

## Chapter 38 – Unexpected

On eighteenth April 1980, Zimbabwe gained its independence. The eager crowd saw the Union Jack lowered and replaced by the new flag of Zimbabwe. Robert Mugabe became the prime minister and Canaan Banana, the president.

John glimpsed his friend Parker once or twice, but didn't have the chance to talk to him. Their duties on the night kept both the young officers busy, and afterwards, Parker was nowhere to be seen.

The next morning, John tried, without luck, to call his friend. The television news that evening showed footage of British soldiers leaving. John didn't know when Parker departed, and he felt a sudden loneliness flood over him. He thanked his blessings for Martha and Walter but was conscious there were no old friends or family around him. Now he needed to find his mother.

On the following Monday he was off duty, so he walked to The Avenues to the Levis' house, hoping to find them at home. John knocked on the front door, but nobody answered. He knocked again. Still, no one came. As he walked back towards the front gate, the door opened.

An African woman stood swaying in the doorway. Her long hair lay in an untidy mat on top of her head, and her eyes struggled to focus on him.

'Is Mr or Mrs Levi at home?'

'No.'

'When will they be home?'

'They are gone.'

'Are they still on holiday?'

'No, they've gone to South Africa.'

'South Africa? To live there?'

'Yes, in Johannesburg.'

'Do you work here?'

'Yes. One month.'

'Who lives here now?'

'The boss. He's away on business.'

John could smell the alcohol on the woman's breath and decided he was wasting his time trying to get sensible answers from her. What could he do now? Someone must know where his mother was. Then he thought of Greatermans department store and Ms Anderson, who assisted with his clothing throughout his time at Judge Barclay's house. But would she still work there?

John walked back towards the CBD, absorbed in his thoughts, when he heard a voice. 'Mauya, is that you?' He stopped when he heard his traditional name and stared at the speaker.

'Chipo!'

'Yes, it's me. I thought I recognised you.'

'What are you doing here in Salisbury?'

'I'm a gardener, here in The Avenues.'

‘When I last visited the village, you’d gone, and no one knew where you were.’

‘Yes, that terrible day the guerillas came. As soon as I saw them coming, I ran. Those who remained suffered dreadful things. I bumped into your mother, and she told me what Simba and Takunda did to Aneni. Even if I’d been there, I couldn’t have stopped them.’

‘It’s not your fault, Chipo. What could you do?’

‘Sorry.’

‘You say you bumped into my mother? When was that?’

‘About three months ago.’

‘Do you know where she lives?’

‘In a flat or townhouse somewhere on Livingstone Avenue. She didn’t give me her address, but she said it was nice, like a gated community.’

Livingstone Avenue was over fourteen blocks long, but it narrowed the area he needed to search. John exchanged contact details with Chipo and thanked him for the information. They’d met near the corner of Second Street and Baines Avenue, so Livingstone Avenue was only one block to the north. John was short of time, but he could walk the last six blocks on the western end of Livingstone Avenue. The rest, he’d leave for another day.

He walked to Livingstone Avenue and scanned the properties on both sides of the road as he walked towards Prince Edward Street, where Livingstone Avenue ended. He wondered if his mother still drove the red Alfasud. Perhaps Chipo knew, but he’d not thought to ask him. He also looked for Judge Barclay’s shiny black Bentley. By the end of the avenue, he’d not seen anything that might lead him to his mother.

Over the following eight weeks, John walked the length of Livingstone Avenue six times. Sometimes, he spoke to passersby who looked like they might be local to the area, but none had seen a red Alfasud or a black Bentley. Finding his mother seemed like a hopeless quest. Might Chipo have got the wrong avenue?

John stopped to rest, leaning against a tree with his right foot propped against the trunk. He watched as a white Mercedes crawled down the avenue towards him and turned into a driveway across the road. The big saloon stopped in front of a wide automatic gate, which slid open to let it enter. As the gate closed behind the car, John thought he glimpsed the edge of a red car parked in a row, in the shade of a corrugated iron roof. He hurried across the road, but the gate’s iron panels prevented him from seeing anything beyond it.

Red cars in Salisbury were not rare, but by now, John was desperate, and a red car on Livingstone Avenue was worth checking out. He waited at the gate, hoping someone would drive in or out. After an hour, the white Mercedes left the property, and John slipped through the slow closing gate. He approached the red car, an Alfasud, and it bore his mother’s number plate. At last!

As he surveyed the building, John counted the flats in the two-storey complex. But which one was his mother’s? The area seemed deserted, and most of the parking spots stood vacant. Perhaps the residents were at work, and not everyone may have owned a car? The building looked well maintained, and behind the row of car spaces lay a neat garden with a large tree. An African man worked in the flowerbed that ran along the fence. Ah! The gardener might be able to help.

The gardener was no help at all. John considered knocking on all the doors until he found his mother, but then noticed the faded numbers above the parking spaces. On the steel girder, above the red Alfasud, was the number eight painted in white. Might that be the flat number?

While residents would need a key to open the apartment block's grilled entrance on the avenue, nothing prevented access from the parking or garden area.

