

## Chapter 11 – Going Home

Friday, the week before Christmas. Norah was up early and ready to leave long before the expected time of her lift's arrival. She'd said her goodbyes to the boss the night before and enjoyed breakfast with Stanford and Philemon. She returned to her room to brush her teeth and grab her suitcase, and walked to the front gate to wait for her lift.

At half-past eight, as arranged, a heavy truck pulled up in front of the house. The driver left the engine running and jumped down from the cab. He was a large, intimidating looking African, sporting short hair, a beard, and a moustache. 'I'm Elijah. Absalom is sick, so I'm replacing him. The cost is three pounds.'

'Three pounds! Absalom said it would be two pounds.'

'Two pounds for me, and one pound agency fee for Absalom for finding the passenger.'

Norah wasn't happy, but after some back and forth, she paid the extra amount, not wanting to risk missing seeing little John again. She hauled herself and her suitcase into the passenger seat next to the driver.

'Your company told me you couldn't take passengers or give people lifts.'

'It's true, and we risk dismissal if we're found out. That is why we charge extra. It is danger money for us.'

Elijah eased the heavy truck around the block and headed for Seventh Street, and on to the road to Umtali. The pre-Christmas traffic was heavy, but it wasn't too long before they reached the edge of the built-up area and the open road. Elijah put his foot down on the accelerator and the truck picked up speed, travelling too fast for Norah's liking. It was the first time she'd sat in the front of a vehicle, and her eyes widened as the oncoming traffic raced towards them.

Bicycles, pedestrians, and the occasional donkey cart flashed by as the truck sped along the road. Elijah wasn't talkative, and soon Norah was lost in her own thoughts. It was close to a year since she'd last seen John. How would he look? Would he remember her? How would he react to her?

They hadn't travelled far when Elijah slowed the truck and turned onto a dirt road leading into the bush.

Norah's heart raced at the unexpected deviation. That, together with the truck's vibration and the rough road surface, made her voice quiver. 'Where are we going?'

'The beer hall near your village isn't the only one that needs deliveries. Your area's beer hall is the sixth one on my list today.'

Five kilometres from the main road, the new beer hall came into view. Elijah pulled up in front of the building and jumped down from the cab. A man appeared in the doorway and shouted a cheerful greeting. The two men laughed and chattered in loud voices as Elijah opened the back of the truck and unloaded several crates and cardboard boxes. They walked to the building and entered the beer hall office. Norah could see them talking and laughing and drinking from mugs. She hoped it was tea and not beer. Elijah's driving was already bad enough.

Norah waited, impatient for Elijah's return, and when he did, she challenged him. 'Will all the stops take this long?'

‘No. That one is my friend. I won’t see him again before Christmas.’

The next stop was Marandellas, where many crates and cartons were unloaded. Although the exchanges between Elijah and the beer hall manager were brief, the quantity of goods unloaded meant the stop was as long as the first one. Both stops, including the deviation to the beer hall, took over an hour.

The beer hall manager was missing at the third stop, so a cleaner sent a young boy to find him. Half an hour later, the missing manager strolled up to the beer hall. Norah sensed Elijah didn’t like him because there was little conversation between them.

Elijah jumped back into the truck. ‘That one is always a problem. He thinks he is too important to worry about us. Sometimes when I arrive, he’s talking on the phone. But does he hurry? No! He sees me waiting, but it makes no difference to him. One day, I will leave without unloading. I’ll get fired, but I don’t care.’

Despite complaining about the delay, Elijah was unhurried and stopped at a roadside store to buy something to eat. Norah bought a peanut bar and a Fanta orange. After eating, Elijah took a rest break, which he said he needed when driving a truck over a longer distance.

The fourth stop was problem free, and everything passed without incident, though it involved a forty-minute round trip and twenty minutes of unloading. During the unloading, Norah stretched her legs, pacing around the truck. Already past two o’clock, there was another stop near Rusape, before the last leg to the beer hall in her area. It was a long, hot, tiring drive in the truck, and Norah still faced a half-hour walk to the village. She was eager to make the walk during daylight and enquired when they would reach their sixth and final stop.

Elijah was non-committal. ‘Maybe five o’clock.’

‘Five o’clock! When will you get back to Harare?’

‘Tonight, I’ll stay with my family near Headlands and drive back to Harare in the morning.’

