

Chapter 54 – The End Game

Nyati dropped John at the Monomotapa Hotel, where he could get a taxi to Martha and Walter's house. John sighed in relief at being rid of the dour man. Nyati proved every bit as dull as the first time he'd met him. Within minutes, a taxi pulled up at the hotel entrance to drop off a passenger, and John hopped in.

At a little past six, the taxi pulled up in front of the house. It looked as neat as ever. John grabbed his backpack and walked to the front door, and knocked. He had his own front door key, but as he hadn't the time to warn them he was coming, he thought it best to knock.

As always, his arrival delighted Martha and Walter. 'Just in time for dinner,' said Martha. 'How wonderful!'

'But you weren't expecting me and wouldn't have cooked for me.'

'Don't worry, I've cooked more than enough.'

Walter walked to the pantry cupboard and took out a bottle of red wine. 'So,' he asked, 'What will you do now you've left the Fifth Brigade?'

'My orders are to report to David Chimbare at Kabrit Barracks next Monday. I'm not sure what plans he has for me. Perhaps I'll be his aide-de-camp once again.'

'And how will you spend your week's leave?' Martha enquired.

'First, I'll visit my mother tomorrow and see how she's doing. You know she's keen for me to move in with her?'

'Yes, we'll miss you if you leave us, but she is your mother, so you need to respect her wishes.'

'Of course, I'll visit you as often as the army allows, and if I'm based here in Harare, it will be frequently.'

As always, when John returned from his army stints, the three celebrated until late. Walter even took out a second bottle of red. The laughter and chatter reminded John of what he'd so missed when away in Matabeleland. Lying on his bed in his cosy room, he felt blessed having the elderly couple in his life.

With the red wine not helping him to sleep, John lay awake thinking about his time in Matabeleland with his men, Winston, the villagers and, of course, Cebile. He was glad for the experience, despite his dislike of the Fifth Brigade and many of the men within it.

Now that he'd avenged the wrong to Aneni in full, he could rest without the sense of unfinished business hanging over him. John recalled the night at Inyazura Station with the chilly wind gusts forcing him into a sheltered corner, when he swore revenge against Simba and Takunda. He hadn't realised then how long it would take to fulfil his vow. If he'd not met Samuel at the station, it might have taken even longer.

Now, his thoughts turned to the future and what it might hold. The prospect of entering a new chapter in his life thrilled him. He didn't expect he'd be returning as aide-de-camp for David. His friend always acted in his best interests, and he believed David would not let him take a backward step in his career.

No doubt, his mother would press him to move in with her sooner rather than later. Norah lived in a nicer area than Martha and Walter, but he'd been happy in their home. Walter replaced the father he never knew, and Martha filled in for his mother over the years she'd rejected him. On his last visit, his mother appeared to have softened her view of him and

wanted things to return to normal. Before Aneni's tragedy, they'd been close, and he hoped they'd soon be close again.

On Tuesday morning, John rose, relaxed and contented. He ate breakfast with Walter before seeing him off to work and returned to the dining table to enjoy a second cup of tea with Martha.

'Oh!' she said, 'I almost forgot. This letter arrived for you on Friday. Walter intended to ask David Chimbare how to send it to you, but now you've saved us the trouble.'

John took the letter and examined the official-looking envelope before tearing it open to remove the single folded sheet it contained.

The letterhead read: Soloman Bernstein and Associates Legal Practitioners

John read the brief letter with trembling hands.

Dear Mr Ziyambi,

Ref: Last will and testament of Ms Norah Ziyambi

As sole beneficiary of your late mother's will, we request you to contact us at your earliest convenience to finalise all matters in terms of the said will.

Yours faithfully,

Soloman Bernstein

John's face turned ashen, and Martha was alarmed.

'What is it, John? What's the matter?'

The words stuck in John's throat as he tried to answer. When he could speak, his voice trembled. 'The letter says my mother has died. It's from her lawyers, asking me to contact them.'

'Oh! John, I'm so sorry,' said Martha, close to tears.

What else could she say? The long, sombre day passed at a snail's pace, and Walter commiserated with John when he returned from work. The quiet, reflective evening stood in stark contrast to the merriment of the previous night. Later, back in his room alone, John felt empty, with a hollow churning in his stomach. His throat felt constricted and his heart was heavy.

The following morning, John phoned the lawyer's office and was relieved Soloman Bernstein could see him later that day. John arrived at the lawyer's office at three o'clock, and the receptionist showed him into Bernstein's office straight away.

'Mr Ziyambi, please accept my condolences.'

'Thank you, Mr Soloman. When and how did my mother die?'

'She died of a heart attack three weeks ago. We notified the army, and I understand they passed on the message to the Fifth Brigade.'

'Well, it never reached me. What about my mother's funeral?'

'Your mother left strict instructions to proceed with the funeral if you hadn't responded within a fortnight. Apparently, she didn't want to distract you from your military duties. Her

ashes lie alongside her former employer in the memorial gardens. I'll give you directions so you can visit her.'

'Thank you.'

'Now, about the will. As I stated in my letter, you are the sole beneficiary. Your mother's assets include her apartment. There is also a trust fund established in the UK, which will provide you with a generous monthly allowance. And of course there is the car. All the keys and other personal items are in your mother's handbag, which we have kept here, waiting for you.'

'Where did my mother have her heart attack, and how did you hear of it?'

'She suffered the heart attack in the waiting room at her doctor's surgery. Even there, they couldn't revive her. She'd earlier told her doctor if she passed, he should notify me. He said she'd suffered from a weak heart for the past two years.'

'I didn't know.'

Soloman Bernstein shrugged. 'I'm sorry.'

'Where is the car right now?'

'Parked at your mother's apartment. The remote control for the gate is also in her handbag.'

On Thursday morning, John caught a taxi to the apartment. He fiddled with the set of keys, working out which one gave him access to the building, and which one opened the front door. The other keys on the key ring puzzled him.

He entered the apartment and looked around. Spotless, with everything in its place, it reflected his mother's years as Judge Hugh Barclay's housekeeper. It had been locked up for three weeks, so he opened the windows for fresh air. He'd only ever seen the open-plan lounge, dining area, and kitchen on his earlier visits. The built-in cupboard in his mother's bedroom held her clothes and other items. In the second bedroom, his clothes, including the suits Judge Barclay bought him, hung in the cupboard.

John sat down in one of the comfy armchairs in the lounge, guilty about the way he'd responded to his mother. Norah may have sat in the same chair only three weeks earlier. He'd not known of her illness. She'd been irascible, perhaps because of her condition, and he'd been impatient with her.

As he sat staring at the room in front of him, he noticed a framed certificate on the lounge wall. He got up for a closer look. The embossed certificate was his A-level results. A distinction in every subject! Only now did a tear roll down his cheek. His mother must have been proud of him to frame the certificate and hang it there. How strange he'd not noticed it on his earlier visits.

It wasn't fair she was no longer alive to see this beautiful, bright, comfortable morning. John's grey mood seemed wrong for such a day. Once again, fate had snatched away a loved-one just when he'd expected a joyous reunion. He recognised he'd led a charmed life aside from his two great tragedies.

An uncontrollable rage rose in John. Simba and Takunda caused Aneni to take her own life, which led to his estranged relationship with his mother when he travelled to Mozambique without telling her. Embittered, he reasoned his revenge on Simba was justified. By comparison, Takunda had been lucky. Through the tears, any qualms he may have had about their demise evaporated.