

## Chapter 13 – Changing Times

Norah worried about being called as a witness in the missing woman's case. She'd settled into a cosy existence at Judge Hugh Barclay's home and welcomed the support and friendship of nurse Sandra, but she'd not otherwise experienced city life.

Would she be in trouble for not coming forward sooner? It was not her fault she'd been in her village over Christmas, where little news of the outside world seeped into the local gossip. It was possible, on her return to Salisbury, she'd heard about the missing woman even before Tadiwa got news of it.

Norah found the dribble of information followed by long periods of silence unnerving. At last, in October, the newspapers reported further details on the missing woman's case. An African man was assisting the police with their enquiries. A day later, the police arrested Elijah Dambudzo, a delivery driver, for the abduction and murder of Miss Farai Nduma.

Elijah? Elijah? No, it couldn't be! Could it be the same Elijah who gave her a lift home to the Buhera District? She thought it unlikely, but the next day, the newspaper article included a photo. The police must have made a mistake. She'd got Elijah into trouble by naming him and his employer.

Now events moved fast. The trial date raced up, and she got more anxious with each passing day. Stanford picked up on her nervousness and mentioned it to the boss.

'You needn't be worried, Norah,' said Judge Barclay. 'I'll be there to support you. Just give honest answers to the questions they ask you.'

The morning of the trial arrived, and Norah wore her smartest clothes. She paced up and down the backyard and had no stomach for breakfast, refusing Stanford's encouragements to eat something. Mortimer, the judge's driver, peered around the corner of the house and called her. 'The boss is ready to leave.'

Norah accompanied Mortimer to the shiny black Bentley waiting in the driveway. The boss was already in the back seat and signalled for her to join him. She got into the vehicle, and Mortimer shut the door behind her. It was her first trip in the boss's car, and somehow, it made her more nervous. The boss tried to reassure her, but she found it difficult to concentrate on what he was saying.

The drive into the city passed without Norah noticing anything outside the vehicle. Soon they arrived at the court, where an eager small group of photographers with their intrusive cameras snapped her out of her dreamlike state. A court clerk asked her to follow him, while Judge Barclay went to sit in the spectators' gallery.

The court clerk led Norah to a wood-panelled room and instructed her to wait. She sat alone in the quiet room with the sombre dark brown wood panelling. It felt like ages before the door swung open. She stood up, but it was only a member of the court service staff bringing her a cup of tea.

At last, Norah was called to give evidence. As she entered the court, she looked at the gallery, where the boss gave her an encouraging smile. She noticed several of the men had white hair and wore black robes. Everyone looked serious. Elijah sat grim-faced in a stand flanked by two policemen, and she tried to avoid looking at him.

Norah told the story of sighting the missing woman to Stanford, the boss, Philemon, Tadiwa, and others, so many times, that answering questions from the white-haired men presented no difficulty. Her turn in the witness box passed in a flash, and she felt disappointed it didn't last longer. The presiding judge stood her down, and the court clerk directed her to the gallery to sit with the boss.

The court adjourned for the day, and Mortimer drove the boss and Norah home.

'Sir, Elijah knows where I live. He might come looking for me.'

'I doubt it, Norah. If he's innocent, they'll release him, and he'll have no reason to look for you. You told the truth and said nothing that incriminated him. If he's guilty, he'll never get out of jail, and they'll probably hang him.'

The next day, everything in the household returned to normal. The boss left for work at his usual time, and Stanford, Philemon, and Norah enjoyed breakfast in the shade under Stanford's veranda.

'Look here, Norah,' said Stanford. 'Your name is in the paper, talking about the evidence you gave.'

Norah was ambivalent about her newfound fame and read the news article several times. She cut it out and put it in a folder in her room. Imagine what Tadiwa would say when she saw it.

The trial continued for another two days, and everyone in the household followed it in the paper with keen interest. Norah realised the trial wasn't only about the missing woman she saw. The police presented evidence to connect Elijah to all the missing women.

After she told the detectives about her trip with Elijah, the police searched Absalom's truck, where they found in the glove box a small bible with Farai Nduma's name inside the back cover. Elijah denied he'd seen her on his return trip from the beer hall, but the bible was damning evidence. Farai's family claimed she never left home without her bible, which she'd received when she attended the mission school.

The police discovered the disappearances of the first three missing women coincided with Absalom's scheduled deliveries to the beer halls. But Absalom claimed Elijah did the deliveries for him on those days. He admitted he never told his employer about his private arrangement with Elijah because it contravened company regulations. Elijah denied ever driving Absalom's truck before the day he gave Norah a lift.

The police didn't believe Elijah and searched his room, where they found items belonging to the missing women. With so much evidence against him, Elijah confessed to abducting and raping the women before dumping them in the bush in a lonely spot off the dirt road about ten miles from the beer hall near Norah's village. A search of the area led to the recovery of Farai's body. The police never found the others. They assumed hyenas, who never leave a trace of anything edible, devoured them.

News of the trial disappeared from the paper's pages once again. Then, two weeks later, an article in the newspaper proclaimed Elijah was found guilty of murdering the four women and sentenced to death. The news shook Norah when she realised she'd spent a day with the serial killer.

'But why didn't he murder me?'

