

Chapter 51 – The Clean Up

The radio in Elijah's tent crackled into life. The sleeping sergeant stirred and reached out for the radio. Damn! It lay just out of reach on the bedside camp table. He leant over farther, before his camp bed tilted and dumped him on the floor. He struggled out of his blankets, grumbling about the disturbance so early in the morning.

'Sergeant Elijah, come in.'

The voice on the radio sounded urgent.

'Sergeant, this is Simon at Road One. Did you or Corporal Samson just drive past me?'

'Of course not. I was sleeping, and you woke me.'

'Did anyone from our camp drive past in one of our vehicles?'

'No! Our orders forbid us to enter Road One when the lieutenant is visiting overnight.'

'Well, someone drove past in a Land Rover with a white cloth on the wing mirror. In the darkness, I couldn't identify the occupants. I thought it might have been you or Samson.'

'Hang on, I'll check the vehicles.'

Elijah hurried to put on his trousers and rushed out of the tent. In two minutes, he was back.

'All our vehicles are here, except for the lieutenants. Did he leave earlier and perhaps was returning?'

'I didn't see him leave. But his Land Rover is a short wheelbase, and the one that drove past was a long wheelbase.'

'OK, I'm coming to check. In the meantime, put the forty-four-gallon drums across the road to create a barrier.'

'That won't work. The road at the entrance is so wide, they'll just drive around them.'

'OK. Hang on, I'm on my way.'

Elijah slipped on his shirt and dragged on socks and boots and grabbed his rifle. Outside his tent, he bumped into Sonny, always an early riser.

'Get your rifle and get Corporal Samson. Hurry!'

'Hey, you, come here!'

Elijah noticed a big man heading towards the camp kitchen with his mess tins. He was one of the recent arrivals.

'Yes, Sir.'

'Don't call me sir, call me sergeant. What's your name again?'

'My name is Akashinga, Sergeant.'

'Oh, yes! Grab your rifle. You're coming with us.'

Within five minutes, with Samson at the wheel, the Land Rover raced out of the camp, carrying the four men. Elijah sat in the passenger seat with a frown on his face and his knuckles white from holding his rifle in too tight a grip.

'Come on Samson, can't you drive faster?'

'It's as fast as this old Land Rover will go, Elijah.'

Usually, it was a thirty-minute drive from the camp to the village. Fifteen minutes to the turnoff, and another fifteen on the dirt track. Elijah held his breath as Samson pushed the accelerator to the floor. Every minute felt like two. Elijah scanned the road ahead for any sign of an approaching military vehicle.

At last, the turnoff appeared. Samson brought the Land Rover to a screeching halt. Simon ran out to greet them.

‘Simon, are they still in there?’ Elijah shouted.

‘Yes, they haven’t come out.’

‘Put the barrels on their side. That way, they’ll cover more of the road and perhaps guide them into the ditch. Put rocks behind the barrels to stop them from rolling.’

‘Yes, Sergeant.’

‘Come on Samson, let’s go.’

Samson floored the accelerator once more, but soon the track became too rocky and rutted to go fast. They drove past the first village, where the villagers waved as they passed. Farther along the track, they came to an extra narrow part where the large trees pressed in on either side.

‘Stop!’ Elijah shouted. Samson slammed on the brakes. ‘Akashinga, grab the axe in the back. Cut down one of those trees so that it falls across the road. Make sure it’s big enough to stop any vehicle from passing. We’ll pick you up on the way back.’

‘Yes, Sergeant.’

‘Come on Samson, let’s move.’

The old Land Rover sped up on smoother parts of the track and slowed to a crawl in rocky and rutted areas. Soon they passed the second village, and five minutes later came to the third village that Satan’s men earlier destroyed. The former inhabitants cleared the trees here, and the road opened onto a flat wide area.

‘Careful!’ Sonny shouted as a vehicle came hurtling towards them. At the last moment, it veered around them, missing by inches. ‘I’m sure I saw the lieutenant in the back,’ said Sonny.

‘Quick, Samson, turn around and follow them,’ Elijah shouted.

The other vehicle had already disappeared around the bends of the twisting track.

‘I hope Akashinga has cut that tree down,’ said Elijah. ‘He’s not had much time.’