Rusape was another long detour, though the unloading ran smoothly. When they were on their way again, Norah breathed a sigh of relief. The stop start day tried her patience, but at last she was heading home.

Back on the main road for another forty kilometres, Norah recognised the turnoff to her village. She breathed more easily as she judged they would reach the beer hall soon after five o’clock. They drove along the deserted, rutted dirt road at a leisurely pace. Then, five kilometres from the beer hall, they passed a young woman with a suitcase heading in the opposite direction.

Elijah whistled through his front teeth. ‘It’s a long walk to the main road.’

‘On your way back, you could give her a lift.’

Elijah grunted without indicating whether he would. ‘Do you want me to take you to your village? It will also be a long walk for you with your suitcase.’

‘Would you charge extra?’

‘Only ten shillings.’

‘I’ve already paid you a pound more than I’d planned, so I can’t afford to pay any more.’

‘Women have other ways of paying.’

‘No, thank you, I’ll walk.’

‘They say it’s dangerous for women to walk alone in this area.’

‘The sun’s still up, so I’ll be fine.’

‘It’s up to you, but if I’m not too long here, I’ll follow you down and see if you’ve changed your mind.’

‘I won’t.’

Moments later, they pulled up in front of the beer hall. Norah grabbed her suitcase and jumped down from the truck’s cab. She waved a greeting to the beer hall manager and said goodbye to Elijah before setting off down the road towards her village. The two men watched her into the distance until she disappeared from view.

Norah hadn’t thought about the missing women until Elijah’s comment. Now she felt uneasy. She quickened her steps but was all too aware it would shorten her walk by only a couple of minutes.

The sun sank fast in this part of Africa, and while she still hoped to make the village before dark, a sense of foreboding enveloped her. What was that noise? A rustle in the bush. Someone was following her! But then there was only silence. Was it her imagination? No! There was that sound again. Something was there, keeping pace with her. Norah looked around but saw nothing. It was silence once more. The deathly hush was unnerving.

The silence was as disturbing as the noise she thought she’d heard. It was strange. The bush was always alive with the sounds of birds, insects, and other wildlife. But this evening there was nothing. Somewhere, she’d read that creatures of the bush go silent when a predator, animal or human, is on the prowl.

Norah became conscious of another sound, faint at first but growing louder. A truck! Elijah must be coming to find her. His manner, just before they arrived at the beerhall, concerned her. He was persistent, almost demanding, and she didn’t like his comment about women having other ways of paying.

The truck was around the corner, approaching fast. Norah ran into the bush and hid behind a thick patch of long grass. Thicker cover grew nearby, but she didn’t have time to reach it. Through the grass, Norah saw Elijah’s truck race past in a cloud of dust. He must have been trying to get to her before she reached the village.

When the dust settled, Norah stepped back onto the road. Now she walked, straining her ears for the sound of the returning vehicle. The earlier sound of some imagined predator was all but forgotten.

Ten minutes later, Norah heard the truck in the distance. It was coming her way. The road was straighter here, giving her less time to hide. But here, the grass was thinner and lacking convenient bushes for cover. The ditch! There was a ditch beside the road. Norah ran to it, threw down her suitcase, and lay as flat as possible, pressing her face into the earth. She dared not look at the truck for fear of raising her head.

The roar of the truck’s engine raced by, just feet from her. Then she couldn’t hear it any longer. In her panic, Norah was unsure if the truck had driven off or stopped. Might Elijah have spotted her suitcase, lying somewhere behind her in the ditch?

Norah lay there, hardly daring to breathe. A couple of minutes passed, though it seemed much longer. She wasn’t sure what to do. If Elijah was parked watching for her in his rearview mirror, or if he stopped for a smoke, she might give herself away if she stood up now.

No, she'd wait a few more minutes. But wait! What was that hiss? Norah looked up, half-blinded by the setting sun. Then she saw it. Only four feet in front of her, the unmistakable silhouette of a hooded cobra.

As Norah's eyes adjusted to the light, she saw the snake's eyes fixed upon her. The creature swayed as if in a macabre dance. Norah lay transfixed by the sight. Her senses seemed to gather in slow motion. Should she wait for the snake to lose interest and slither away? But the snake showed no sign of retreating.

