

Chapter 47 – The Calm

Winston's village lay at the end of a rough dirt road. Prior to John's arrival in the Fifth Brigade, Satan and his murderous troupe ravaged the three other villages that stood on the same bush track. Winston's brother and his family all died in the neighbouring village, with only Bundu, his brother's youngest son, surviving the massacre. When Satan and his men came to Winston's village, they murdered his parents and another elderly couple.

After the rampage, it was unlikely any dissidents remained in the area. Despite this, John was a frequent visitor to Winston's village, making a point of dropping in whenever he passed the dirt road leading to it. The road was one of four, leading into his designated area of responsibility. Following Satan's last incursion into the area, John stationed guards at the entrance to each road to prevent further unwelcome intrusions.

The villagers greeted John's visits with waves and smiles, with the children running and shouting beside his vehicle as it bounced and rattled its way into the village. This was due in part to the food and medical supplies he often brought with him, but also to the sense of safety it gave the villagers. Cebile, more than most, looked forward to his visits, fussing around him and making him tea and something to eat.

At first, Elijah accompanied him on his visits, but as time passed, John often turned up alone. Winston always invited him to stay over if he wished, but he declined the invitations, saying he needed to return to his platoon.

Early one balmy evening, when John visited the village, they were celebrating their good fortune. Under his protection, the villagers could tend their crops and look after the animals without fear of a Fifth Brigade raid. The white rags tied to the wing mirrors on his men's vehicles made life so much easier for the village, creating an air of normality.

The women had brewed beer, and a cheerful atmosphere with laughter and dancing enveloped the village. John had developed a liking for traditional African beer and soon joined in the merriment. The backdrop was the beautiful Matabeleland sunset, silhouetting the trees against the horizon. And as darkness fell, a few discreet fires, shielded from view from the main road, provided a gentle glow in the village centre.

John sat on a fallen log bracketed by Winston and Cebile. They didn't talk of dissidents or the Fifth Brigade, but the beautiful evening and the nourishing food and beer. African beer could be quite potent, and though not drunk, John realised he was a little affected.

'You should stay the night, Sir,' said Winston. The road is not good after dark. Several times before, John had rejected the invitation, but after the relaxing beers, it seemed like a sensible idea. He returned to the Land Rover and picked up the radio. 'Elijah, I'm at Winston's village. I've been drinking too much beer, so I think I should stay here tonight.'

'Sir, is that a good idea? When you are alone and been drinking, you are at risk.'

'Stop fussing, Elijah. Do you imagine these villagers would want to harm me?'

'But what if Satan comes your way, Sir?'

'Satan won't come here, but if you're concerned, tell the guard at the entrance to this road, no vehicle can pass tonight. Don't worry, I'll be back in the morning.'

As the fires died down and the villagers returned to their huts, John walked to the same hut he stayed in when he sprained his ankle. It appeared; Winston set aside the hut for his

exclusive use. John enjoyed being in the village as it reminded him of better times in his own village near Inyazura. The relaxed atmosphere and the simple villagers seemed to wash away his everyday worries.

He undressed and lay down on the sleeping mat with a cushion for his pillow and covered himself with the single blanket. The cackle of hyenas sounded in the distance, and he pulled his blanket closer around him, aware that only a thin curtain stood between him and those awful creatures. Hyenas sometimes entered villages looking for scraps of food, and anyone sleeping in the open risked losing a body part.

John sensed a presence at the door and grabbed his handgun.

‘It’s me, Sir. Cebile.’

‘Did your father send you?’

‘No, Sir. It is what I choose.’

‘Does your father know you’re here?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Cebile, your father thinks if you are with me, you’ll be safe, but I have enemies in the Fifth Brigade who wish me harm. Satan is one of them. With me, you put yourself in greater danger.’

‘That is OK, Sir. I will take that risk.’

The windowless hut was pitch black, with the curtain-covered doorway the only potential source of light, but in the moonless night, the darkness was impenetrable.

John lay silent, struggling for the words to respond to Cebile’s unexpectedly bold approach. He’d fixed his focus on his career and revenge against Simba and not thought too much about women since the night in Mozambique, when Maita visited his tent. And then, he’d only accepted her advances to hurt Takunda, who jealously guarded her company. Perhaps, for her own reasons, that was Maita’s motive, too.

Cebile sat down next to John. In the blackness, he’d not seen her drop her cloth covering, but he became aware she was naked. He reached out and ran his hand down her smooth back before moving it to her firm, young breasts. She possessed a slim, taut body, and he had no thought of rejecting her advances as she straddled him. They made unhurried love, so different from the snatched sex with Maita in Mozambique.

John woke with the first crow of the cockerel. Cebile lay up against him, warm and comforting. He’d not experienced such relaxed contentment since he last saw Aneni. But that love was young and innocent and based on dreams of their future together. Through the thin doorway curtain, the first light of dawn fell on Cebile’s face, and she stirred.

She looked lovelier than ever as her eyelids flickered and opened. ‘I must go back to my hut. The villagers will gossip, and our night together won’t remain a secret for long. Will you come and see me again?’

‘Of course I will. How could I not see you again? But what about the village gossip?’

‘I’ll say I’m doing it to protect the village.’

‘You know that’s not true?’

‘Yes, but that will be our secret.’

After she left, John noticed a small splash of blood on the sleeping mat and wondered if she’d been a virgin or if it was her period. Either way, it didn’t matter. He’d entered the village with few expectations, and would leave fulfilled.

Now, he became an even more frequent guest, staying overnight once a week. He especially loved the nights when the smell of rain hung heavy in the air, followed later by a downpour, leaving the trees dripping until dawn. On other evenings, before sundown, he and Cebile would explore the surrounding bush, admiring the glow on the horizon, turning even redder after the sun slipped over the horizon. The peaceful bush belied the horror occurring on the other side of the main road in Simba's area.

One evening, out of sight in a hollow near the village, they passed a tall, narrow, windowless hut. It stood over twice the height of the usual village huts and boasted a sturdy, padlocked, wooden door.

'Cebile, what is this place?'

'An old sangoma used to live here years ago.'

'Do you know what's in there?'

'I think it's empty. The sangoma left instructions that when he died, all his possessions should be burned and the hut locked. I was a baby then. I'm not sure if anything remains.'

'It's padlocked. Do you know who has the key?'

'Winston may know, but no one ever goes inside because the sangoma left a curse saying anyone who entered the hut would never leave it.'

Later, John asked Winston about the strange hut.

'I was a young man then. My father got the village men to empty the hut and make a bonfire. We had a big celebration with food and beer as the sangoma's things burned. It was his wish. There is nothing left in the hut.'

'And you've never been inside the hut since you emptied it?'

'No! No one would risk the curse.'

'Who has the key to the hut?'

'My father passed the key to me only days before Satan's men killed him. Perhaps the spirits instructed him to give me the key.'

The story of the old sangoma and the curse intrigued John. It sat at the back of his mind for several days.