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CHAPTER TEN

Squeak

*The Secretary bird dies with its feathers.
(A man's character dies with him)
– Sindebele proverb*

Gowrie Farm, Norton, March 2002

At 6.30am on the morning of 18 March 2002 Debbie du Toit [now Tingle] got a phone call from Norton from a neighbour of her cousin Terry Ford.

'Hurry, can you come? Terry has been found dead!'

The du Toit/McChlery and Ford families had owned Gowrie Farm since the early 1900s and Terry Ford operated both Gowrie and the neighbouring Msasa Farm in Norton for his mother, his Aunt Paddy and himself. The farms are located in the rural area of Zvimba, the homeland of President Robert Mugabe and the area in which his sister, Sabina Mugabe, was the sitting Member of Parliament. Terry's cousin Debbie told how it came to be that war veterans were living in their aunt's house when Terry was murdered:

'Our aunt, Paddy, had died the July before Terry was killed, with us all sitting around her bedside as she passed away. She had been like a mum to Terry (never having had kids of her own) so Terry, in his mourning, had left her whole household intact until he was ready to dispense all her beautiful stuff. He lived in a house that he had built only about 500 metres away so he thought things were safe to leave like that. And then the war vets moved into our Aunt Paddy's house! And we couldn't do anything about it.'

Terry was a successful farmer of both livestock and crops and produced 800 metric tons of wheat annually – enough for one million loaves of bread a year. Terry also reared thoroughbred horses and Merino sheep. Bob McChlery, another cousin, described Terry as a:

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'Quiet, ever-smiling man; a teetotaller, always friendly, always compassionate to his family, his workers and his animals. He often had a dog on his lap, an orphaned lamb under his arm or a horse between his knees.'

When war veterans stopped Terry from farming he got a job in a school in Harare and commuted backwards and forwards to Gowrie Farm. He was at the farm preparing for the return of his son Mark from New Zealand when tragedy struck. Debbie du Toit described what she saw when she arrived at the scene:

'From blood marks and spoor, we gathered that Terry had been asleep upstairs in his bedroom. The war vets had broken into the downstairs part of his house, stolen the keys to the school vehicle and threatened to drive away with it. Terry, trying to stop the vehicle from being stolen – had charged downstairs (dressed only in his boxer shorts and sandals) with his revolver – and jumped onto the side of the vehicle, trying to grab and turn the steering wheel. You could see in the yard where the vehicle had spun when Terry grabbed the wheel. Terry had fallen off the side of the vehicle, and the war vets had turned the vehicle right around and tried to run Terry over. Terry had been trying to run away, but had slipped and lost his shoe in a large puddle. The shoe was still there. He had got up and run towards the fence. The vehicle had rammed him straight into the fence. He managed to get up again, and was running to try and hide behind a tree. But the vehicle got to him first and rammed him straight into the tree. He was crushed and fell down, dropping his revolver. The war vet picked up the revolver and shot Terry at point blank range in the forehead. There was blood splattered all over the tree under which he was lying and all over the vehicle that had rammed into him.'

Six shots were fired.

Terry's dog, a Jack Russell named Squeak, lay next to his master, faithful to the last and refusing to move. Debbie said:

'It was very traumatic. Harry and I had to lift Squeak off Terry's body – kicking and snarling and even trying to bite us, until we managed to get him into our car. There were three other dogs in the yard. All were absolutely traumatised by the time we got there. The two Border Collies, Bwana and Collie, had run a path around the security fence trying to ward off the war vets breaking in. There was a thatched grass fence that was shredded to pieces where the Collies had been ripping it with their teeth – trying to get at the war vets. The other little Jack Russell, Bubbles, we found cowering inside.'

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While they waited for the police to arrive, Debbie went across for one last look at her late Aunt Paddy's house. What she found there is something she will never forget, details that seldom, if ever, were known or revealed after farmers' homes had been invaded by war veterans.

'I managed to retrieve some photos and trinkets – all that I could fit into a couple of plastic bags. The war vets clothes and hats were hanging on a coat rail, over my Aunt's clothes. They had been sleeping in the bed where she had died. There were cigarette stompies and Chibuku [beer] containers all over her bedroom. I still remember the smell. It was like a dirty, smoke-filled pub – what I imagine a shebeen [bar] smelling like. All the cupboards and drawers throughout the house had been vandalised. To be honest I could have retrieved a lot more stuff – but I have never encountered such an intense feeling of evil in all my life. I took fright and ran out of there as fast I could. Just as well because they found the revolver that shot Terry in the house later that day. A war vet called Bowambi, who had been living in Aunt Paddy's house, had been the one who pulled the trigger. Unbeknown to us he had also been standing in the crowd who had gathered at the crime scene but had run off when the riot police arrived. He was picked up but released later. Mark visited the police station at a later stage but no docket was found.'

Meryl knew only a few of these details when she attended the funeral of Terry Ford on 22 March 2002. Later that same day she set out to Gowrie Farm in Norton. The two Jack Russells, Bubbles and Squeak, had by then been taken in by family friends and the two Border Collies were being cared for by the SPCA in Chegutu until they could be moved to Debbie's farm in Selous. Meryl had been asked to try and rescue dogs that had belonged to Terry Ford's step father, Dan Coetzee who had died the year before and also to check on the dogs that belonged to war veterans who had been taken into custody by police investigating the murder. Accompanied by SPCA Inspector Tawanda, Meryl went to the police station in Norton.

The Chief Superintendent remembered Meryl from his last posting, commenting that the SPCA had done 'a very good job' rescuing animals in what he called the 'debacle' of invaded farms in Mhangura and he immediately agreed Meryl could go and collect dogs from Gowrie Farm. When Meryl said that the dogs belonging to the arrested war veteran may have to be removed if there was no one who was able to look after them, the Superintendent changed his mind. Clearly unhappy with having to agree to something that concerned a war veteran, the Superintendent made a phone call and then said that Meryl could only deal with the late Mr Ford's dogs but not those belonging to the war veteran. Meryl was not happy and tried to argue for the welfare of the animals