Samson gunned the old Land Rover’s engine, crashing through ruts and skipping the wheels over rocks. The occupants held tight to any secure handle for fear of bouncing out of the vehicle. As fast as they drove, they didn’t see the other vehicle. Elijah’s mouth was dry as he contemplated the consequences of the other vehicle getting away.

They raced through the second village on the track, leaving the open-mouthed villagers in a cloud of dust.

‘There they are,’ shouted Sonny.

The vehicle was stationary on the track. Its progress blocked by a fallen tree whose branches towered over it. Three men struggled in vain to shift the obstacle. There was no sign of Akashinga.

When the men saw the Land Rover racing up behind them, they rushed back to their vehicle and grabbed their rifles. As they raised them to greet the new arrivals, a shot rang out and one man, Andrew, dropped like a stone. James, not knowing where the shot that felled Andrew originated, dropped his rifle and threw his hands up in surrender.

Elijah and Sonny jumped out of the Land Rover with their rifles.

Satan grabbed his rifle, but as he tried to leave the vehicle, John launched himself, head-butting him on the side of his head. John’s captor was momentarily disoriented, and by the

time he'd recovered his senses, Elijah stood next to him with his rifle trained on the much-feared man. Meanwhile, Sonny rounded up James. In the excitement, no one noticed Jackson Mpopfu race into the bush on the vehicles left.

Akashinga emerged from the thick bush on the roadside. It was his shot that downed Andrew. He took his knife from its scabbard and cut the rope tying John's wrists.

John rubbed his wrists. 'Thanks guys. Haven't I got the best team in the Fifth Brigade?' He turned his attention to Satan. 'Well, Simba, what to do with you?'

'The river, Sir,' Sonny suggested. 'If he gets across, shoot him when he's on the other side. He'll be lucky to get away, but he'll have a chance.'

'Sonny, why do I feel there's more to this than giving him a sporting chance? You'd enjoy the spectacle, wouldn't you?'

'Come, Sir. I'll show you.'

The powerful Akashinga, with Samson's help, dragged the tree off the track.

It was now Satan's and James's turn to have their wrists tied behind them. Akashinga loaded Andrew's body into the back of Satan's vehicle. John drove while Akashinga, sitting in the rear seat with Satan, made sure he behaved. Samson drove the other vehicle with Elijah and Sonny, and the unfortunate James.

John followed Samson's vehicle, with Sonny directing them to the spot he had in mind. Soon the group stopped on the bank of the river. It hadn't rained in the past three weeks and the river, a raging torrent a month ago, was now a gentle flow.

John turned to Simba in the rear seat. 'Well! What do you think? You shouldn't have too much trouble swimming that river.'

They all alighted from the vehicles and stood surveying the river and the bush on the opposite bank. If Satan made it across, he'd need to cover only two metres before the thick bush swallowed him. It occurred to John he'd be giving Simba a sporting chance to get away, though he was determined to not let that happen.

'Right, untie them.'

Akashinga untied the two captives while Elijah, Samson, and Sonny stood guard.

'OK, you two! When you're ready, you can swim across and try to reach the trees. I won't shoot until you're clear of the water. That's fair, isn't it? But if you don't go, I'll shoot you right here.'

The two eyed the water, weighing up their chances of success. Satan looked as if he was about to go but froze when he caught sight of a partially submerged shape glide past them. Without warning, James made a sudden dash for the water, taking everyone by surprise. Perhaps he'd not noticed the crocodile, or thought Satan was about to go. Perhaps, he reasoned, Satan was John's prime target, and if he left the water ahead of him, John might hold his fire until Satan emerged from the river. Either way, his timing was not good. Halfway across the river, James disappeared without making a sound.

'OK Simba, you're next. Go while your corporal is keeping the crocodile busy.'

'There's lots of crocodiles here.'

John glared at Sonny for his unhelpful remark.

'You're crazy if you think I'm swimming across this crocodile-infested river.'

'Believe me, Simba, this is your best option. This way you have a slim chance, which is more than you gave Aneni.'

‘I’m not doing it. I’m not swimming this river.’

‘OK! Until we think of something else, I know the perfect place to hold you until we’re ready.’

‘Hah! Jackson Mpofu got away. He’ll soon return with all my men, looking for me. They’ll also be looking for you.’

Akashinga took Andrew’s body from the back of Satan’s vehicle and swung it around above his head before tossing it into the water. A frenzied splashing where the body landed confirmed Sonny’s comment about a lot of crocodiles in the river.