covered house. The two miles had seemed more like five carrying the big, heavy holdall and it had taken Jamie far longer than he had expected. Still, he had arrived and his parents would be impressed with his independence. He pulled the long, metal bell chain which hung reassuringly by the large oak front door. A minute later, the door was opened by Nancy in her starched black and white uniform.

“Oh, Master James,” she said. “We expected you to phone from the station.”

Jamie smiled broadly. “I walked,” he said.

“My, I can see that...” Nancy said.

Just at that moment there was a rustle of skirts and the sound of voices.

“Is that my Jamie?” His mother came rushing towards him, her arms out stretched, her full skirt billowing. Jamie stepped in and Nancy stepped to one side. In an instant, Jamie was grabbed and hugged and lifted by his mother who planted a series of kisses on his face which rather annoyed Jamie – could she not see he was a man and too old for such shows of affection?

“Oh Jamie, Jamie, it is so good to see you. You can’t believe how much we have missed you and you’ve not changed at all. Come, let’s have a proper look at you.”

And then his mother was on her knees. She was holding his hands and looking at him as if for the first time with tears in her eyes.

“Jamie, we have missed you so, so much,” she said softly. Then she seemed to recover herself and stood up.

“Gibbs, take Jamie’s bag upstairs to his bedroom,” she said to old Mr. Gibbs who was lurking by the kitchen door. “And tell Mrs. Gibbs to bring some tea and cake to the drawing room.”

“But Mother, I want to see my room!” Jamie protested (he also wanted a fresh change of clothes be-

cause he had perspired but thought he should not say that).

“All in good time,” Madeline said. “First, your father and I need to have a talk to you.”

Jamie was aware that his mother had not released his hand and actually held him quite tightly. He wondered what on earth he could have done wrong... or who had died... or what had happened which was so important he could not go to room first. Also, he wondered why his father was not at work. Still, he followed his mother to the drawing room. His father, Hugh, approached him and shook his hand.

“Hello Jamie, welcome home.”

Hugh was a tall and distinguished man, some fifteen years older than Madeline. He was quiet, reserved and serious: that particulate afternoon Jamie was only too aware of the earnest look on his father’s face. Madeline sat down on the chaise lounge and fanned out her dark silk skirts.

“Take a seat, Jamie,” Madeline said and patted the seat beside her. Jamie sat down next to his mother. There was an uncomfortable silence and then Mrs. Gibbs knocked on the door and entered with a tray of cakes, sandwiches and a pot of tea and some cups.

“Nice to see you home, Master James,” she said to Jamie. Jamie smiled in return.

“It’s good to be home,” he said but he was beginning to wonder if he should have stayed in the dorm like some of the foreign lads who had no homes to go to over the summer.

“Shall I pour the tea?” Mrs. Gibbs asked.

“No, no, I’ll do it,” Madeline said, “that will be all, thank you Mrs. Gibbs.”

When the door closed Hugh started to speak. He started to tell Jamie a story as Madeline sat on the chaise lounge staring at the full teapot.

An hour later Jamie ran to his room and lay in his bed and cried like he had never cried before. He sobbed like a baby and when, later that afternoon, his mother tried to comfort him, he threw a book at her. When his father tried to comfort him, he told him to go away. There was no consoling Jamie and he cried into the night and in the morning, he refused to get out of bed.... he had never been so unhappy in all his life. Never had he felt so, so sorry for himself.

Chapter One

To find the root cause of Jamie’s unhappiness we must turn the clock back some nineteen years to 1934. At that point Madeline Stringer was an aspiring actress who had studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and was getting some stage roles. She was already noted as a beauty being blond and feminine and slim and was tipped to be a great actress either of stage or film (her dream was to be a Hollywood actress) – in fact, she was already being compared to the Hollywood starlet, Carole Lombard. One night, whilst appearing in a farce entitled *All Good Things* by Roy Pratchett, she was spotted by a young South African by the name of Oscar De Beer. De Beer was twenty-one and had been sent to London from his family home in Johannesburg to study mine engineering as his family owned a diamond mining business. Oscar was a wealthy young man with dark hair, delicate features and small, round

glasses. One of his party knew some of the cast of *All Good Things* so Oscar dutifully followed along to the after show party and that was where he met and fell in love with Madeline.

