

## Chapter 34 – Home Sweet Home

John hurtled down the road towards the railway station on the old bicycle. He'd not ridden a bike in ages, but in the fresh early hours, the ride was bracing rather than challenging. A little past the railway station, he turned left at Main Street and headed out to Grand Reef.

He was thankful for the deserted streets until he realised how conspicuous he'd be to any passing motorist. The police would be bound to regard his presence as suspicious. To reach Grand Reef on time for the convoy, he needed to hurry while staying vigilant of traffic.

Soon, the ride warmed him, but the breeze chilled his hands and face. The combination made his nose run and eyes water, often forcing him to wipe his face with his old hanky. A car travelling at speed raced past, but to John's relief didn't slow or stop.

Despite his overall fitness, his legs soon ached with the unfamiliar exercise of pedalling on a bicycle. Running and walking called on different muscles to those he now used. Soon enough, at ten kilometres an hour, he ate up the distance, and at five o'clock he saw a sign for Grand Reef.

Two hundred metres down the road, he saw two army vehicles parked on the verge. Were they there for the convoy? It was still one hour before the scheduled departure, so perhaps he was just early. But what if the convoy assembled elsewhere? If he delayed now, he might miss it, but he was hesitant to approach the army vehicles.

While contemplating his next move, a car drove past and parked behind the army vehicles. Then, a few minutes later, another car arrived. These were the early risers. Before long, more vehicles joined the queue. John hoped to see a bus in the convoy, but fifteen minutes before departure, none had arrived. It was getting late, and he needed to do something. He pushed the bicycle into the ditch and ran to the line of vehicles.

John approached an African man in a bakkie parked at the queue's rear.

'Sir, I'm going to Salisbury. Could you please give me a lift?'

'Why are you going to Salisbury?'

'I'm going to get a job.'

'You don't have a job?'

'Not yet.'

'Come back when you have one.' The man wound up the bakkie's window.

The next two cars were full. An elderly white couple occupied the fourth car.

'Sir, I'm going to Salisbury. Could you please give me a lift?'

'Where in Salisbury?' the elderly man asked.

Before John could answer, the man's wife interrupted. 'Henry, wind up the window.'

'One minute, Wilma. The lad says he needs a lift.'

'Sorry, but we're not giving a lift to a stranger. He could be a terrorist and murder us.'

'He's hardly likely to murder us in an army convoy.'

'Wind up the window, Henry.'

The man raised his palms and eyebrows. 'Sorry, lad. The wife's not comfortable giving anyone a lift.'

'That's OK, Sir. Thank you.'

John looked at his watch; five minutes before departure. He needed to act fast. Samuel claimed an army camp was the last place they'd expect to find a terr. So who'd be the least likely person a terrorist would approach for a lift?

The convoy commander was giving instructions to a latecomer. John walked up to him. 'Excuse me, Sir. Could you please give me a lift to Salisbury?'

The commander looked surprised at his sudden appearance. 'Where did you come from? I didn't see anyone drop you off.'

'No, Sir. I rode a bicycle here.'

'There's no room for a bicycle.'

'No, Sir. My friend told me to leave it in the ditch, and he'd pick it up later.'

'What's in your backpack?'

'Just my clothes, Sir.'

'Let me see.'

John opened his backpack to let the commander rummage through it.

'OK. Come with me.'

John followed the commander to his vehicle at the front of the convoy. The commander signalled for him to jump into the back seat before getting into the front passenger seat next to the driver. As the convoy pulled away, the second army vehicle joined at the tail end.

The commander turned to John. 'Why are you going to Salisbury?'

'To find a job, Sir.'

'What were you doing in Umtali?'

'I was working on the farms in the area.'

The commander seemed satisfied with his answer and settled back into his seat. Before him was a mounted machine gun pointing over the Land Rover's bonnet, and seated next to John, a soldier guarded another machine gun, mounted at the rear.

With the windscreen lowered to allow for the mounted machine gun, it promised to be a bone-freezing drive, at least until mid-morning when the sun gathered strength. Both the commander and the driver wore goggles to prevent the wind from bringing tears to their eyes.

