

Chapter 50 – The Storm

John loved every minute of his week's leave, so he surprised himself to find how pleased he was to be back with his men in the Matabeleland bush. Elijah's reassurance that all went well in his absence was a relief, but several issues niggled at him. He'd been comfortable in his role, leading the platoon for the past year, but he realised the fragility of the situation. Major Kim and Satan might have created havoc while he was away.

David Chimbare said Major Kim felt he was underperforming. What if the Fifth Brigade had prevented his return? Everything he'd worked for would have unravelled. But now he was back with his platoon, and he brushed aside his concerns. It appeared nothing had changed.

David also mentioned talks between Mugabe and Nkomo might lead to the end of the Gukurahundi. Negotiations often dragged on, but he could be back in Harare within the year. In the meantime, he'd like to stick with his platoon until the operations in Matabeleland ceased. John recognised his involvement with Cebile was part of the reason for this. He couldn't imagine leaving her and the village to the mercies of Simba and Major Kim. He wouldn't put it past that pair to indulge in a last bloody farewell to the Gukurahundi campaign.

John soon settled back into the daily routine. Things were quieter than ever. Finding genuine dissidents was getting more difficult. Major Kim would not like to hear his opinion in that regard.

Soon, John's thoughts turned to Saturday night when he'd visit Cebile in the village. He liked her a lot, but Shona and Ndebele were akin to oil and water. He couldn't see himself taking an Ndebele village woman with him back to Harare. It would be difficult in his social circle, and she might experience prejudice in the capital. Also, it could harm his army career. What would his mother say? He couldn't gauge her likely opinion, as Judge Hugh Barclay's influence changed her views in so many ways.

John worried about how he'd break the news of his pending departure to Cebile. But with no date set, he dismissed the thoughts for the moment. He'd looked forward to the next visit and didn't want to spoil it.

Saturday at last. John hummed a tune as he bounced along the rough dirt track in his Land Rover, with the setting sun glinting on the vehicle's bonnet. Two hundred metres from the village, he saw Cebile sitting on a log, waving at him. She'd expected his arrival.

'Cebile, what are you doing here?'

'Waiting for you.'

'You shouldn't wander too far from the village. It might be dangerous. Always keep the village in sight, so they can see you. What if Satan came along, or hyenas? That's the same thing, I suppose. You wouldn't be able to outrun them. Hop in. I'll give you a lift.'

Cebile gave a mock pout and then beamed from ear to ear. She'd not ridden in a motor vehicle before, and now she'd return to the village in style. The villagers gathered around to welcome John. They relished his Saturday visits, missing him the previous week when he was away in Harare. The women and children gathered around Cebile in her new celebrity status, having travelled two hundred metres in John's Land Rover.

John brought a supply of meat with him, and together with a beautiful balmy evening, it became the perfect excuse for another party. The laughter and chatter, complemented by a dark gold rising moon, made for a memorable evening. But as the hours passed, and the moon turned to silver high in the sky, a chilly breeze blew up, encouraging the villagers to return to their huts. In all the merriment, no one noticed the unlit vehicle parked across the valley.

John relished the prospect of cuddling up to Cebile under the blankets in the hut reserved for his exclusive use. Only two long weeks since he'd last seen her, but to him, it felt like an age. Cozy in their blankets, away from the howl of the blustery gusts of wind, they made slow and gentle love. Soon, they drifted off into a contented sleep.

Around two in the morning, a sudden sharp noise woke John. He thought he'd heard a clatter outside his hut. Did the sound wake him, or did he dream it? For a long time, he lay listening for any further sounds. His experience in Mozambique and Matabeleland taught him to pay attention to any unexpected sounds or movement that caught his attention.

After half an hour, John decided the sound was most likely a tin can or drum blown across the village by the strengthening winds. But finding it impossible to go back to sleep, he got up and slipped on his trousers to step outside and investigate.

The blustery wind stripped leaves from the trees, and the branches groaned as they rubbed against each other. An old plastic garden chair somersaulted past him as he stared into the darkness. Then, an empty Fanta Orange can flew by, clattering into the wall of the neighbouring hut. Reassured, John returned to the two blankets that cocooned Cebile and cuddled up close to her, trying to warm his bare chest, chilled by the late-night blast.

Now, his thoughts returned to how he'd find it possible to say goodbye to her when he got his orders to leave Matabeleland. He prayed the army wouldn't send him to the Fifth Brigade base in Gweru, except, perhaps, to return his uniform. With these thoughts troubling him, John's fitful sleep continued until the cockerel's morning crow.

Cebile yawned, stretched, and snuggled her back into John's embrace.

'Morning comes so fast. I wish it would come much slower,' she said.

'It didn't come too fast for me. I had much to think about.'

'What worries you, my love? What kept you awake?'

'It's nothing for you to worry about. I just couldn't stop my mind from working.'

'When you're with me, think only of me. That way, you will sleep well.'

'I was thinking of you, but also other things.'

John needed to get back to his platoon. Major Kim's occasional visits to the camp often took place on a Sunday morning, and John didn't want him making any more complaints about the way he led his men. He skipped breakfast, said goodbye to Cebile, and raced along the dirt track that led to the Bulawayo-Plumtree Road.

The night's high winds were gone, leaving a beautiful fresh morning. The vehicle's tyres threw up stones, rattling the underside of the Land Rover. John hummed to himself as he drove, with his mind still on Cebile. She'd made a welcome difference to his time in Matabeleland, and the thought of leaving her niggled at him.

He rounded a bend and slammed on his brakes. Some idiots had parked their vehicle in the narrowest part of the track. What the hell were they doing there? John saw the white cloth tied to the wing mirror and jumped out of his Land Rover, ready to blast the fools. As he

strode towards the offending vehicle, two armed men approached him from either side. John didn't know them, but then, he recognised Satan and Jackson Mpofu emerging from the other vehicle. He'd assumed the vehicle was one of his, and left his weapon on the passenger seat. He cursed himself for his stupidity.

'Ah, Mauya!' said Satan, addressing John by his traditional Shona name. 'What a pleasant surprise, meeting you here.'

'Not pleasant at all, Simba. What are you doing in my area?'

'We thought you'd benefit from seeing the operation on our side of the main road.'

Satan trained his handgun on John. James's finger rested on the trigger of his rifle.

They stood well back from him, aware of his prowess in unarmed combat. Jackson Mpofu stood even further back with his rifle at the ready.

'Andrew, tie his hands behind him,' Satan ordered.

John watched the corporal rest his rifle against a tree, well out of his reach. He found himself in a hopeless situation. Resistance was futile. If he resisted, he was sure Satan would open fire, even if it risked his own corporal's life. What could he do? Perhaps there'd be an opportunity to escape later. But how?

The corporals marched him towards Satan's vehicle. John surveyed the surroundings. The bush edging the dirt track didn't offer enough cover to make a run for it. With his hands tied behind his back, Satan held the advantage.

In Satan's Land Rover, wedged between Andrew and James, John's mind raced. Should he lunge forward and headbutt Satan? The man drove at speed, and the sudden impact might cause him to crash the vehicle. With his wrists bound, it would be risky for him. But it might offer him a slim chance of escape. And it would be better to try it before he entered Satan's unfamiliar territory. There was little time to act. John readied himself, waiting for a bumpier part of the track, when the vehicle would jolt and sway. Then he'd launch himself into the back of Satan's head.