A whirlwind romance blossomed – the relationship was consummated and the pair lost their collective virginites – both being somewhat young and naïve. Madeline thought she had taken precautions but alas it was not the case and she found herself pregnant. Oscar was studying vigorously by then but promised to stick by her though he seemed less keen on a “shot gun” wedding, fearing the reaction from his parents back home in South Africa. Poor Madeline! Her parents disowned her and described her as a “trollop” and a “tart” but at least she was secure in the knowledge that Oscar would stick by her and would take care of her. Then disaster struck on that front too. One day Oscar received an urgent telegram from his mother.

“Father killed. STOP. Mining accident. STOP. Must come Home. STOP. Emergency. STOP.”

Oscar was in bits. He was in the middle of his thesis on geology, rock structure and boring techniques, he had a girlfriend who was pregnant and now this!

Still, family had to come first and Oscar took a plane from Croydon airport one misty day in March and started the long, arduous trek back to South Africa.

Madeline was left high and dry – her fiancé had deserted her (although he had never actually got around to proposing, she knew he would once he finished his thesis) and she was five months pregnant. Fortunately, a maiden aunt in Dorchester took pity on her and Madeline took the train to her house where she wrote long, loving letters to Oscar, saying

how much she missed him. They even discussed baby names – Savannah for a girl and Oscar junior for a boy.

“Whatever you do, darling Maddie,” Oscar said in one letter, “I beseech you not to give our child up for adoption. Please, please take care of him or her and I will look after you financially. I will take care of you and your child forever. You have my word on that as a true Afrikaan.”

Distance, Madeline considered, can make the heart forget for there was no mention in Oscar’s letters about a return to England and a resumption of their relationship – or indeed, any mention that Madeline should come to South Africa and join him. In fact, Oscar’s letters were filled with all the many responsibilities and commitments he now had “not only to his mother, sisters, grandparents and relations but the 150 employees of the De Beer Geo-Mining and Evacuation Company.”

Poor Madeline felt quite forlorn. It seemed Oscar had no space in his life for her. Eventually, Madeline did give birth to a baby girl. She registered the birth name as Savannah De Beer and, after much pressure from her maiden aunt and her parents, she gave her baby up for adoption and headed back to London to resume her acting career.

Chapter Two

One day she entered her lodgings, having returned from rehearsals for a show she was due to appear in, when she discovered a letter with a Johannesburg post mark. She quickly opened the envelope and discovered a letter from Oscar asking for details of how Savannah was fairing and what Madeline was now doing,

“Are you a full-time mother?” the letter asked naively.

Madeline sighed, money was short - the theatre didn't pay much and was irregular work; she had had to get another job as a waitress in a local café to help fund her career – there was no way she could have looked after a baby as well. Then she saw an object stuck in the envelope, she lifted it up and a large buff-coloured object fluttered to the ground.

Madeline bent down to pick it up. A beaming smile crossed her face for it was a cheque for £90 to be drawn from the Bank of Johannesburg, signed by Oscar De Beer.

“Here, find enclosed a little something to help keep mother and child together,” the letter read. “I promised you I would not let you and my baby go hungry and I will make regular payments to you. You have my word as a true Afrikaan.”

Madeline's heart skipped a beat. On the one hand she knew that, morally, she should not accept the money but on the other hand hadn't Oscar deserted her at her time of most need? Hadn't her parents deserted her too? Didn't she deserve a bit of luck? Anyway, she would pay him back when she was a famous actress – she would make that pledge to herself.

That night she composed a reply and enclosed a photograph of herself as a baby – stating that it was a photograph of Savannah. She wrote that Savannah was doing fine and that she had gone back to acting – Savannah was a bonny, beautiful baby. A few days later she paid the cheque, which conveniently been made out in pounds sterling, into her bank account.