The army commander turned again to John. 'We swap convoys halfway between Umtali and Salisbury so we can be back in Umtali tonight. I can't guarantee the Salisbury convoy's commander will take you the rest of the way to Salisbury. I'll ask him, but I can't make any promises.'

'Thank you, Sir.'

John's padded jacket had served him well, but with the convoy travelling at fifty kilometres per hour, in the open Land Rover with its lowered windscreen, he soon felt chilled. He turned his collar up and tried to sink low into his seat, with his basketball cap pulled down to shield against the wind.

He jumped when the rear machine gunner suddenly swivelled his weapon at lightning speed. It was a false alarm, with a woman collecting firewood. The man explained that terrs often hid on the edge of the road to ambush vehicles. 'Better safe than sorry, hey?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'Have you noticed those vehicles with the metal contraptions on the roof? They look like wrought iron flowers. Those are twenty-four barrel, twelve-bore shotguns. One turn of the handle in the cab fires twelve barrels, and a second turn fires the remaining twelve. Some

barrels aim at the ground near the vehicle, and other barrels aim farther away, so it covers a wide area. To protect the entire convoy, we spread out the vehicles that have them. If the terrors see those things, they keep their distance.'

'What about the cars ahead and behind?'

'In a convoy, you must leave the front and rear facing barrels unloaded. They use wooden plugs in the unloaded barrels to show they're empty. It's part of the commander's job to make sure they've done that.'

'So, we've got nothing to worry about then?'

'Landmines are the biggest problem, even on tarred roads. They're hard to see, and that's why we travel between thirty and fifty kilometres per hour. The commander and driver concentrate on the road, looking out for them. It's draining, and by the time we get back to Umtali, they're exhausted.'

The convoy reached Inyazura sooner than John expected. His thoughts giving him brief respite from the persistent stiff wind. A lump grew in his throat as they passed the turnoff to his village. Each time he'd travelled along that road, he was light-hearted and eager to see Aneni again. Now, it represented a dark, heart-wrenching memory for him.

His hatred of Simba raised bile in his mouth, and he renewed his vow to avenge Aneni in the most brutal way possible. But had he missed his opportunity on the trek from Camp David through the forest? Zimbabwe was not a large country, so he was sure he'd get another chance to give Simba a befitting end.

After the commander spoke on his wireless to the commander of the Salisbury convoy, he slowed down so they wouldn't arrive at the meeting point too soon. It wouldn't do to arrive early and risk an ambush while they waited.

As the convoy arrived in Headlands, the Salisbury convoy appeared in the distance. The two commanders alighted from their vehicles and exchanged greetings before the Umtali commander beckoned John to join them.

'Well, young man. Fancy meeting you again!'

John recognised the Salisbury commander as the one who'd welcomed him on his trips to the village, once in his mother's car and again on the bus.

'My vehicle is full, I'm afraid, but I'll see if I can talk someone into taking you.' The commander walked to a car two back from the lead army vehicle. He spoke to the driver, who nodded in response, and then beckoned John to join him. John thanked the Umtali commander for the lift and walked over to the car where the Salisbury commander stood.

Inside the Peugeot 404 sat an elegant-looking, mature African woman. The Salisbury commander was encouraging. 'He's a good lad. I've known him for a few years now.' He turned to John. 'This nice lady will take you to Salisbury.' John thanked them both and put his backpack on the back seat and jumped into the passenger seat next to her. The embracing warmth of the car was a welcome relief from the nagging cold wind.

Martha Hungwe was a pleasant, mild-mannered woman in her early fifties. The way she dressed and spoke suggested she was an educated woman with money. She and John soon hit it off because they'd both studied overseas, he in England, and she in the USA. Martha owned a dressmaking business with a large clientele among the wealthier African women in Salisbury.

Their chatter melted the miles, and soon they were on the outskirts of the city.

‘Where should I drop you off?’

John hesitated. He’d not thought about where he’d go when he reached the city. Apart from The Avenues, where Judge Barclay lived, he didn’t know Salisbury.