Norah eased herself back away from the snake. It was a slow process. After an interminable effort, she'd increased the distance between them by a couple of feet, but then she bumped into an obstacle, her suitcase. The extra two feet appeared to satisfy the snake, and it lowered its hood and slithered off in the opposite direction.

Forgetting about Elijah, Norah stood up, then spun around, remembering why she'd jumped into the ditch. Elijah and the truck were nowhere to be seen. She grabbed her suitcase and stepped back onto the road, keeping her ears peeled for any sound of the truck or other unwelcome company.

Norah's imagination was now let loose. Rising panic in her mind overwhelmed any other thoughts. Then, there in front of her, stood her village. The smell of the village fires, glowing in the dusk, caught her nostrils. She was home.

Norah's sudden, dishevelled appearance delighted her best friend, Tadiwa. She was overjoyed to see Norah and called the children to come to her. Her voice carried an unmistakable urgency. Two small figures appeared in the hut's doorway.

'Mauya, your mother has come.' Tadiwa always called John by his traditional name.

Norah held out her arms, but John was shy and slow to come to her.

'Come, John. Come to mama.'

With slow, faltering steps, John approached Norah, but she could wait no longer and rushed forward and wrapped her arms around him.

'You have been gone a year, Norah, so he's struggling to recognise you.'

Little Aneni came forward and joined in their embrace.

'The children love each other. Mauya says he'll marry Aneni when he grows up.'

The small group was all smiles as Tadiwa cooked the evening meal. After the children went to bed, Tadiwa and Norah chatted late into the night.

'Mauya says Aneni is his best friend, but he is also friends with the three boys, Simba, Takunda, and Chipu. Simba and Takunda are a year older than the others and lead the children into mischief, but that's how they learn. All the children loved Tendekai, the former leader, until that terrible day last month.'

'What happened?'

'After lunch, the children played near a mound in the open bush about three hundred yards from here. It wasn't a problem, as we could see them on the mound, shouting, and playing, and waving. If you remember, Danai watched over the children, but she left the village for the city. That's when Tendekai took over as the children's leader.

'We were working around the village when the children came running back, shouting that a big snake bit Tendekai. All us women ran to the mound with our hoes and sticks. When we got there, we found a huge python wrapped around him. We beat the snake, so it let Tendekai go and slithered into the bush. The poor boy couldn't breathe. Simba and Takunda ran to the

mission for help. The doctor came, but too late to save Tendekai. Some thought the snake crushed him, but later, they said he died of a heart attack.'

'Is there news about the missing women?'

'No news. No more women have gone missing since you left, and the police think the murders or abductions may have ended.'

'What about the hyenas?'

'It's been months since we last heard them calling.'

Norah found it difficult to sleep that night, and it wasn't because her old bed didn't match the comfort of her bed in the city. Nor was it the dangers of life in the bush that worried her. She noticed Tadiwa always referred to John by his traditional name, Mauya, and spoke to him in Shona. He'd forgotten the English she'd taught him before she moved to the city. He was a typical village child, which was inevitable, but it wasn't what she wanted for him. It made her even more determined to move him to the city.

John soon got over his shyness as Norah devoted her days to reconnecting with her son. He remembered her from the time before she left for the city, but he'd become accustomed to thinking of Tadiwa as his mother. On holiday, the days fly by, and soon Norah would return to Salisbury. She took care to make John understand her visit would soon be over, but she would be back whenever possible. The boy took the news with no outward sign of emotion. He'd got used to his current circumstances.

Norah promised Tadiwa she'd come in July on the Rhodes and Founders long weekend but wasn't sure if she could visit over Easter.

'I will take John to Salisbury at the end of the year, Tadiwa.'

'Eish, Aneni and John won't like that.'

'I know, but it is for his benefit.'

'The children are never apart.'

'Like me, he will visit whenever possible.'

All too soon, Sandra and Andrew, her driver, arrived on the scheduled day to give Norah a lift back to Salisbury. They'd visited a neighbouring village to deliver one of Sandra's birth control lectures. As on their earlier visit to Norah's village, Andrew was in a hurry to leave to get back home at a reasonable hour. On this occasion, John was there to wave them goodbye. If he was sad to see her go, it didn't show in his broad, toothy smile. Only the adults appeared to feel the sorrow of parting. Norah hugged Tadiwa, Aneni, and John last of all. She kissed him, told him to be a good boy, and jumped into the Land Rover.