Then, a few months later, another letter and cheque arrived and again Madeline replied and enclosed a photograph of herself as a baby. Then, when it was Savannah's birthday – 8th August - an even larger cheque arrived.

“Here's hoping you can put something aside for Savannah so that she has some money when she becomes a lady,” the letter said.

After a while Madeline accepted the cheques as a kind of payment for her suffering and, although she initially had some qualms about taking them, she started to look forward to the envelopes from Johannesburg as she knew they contained cheques from Oscar. One advantage of his money was that it meant she did not need a second job as a waitress and could concentrate on her acting career. As she suspected, the frequency of the letter (and cheques!) from Oscar lessened as time went on but Madeline was still grateful and being frugal she was able to save a not inconsiderable sum of money.

However, the truth was that although she had moderate acting ability she was not cut out to be an actress; in many ways the affair with Oscar had knocked the stuffing out of her. She toiled on the boards for a while longer and then she met Hugh. The circumstances of the meeting were very similar to the meeting with Oscar – a friend introduced them at an after-show party. Hugh was debonair, some fifteen years Madeline's elder and a stockbroker. They

started dating and love blossomed. Then, one day, sitting on a bench in Regent's Park, Madeline made a confession.

“Hugh, I have done the most awful thing...”

She went on to make a tearful confession about Oscar and Savannah and how she had had to give the “poor mite” up for adoption. Hugh rubbed her back and comforted her and in that moment his love for her grew even stronger – he was not a naive man and knew it was very difficult for a single mother in 1930's Britain and she had taken the only course of action available to her. A few days later, he proposed.

So, as it was reported in *The Times* newspaper, on 16th July, 1938, Madeline Stringer, 23, married Hugh Queensbury, 38, at St. David's Church, Haversham. Madeline, it was reported, had decided to give up the stage and concentrate on starting a family.

To that end, twelve months later, James Alfred Queensbury was born. It was a difficult birth and Madeline was warned that further pregnancies may result in “health complications.” Hugh was a mild man who accepted the situation with sanguinity. After all, he had a son and heir and his family was complete.

Then in 1939, the war intervened and Hugh “done his bit” for the country as a bomber pilot whilst Madeline bought Jamie up alone at home – hence the strong bond between Mother and Son. Hugh survived the war and returned to marital bliss for, indeed, the Queensburys were a happy family unit.

Madeline found a quiet contentment in being a housewife and lady of leisure and excelled at giving parties. Of course, she had updated Oscar of her

change of circumstances (but not the fact she now had a son) and her new address and was somewhat delighted that the Johannesburg letters (and cheques) kept coming - particularly through the war years when money was tight and there was a very high risk that she would be widowed.

After the war Madeline discovered that Hugh was a thrifty individual who, she felt, sometimes did not let her have as much money as she would have liked so the knowledge that she had a secret account with Oscar's money in it as a reserve was very re-assuring. Then Hugh discovered a Jo'berg letter in Madeline's drawer and questioned her about it. Madeline once again made a tearful confession – this time that Oscar had continued to pay for Savannah, not realising she had been given her up for adoption.

Hugh, an upstanding man, was not pleased by this confession; it caused a rift between the pair which lasted a number of days but he eventually realised that it was too late for Madeline to come clean. He checked out the stock price of De Beer's engineering company – it was riding high and Oscar was a very rich young man. Therefore, Hugh decided that discretion was the better part of valour and that there was no harm in continuing to accept the cheques. Indeed, maybe there was some merit in Madeline's argument that he "owed" it to her for the hurt he had caused. Still, Hugh doubted the police would see it like that – she had taken money under false pretences which was fraud - plan and simple. But then who would ever know?

As Madeline so rightly pointed out, Oscar was a very eligible bachelor and was sure to marry and have a family of his own at which point he would forget about Madeline and Savannah - then the "Jo'burg letters" as they were dubbed, would dry up as Oscar would "forget" about the fling he had had in England.