‘Where will you spend the night?’

‘Is there a cheap hotel near here?’

‘I have a spare room in my house. Only my husband and I live there. You can stay the night with us, and we’ll talk about a cheap hotel tomorrow morning.’

John was grateful for the offer and was quick to accept. With limited funds, he likely would have slept under the nearest bridge.

Martha’s house mirrored her, small and elegant. She showed John to the cosy spare bedroom, where he put down his backpack. Then she took him on a tour of the house and the tiny garden. Though less imposing than Judge Barclay’s residence, it was tidy and inviting. John imagined it to be like the house he and Aneni would have shared when they first married.

When Martha’s husband returned from work, she introduced him to John. Walter was most welcoming. He had an intelligent face, with a neat moustache and short, greying hair. After the first hearty meal he’d experienced in two years, the couple peppered John with questions about his past and his plans. He stuck to his story about working on the farms near Umtali, but otherwise recounted his life without revealing his connection to Judge Barclay.

‘Walter, do you think there’d be work for John at your factory?’

‘I can speak to the boss. If John can read and write, there may be an opportunity somewhere.’

Martha turned to John. ‘Walter has an important job in charge of the wages at his factory. There are two hundred and fifty workers. Each week, he and his assistant calculate their wages, prepare the pay packets, and pay them on time.’

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The next morning, Walter left early for work, while John sat at the kitchen table chatting with Martha and enjoying the breakfast she prepared.

‘Stay with us, at least until you’ve found work. A homeless young man, hanging about in Salisbury, is sure to attract unwanted attention. You could find yourself detained as a suspected terrorist.’

‘Many men must be looking for work.’

‘But most would have somewhere to live. What address could you give if questioned?’

Their engrossing conversation ate up the day, and Walter’s return surprised John. He looked at his watch. Half-past-five already!

Walter looked pleased with himself. ‘I’ve spoken to the boss, and he said you must come with me tomorrow for a job interview. They’re looking for an assistant storeman.’

‘But I’ve never worked in stores.’

Martha was delighted. ‘That’s wonderful! Tomorrow, I’m seeing my sewing ladies, so John would only have the maid for company, but now he might be working. It’s lucky we washed and ironed his clothes today. Walter, do you have a tie John can borrow for the interview?’

‘It’s the stores, Martha. John won’t need a tie. They’ll give him a dust coat to wear. Even the head storeman doesn’t wear a tie.’

Walter spent the rest of the evening giving John tips about the interview. ‘Don’t worry that you have no stores experience. With your education, you’ll soon learn. It’s just a matter of issuing and receiving stock and making sure nothing goes missing.’

‘I only have casual clothes. Will that do for the interview?’

‘Yes, that’s fine. I explained to the boss you’ve been working on farms near Umtali, so he won’t expect you to arrive in a business suit. Just be honest about your capabilities and past accomplishments.’

Walter’s last words gave John a niggling worry because he’d not been honest about what he’d done since he left school, nor was he honest about his life in Salisbury. What if the boss wanted references? He had none to give. If he revealed any of his contacts, it would expose his lies, so he couldn’t even give his primary school headmaster as a reference. Tomorrow, he’d be interviewing for his first job. By nature, John was confidant and optimistic. He never imagined the prospect of a job interview would be so traumatic.

The way his life was unfolding disheartened John. It was nothing like he’d envisaged. He’d considered studying for a law degree at Oxford and, one day, perhaps becoming a judge. And he’d pictured Aneni by his side. How could his promising future end up in this mess? Not yet twenty-one years old, he’d already killed two men and planned to kill a third. How would Martha react if she discovered there was a killer in the house?

Not only had Simba and Takunda destroyed Aneni, but they’d also cut him off from his family because of the decision he’d made to follow them into Mozambique. He’d always been a popular role model for his schoolmates, but now his life was one of anger and a thirst for vengeance. He didn’t like the person he was becoming, but he was determined to achieve his goal. Until then, he wouldn’t rest.