'Because,' said Stanford, 'we all saw him arrive in the truck to give you a lift. He wouldn't murder you when so many witnesses saw you leave with him.'

Norah shuddered to think about what might have happened if she'd accepted Elijah's offer to drive her to her village. Perhaps Stanford was correct, and she'd been safe all along. But do serial killers think and act rationally?

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The trial distracted Norah, and time had flown. Christmas was close. Sandra would drive her to her village, but how would she get back? It would be even more difficult with John accompanying her. Worse still, she'd not spoken to Stanford about John staying with her in her room.

Bringing John to the city was a momentous decision, even bigger than her own move. If Stanford refused to let her bring John to Salisbury, everything she'd done would have been for nothing. She needed to speak to him soon, but was unsure how to broach the topic.

'What's the matter, Norah? You've been hovering all day. Is something wrong?'

'Hovering?'

'It means you've been hanging around me.'

'No, there's nothing wrong.'

'I can tell something is worrying you. Are you thinking of handing in your notice?'

'No, but my son is almost six and must begin school.'

'So! What's the problem?'

'Well, I want him here with me. Staying with me.'

'Ah! I can't make that decision, Norah. I'll have to talk to the boss. When do you want to bring your boy?'

'When I return from my Christmas break.'

'Christmas break? I'm not sure the boss is going on holiday this year. I'll let you know.'

In the evening, Stanford approached the boss in the lounge. He sat at his desk, sorting through a pile of papers accumulating in a drawer.

'Sir, we have an issue with Norah.'

'Yes, Stanford, what is it?'

Stanford explained the situation to the boss.

'If she brings the child here, where will he go to school?'

'I suppose in the location, Sir.'

'And how will he get there?'

'Perhaps he'll walk, Sir. And there's another matter. Norah wants to bring him back with her after her Christmas leave. Are you going away for Christmas, Sir?'

'Yes, I'll be going to Cape Town. I assumed one of you would be here to watch the house.'

'I can stay, Sir, and take my leave later in the year.'

'It's up to you, Stanford. You're in charge.'

Stanford found Norah in the kitchen. 'The boss wants to see you in the lounge after dinner.'

A shiver passed through Norah. What would he say? Was her request for John to live with her too bold? She loved her job. It was more than she ever dreamed possible. Perhaps she was asking too much. Stanford didn't comment further on her taking leave at Christmas. Might her plans be falling apart?

Following dinner, Norah proceeded to the lounge. After a few moments' hesitation, she tapped on the door frame. Was it too soft? The boss may not have heard, but if she knocked louder, it may appear she was impatient.

'Ah! There you are, Norah. Come in.'

Norah entered the lounge with small hesitant steps.

'So, you want to bring your son here to live with you?'

'Yes, Sir, if possible.'

'Anything's possible, Norah. Christmas is three weeks away. Have you arranged a lift back to your village? Please make sure it's with someone other than a serial killer this time.'

'Yes, Sir. Nurse Sandra will take me.'

'And she'll bring you and the boy back?'

'No, Sir. We'll walk to the main road and catch a bus.'

'I thought you said the drive from your village to the main road took over forty minutes?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'You can't walk that far in summer with a six-year-old boy. No, I'll get Mortimer to pick you up. Tell him where and when.'

'Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.'

Norah was ecstatic. She'd got Christmas leave, and permission to bring John to live with her in her room. She thanked the Lord that he'd led her to two wonderful men, Stanford, and the boss. In bed, later that night, she reflected on her incredible luck, and she recalled the part Sandra played in getting her the job. Against her principles, the nurse exaggerated and fibbed about Norah's experience for the role of housemaid for the boss.

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It was the Monday before Christmas, and Sandra and Andrew arrived early to pick up Norah for the drive to her village. The boss left for Cape Town over the weekend. Only Stanford and Philemon remained to see her off. Philemon gave them sandwiches and a flask of coffee to have on the way. The roads weren't too busy, and Sandra dropped Norah at her village just after lunch.

Sandra and Andrew were heading for another village in the area, so Norah thanked them for the lift and wished Sandra a happy overseas holiday. Tadiwa and the children were overjoyed to see Norah again so soon. It was her fourth visit in twelve months.

Norah told John early in the visit she'd be taking him with her back to Salisbury at the end of her holiday. She wanted John to get used to the idea he'd be leaving the village. He seemed comfortable with the idea, and his friends, including Aneni, were intrigued. But as the visit neared its end, a dark cloud descended on the little group. First, it affected the adults and then John caught the mood. It seemed little Aneni didn't realise the implications of what was coming.

In the early afternoon on the day of their departure, the excited villagers gathered around the shiny black car. The driver was dressed in a smart green uniform and wore a peaked cap and white cotton gloves. It was the grandest event the villagers had ever seen. The driver called John's mother Madam Norah and carried John's suitcase to the car and put it in the boot. Norah felt embarrassed she and John were not better dressed for the occasion.

All was well until John joined his mother in the Bentley's back seat. Little Aneni wailed, and tears ran down the cheeks of John and the adult women.

‘Don’t cry Aneni. We’ll be back soon at Easter. You’ll see.’

Norah’s words did little to comfort the child, whose wails followed them as they drove out of the village.