Hugh made one stipulation – Madeline’s account had to close. The money needed to go into his account and he would pay her more housekeeping.

Reluctantly, Madeline agreed. Hugh was as good as his word and Madeline found she had a lot more money for clothes and décor around the house. The Queensbury household resumed normality and happiness. Jamie was sent to boarding school at the end of the war and returned to the family home in the holidays.

Chapter Three

Over time, Madeline and Hugh became blasé about the “Jo’burg letters” which started to arrive twice yearly – at Christmas and on Savannah’s birthday – so much so that although Madeline was aware that 8th August was Savannah’s birthday she had no idea that it was Savannah’s *eighteenth* birthday on Saturday, 8th August, 1953. Unfortunately, for her Oscar did. He wrote to say he had a beautiful topaz necklace for “his darling daughter” and he was coming to the U.K. to place it on her eighteen-year-old neck in person a few days after her birthday as he had business to conduct in London. Can you imagine the upset that was caused in the household? Madeline was sent into an almighty panic.

“He is not going to be to bloody happy when he finds out you gave Savannah up for adoption!” Hugh shouted when he heard the news. “I told you not to continue with this deceit. It was bound to end in tears!”

“What do you think will happen when he finds out?” Madeline sobbed.

“He will call the police,” Hugh said. “You have committed a fraud and I am a party to it too. We will both go to prison. Our lives and reputations will be ruined!”

All Madeline could do was cry. At night she dreamt of burly prison warders with hundreds of keys locking her in the cell for the night. She dreamt of rough prisoners mocking her for her posh accent and refined ways. Prison was not meant for the likes of her. She hadn't meant to commit a crime – it was an accident but she knew it was wrong. But what could she do?

“We must write to Oscar and put him off!” Madeline pleaded. “It is just coincidence that Savannah's birthday coincides with a business trip to London.”

“We can't,” Hugh said. “By the tone of his letter he is clearly determined to see Savannah even if it means making a special trip later in the year. Look, the letter reads: *I know the 12th August may not be convenient for my visit but I can extend my trip to London as I wish to see Savannah in her eighteenth year and can be available anytime in August to give her my special gift. If that is not convenient, I am prepared to make a special trip to England to see her.*”

“We could get an actress to play the part of Savannah?” Madeline suggested. Through the tears she tried to come up with a plan.

“Too risky,” Hugh said. “We would then be at risk of blackmail from the actress as she would have to know the full story. Anyway, how will we get the right person in such a short space of time?”

“Why don't we just offer to pay all the money back?” Madeline proffered.

Hugh sighed. “Do you know how much he has given you over the years for Savannah?”

Madeline shook her head. “No, I never kept records.”

Hugh continued. “It is likely to be a substantial sum and would not be money we would have readily available to us without re-mortgaging the house. Anyway, there’s still no saying that Oscar would not want to take it further. It would just be an admission of guilt.”

Hugh knew from the business world that rich, powerful men never liked to lose face and feel belittled and if Oscar felt Madeline had been dishonest for eighteen years he would call in his lawyers. There was no doubt about it, a man like Oscar De Beer who ran a highly successful mining company would want his pound of flesh.

The couple argued, they talked, they debated, they blamed each other - both knowing they were complicit in the other’s guilt.

“It’s a fucking mess,” Hugh said one day. He was not prone to swearing but the situation was impossible. There seemed no way out.

Then one day over breakfast, Madeline, who had hardly slept at all since the letter from Oscar had arrived, spoke to Hugh in a more conciliatory tone. For the first time she seemed a little brighter.

“Hugh, darling,” she said. “Last night I had an idea.”

Hugh was about to dip a bread soldier into his egg. He paused. He loved his wife passionately and hated to see her so distraught. He just wished she had not

been so reckless as to take Oscar's money – but had he not, as Head of the Household, condoned the action by not sending the cheques back as soon as he had realised the deceit? If Madeline was convicted of fraud, then he would be convicted as a co-conspirator. Anything they could do to stop such a situation had to be tried, *anything, anything, anything, anything...*

Madeline paused. "It concerns Jamie."