Six doors stood behind the low wall that marked the ground floor public passageway. John guessed number eight would be the second door upstairs. He sprang up the stairs, and a short distance down the corridor found number eight. He took a deep breath and knocked. A few moments later, the door swung open.

Norah's mouth dropped, and her legs gave way. John grabbed her under her arms before she could fall. 'Mum, it's me, John.'

Norah struggled to speak. 'Of course it's you. Where have you been all this time? We thought you were dead.'

'It's a long story, Mum. Why are you living here? Where is the judge?'

'Hugh died nine months ago. Why didn't you call us and let us know you were safe?'

'I was in Mozambique for two years. There were no phones.'

'How long have you been in Salisbury?'

'About a year now.'

'Why didn't you phone when you returned?'

'I couldn't call before the Lancaster House Agreement because the authorities put me on a wanted list of ZANLA guerillas. If I phoned, it would have put the judge in an impossible position. But later, when I called, the phone was dead. The exchange said the number was disconnected.'

'Don't make excuses. If you'd phoned earlier, you would have got us. All we needed was news that you were safe.'

'Well, as I—'

'I'll make some tea.'

Norah turned and walked to the kitchen, leaving John standing in the hallway. Only now did he notice how spacious and elegant the flat looked. He recognised the furniture from Judge Barclay's house. His desk and leather covered office chair stood in one corner next to the tall bookcase. The comfy leather armchairs sat around the polished wooden coffee table. There also was the display cabinet with the crystal glasses and the beer steins. The layout here was identical to the judge's front room.

Norah returned with the tea, and John continued from when Norah cut him short. 'I tried to find you in December, but no one knew where you were. If I hadn't bumped into Chipso, I still wouldn't have known. Anyway, what are you doing here? And where are Philemon, Abigail, and Thomas?'

'Hugh bought me this apartment for my security. When he died, his brother came from England to sell the house. He didn't want the furniture, so I took some of it. Philemon retired with a generous pension from Hugh. He also provided for Mortimer, Thomas, and Abigail, but I've not seen them since we left the house.'

'What about Tadiwa?'

'Tadiwa got sick and died six months after you abandoned her to face Aneni's death and funeral on her own.'

‘I didn’t abandon her. I went looking for Simba and Takunda to make them pay for what they’d done to Aneni. Besides, Tadiwa’s husband, Michael, would have been there to support her.’

‘That man never supported her in anything. He didn’t even turn up for Aneni’s funeral. So, now you’ve appointed yourself judge and punishment for Simba and Takunda? You should have met your responsibilities to your family and Tadiwa, instead of running off to Mozambique to be a hero.’

‘Don’t you understand how much Aneni meant to me?’

‘Don’t you understand how much you meant to us? Hugh treated you like a son, and you let him down. With distinctions in all your school subjects, Hugh would have paid for your studies at Oxford. He was so proud of you, but then you just disappeared.’

‘Mum, you are seeing things through the lens of Hugh’s mistress.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘You weren’t just Hugh’s housekeeper. You were his mistress, but you never sat at the table at one of his dinner parties? No, you were the serving girl, carrying plates and pouring drinks. I may have been like a son to him, but I was just a serving boy when his friends visited. You were the mistress of the house, but you accepted your position as a servant when he entertained his friends. Why didn’t you demand he acknowledge you instead of just accepting your subservient role?’

‘One minute you say you didn’t want to put the judge in an impossible position, and the next minute you talk like this. His friends, as you call them, were his colleagues. Can you imagine the consequences for him if he acknowledged us? And don’t judge me, your mother. Judge your own actions. You abandon your loved ones to go after Simba and Takunda to punish them. And how will you punish them? Are you a killer now?’

‘Enough! I made a mistake coming here. I’m pointing out the truth. That’s why you’re so upset with me.’

‘Don’t dare talk to me like that.’

‘Right! Goodbye!’ John stormed out of the flat, slamming the door behind him. In the heated exchange, he’d not told his mother about what he’d been doing since his return to Salisbury. He thought she’d be proud he’d become an officer in the National Army. His reunion with his mother was not how he imagined it would be.

By the time he got back to Martha and Walter’s house, he’d calmed down somewhat. He reflected on his mother’s appearance. She looked a lot older and thinner than he remembered. Only three years had passed since he’d last seen her, but Judge Barclay’s death must have put an awful strain on her. John didn’t consider the possibility his absence may also have contributed to it.

He would visit her again when they’d both had time to consider their heated reunion. His sudden appearance shocked her. Even he was unprepared for the emotion of their meeting. She’d been cool at first, but then her anger boiled over. John wasn’t too surprised by her reaction, though perhaps more surprised by his own. The guilt he’d long felt about his impulsive decision to rush to Mozambique without telling his mother made him defensive. But he’d not imagined he’d be there for two years. Nor had he thought it would take another year to reconnect with her.

John settled back into the comfortable existence of home life with Martha and Walter. The days stretched into weeks and the weeks into months. The army kept him busy, and Martha and Walter kept him contented in their cosy home. John often thought about his mother but, following their last meeting, he lacked the resolve to face her. Somehow, he always found a reason to defer another visit.