Hugh was puzzled.

Madeline took a deep breath. "I've been thinking. Jamie is fourteen and of slight build and he has not yet matured into a man. Indeed, when he was at home at Christmas, his voice had not broken and there was no hair on his face."

Hugh really was bewildered.

Madeline continued. "Darling, I know we would be asking a lot of him but before you reply, just think about it. I never told Oscar we had a son. In fact, in my letters back to him I have told him very little about my family life apart from the fact you are a stockbroker and we live very nicely and we both love Savannah like a daughter."

Hugh had dropped his soldier onto his side plate and was staring at Madeline, *What on earth is she thinking? Has she finally lost her mind?*

"Well," Madeline said, "Everyone says how much Jamie takes after me – in looks and personality. He has the same blond hair and blue eyes and delicate features and you know what? The photos I sent to Oscar of Savannah, well, they were all of me as a baby and a young child. Darling Hugh, I know it is asking a lot but every night I think of the prison cell

and the scandal and I know I have done wrong... and listen, darling. I didn't send many photos of myself to Oscar over the age of ten when you came back from the war and discovered the Johannesburg letters as I was scared you would question where the photos were. So he has not seen her, not at all, do you see? Yet he knows she looks like me as that is what I have told him.

"So darling, we could dress Jamie up as Savannah and pass him off as her. It would only be for one afternoon when Oscar comes for tea to give her the topaz necklace. He would present her with her eighteenth birthday present. We would all have lunch together and then we would have a nice cup of tea and cake and we would make him most welcome. Then he would go back to London to do his business as he says he has business there. Then he would fly home to Johannesburg. *He would fly back to Johannesburg.* Don't you see, darling? He would be happy. He would have seen Savannah! And, if he ever wanted to see her again, we would say she had left home and become a nun or gone to some out-of-the-way place so the situation would not arise again. He would have seen her the once so why would he doubt us?"

"Dress my son as a girl? NEVER." Hugh banged the table. "Oscar would see straight through it for one thing. You can't pass a boy off as a girl. It can't be done."

"But Hugh, it *can* be done!" Madeline came over to Hugh and bent down at his chair, she was feeling excited and alive. She took his hands. "Hugh darling, I was an actress, I still have friends in London theatres who would provide wigs and things. I just know I could do it if you allowed me this one chance. I know if we could get Jamie to agree I could make him look like a girl. Please Hugh, please, it is our only chance. We can't find Savannah as I think she was adopted

by an Irish couple but I have no names. We can't get an actress to play the part and yet in less than three weeks Oscar will be here with a present for his eighteen-year-old daughter."

Hugh was resolute. "Passing a boy off as a woman can't be done. It is not possible."

Madeline held Hugh's hands more firmly. "Oh but it can, Hugh. Just give me a chance to show you. We won't say anything to Jamie until he returns from school. Then, whilst you are at work, I will prepare him. I have a friend in London who has a wig shop. I will call her up and she can come down. I will start getting things organised. We will get Jamie prepared and we will have dinner. Just the three of us. That will be like a practice run but Jamie will be a thousand times better before Oscar arrives as I will practice with him every day. I just know it will work. Jamie is a dear, sweet boy and he will help us. Oh damn, we are in such a pickle. I know he will do his best for his mummy. If you feel it won't work, then I will ditch the whole crazy idea and prepare myself for prison." Madeline sobbed her heart out as Hugh comforted her and stroked her back. It wasn't just his wife that faced prison – it was him too. He didn't like the idea of his son dressing up as a girl but if there was a chance it could work. If there was a chance...

"All right," he said. "Let's see what you can do with the boy and then I will make my decision. But we will have to be careful, we don't want to make a bad situation worse. If Oscar was to suspect anything..."

"I know, Hugh, but it is our only chance, our only chance." And she sobbed again, sobbed for all she was worth.