

## Chapter 4 – Job Hunting

Morning arrived all too soon. For Norah, it seemed like she'd just laid her head on the pillow, when already it was time to rise. In fact, she'd slept soundly and was well rested. She sprang out of bed. Today, she'd get a job. She was sure of it.

Daisy was already up and dressed, returning from the house kitchen with cups of tea for herself and Norah. 'You better hurry with your shower, or you won't be ready to go with the madam to the city.'

A shower? What a luxury! No need to wash herself with an old facecloth dipped in river water collected in a tin drum each afternoon. Norah hurried to the kia's bathroom with a towel Daisy handed her. The small room boasted a polished concrete floor and a wooden plank door that ended a foot above the floor and a similar distance from the top of the doorway.

A block of Sunlight soap lay on a ledge on the shower wall. Norah turned on a tap, and a spray of cold water prickled her body. A second tap caught her attention, and she turned that one on as well. Soon, the water temperature rose to a comfortable level, reminding her of the river water near the village in mid-October. Norah soaped and rinsed herself before drying with the towel. So quick and easy; what a joy.

Daisy brought from the kitchen a pile of hot toast, with butter and strawberry jam, for their breakfast. 'Madam Sandra said you should go to the front gate at half-past seven and wait there.'

Norah brushed her teeth and dressed in her best clothes, ready for the day ahead. At half-past seven, she made her way around the house to the front garden with its neat lawn and attractive trees. The sparkling Salisbury morning promised a sunny, warm day.

At precisely seven-thirty, Sandra emerged from the front door. 'Morning, Norah. Ready for your busy day?'

Just as Norah was about to answer, Andrew arrived in the old Land Rover. After an exchange of greetings with the driver, the women jumped into the vehicle. Andrew reversed out of the driveway and set off down the road.

When they turned onto the Borrowdale Road, heading into the city, the heavy traffic was nothing like the previous evening's empty, wet roads. Then, the darkness cloaked the surroundings and had been a calming welcome to Salisbury. But now, the honking horns and roar of the traffic gave her a different view of city life.

Sandra turned to Norah. 'Remember, you must be here at half-past five this evening. I've written my address on this piece of paper. If you're not here when we pass, you'll have to find your own way back to my house.'

'What is this word here, Madam?'

'Vainona! It's the name of the suburb.'

'Ah!'

Soon, Andrew slowed the Land Rover and pulled up at the roadside.

Sandra turned again to Norah. 'This is the corner of Seventh Street and Montagu Avenue. This evening, at five-thirty, wait for us on that side of the road. Don't be late.'

'No, Madam, I will be here.'

‘Bye, Norah. Good luck with your job search.’

‘Thank you, Madam.’

Norah watched the Land Rover disappear into the distance amongst the crowd of cars. She looked around. Which way to go? The heavy traffic on Seventh Street discouraged her from crossing to the other side, so she turned and headed towards Eighth Street.

There were several houses that looked like they might hold wealthy families. Sandra said this was a good suburb, so she’d start here. Almost at once, reality raised its ugly head. As she opened the gate of the first house, two snarling dogs came charging towards her. Norah slammed the gate shut. The dogs stood their ground, barking and snarling with bared teeth. Norah waited to see if anyone would come to investigate the commotion. No one did.

The next house looked just as promising. She pushed open the gate but didn’t enter. The gate made a loud squeaking noise, so she opened and closed it several times, testing for dogs. None came, though the dogs next door obliged with yet more barking.

Emboldened, Norah opened the gate and walked up the driveway to the house. As she was about to knock, the door swung open. A stern looking African woman stood there. ‘What do you want?’

The unfriendly welcome stopped Norah in her tracks. ‘I’m looking for work.’

‘There’s no work here.’ The heavy door closed with a deep thud.

Norah sighed and walked back out of the garden, shutting the squeaky gate behind her. At the next house, a kindly-looking, elderly white woman stood at the gate. ‘Are you looking for work, my dear?’

‘Yes, Madam.’ Norah gave the woman a bright smile.

‘I’d like to give you a job, but we already have two housemaids. Try next door. You never know.’

The next house was quiet. There were no dogs, and nobody answered her knock. Norah looked across the road. The houses looked just as impressive, but she ignored them and walked a block to the next street to try her luck. The results were like the first street she tried. From late morning, the sun’s rays developed bite, and she was grateful for the rows of large shady trees that ran through the suburb.

Norah’s stomach rumbled. She’d forgotten about lunch. It was two-thirty, still three hours before she was due to meet nurse Sandra. With her energy levels low, her door-to-door enquiries slowed to a crawl. Although she carried a little money, she’d seen nothing resembling a suitable shop selling potato chips, cool drinks, or sandwiches.

Job hunting was proving to be a tiring and dispiriting process. By four o’clock, with her shoulders drooping, Norah made her way to the meeting point to wait in the shade for Sandra. The cars appeared to race to various predetermined destinations, and the pedestrians walked with purpose. Norah felt excluded in the city environment.

Sandra’s arrival at five-thirty was a relief for Norah after what seemed like an interminable wait.

‘Well, did you find a job, Norah?’

‘No, Madam.’

‘You look exhausted. Have you eaten anything?’

‘No, Madam.’

‘Tomorrow, you must take some sandwiches with you. You can’t walk around all day with nothing to eat or drink.’

‘Yes, Madam.’

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The next two days were equally unproductive, though Sandra’s sandwiches and a bottle of water made a big difference to the number of houses she visited each day. But all the homes appeared to have an established complement of servants.

On the third day, Friday evening, Sandra said they’d not be travelling into the city again until Monday morning. Norah was pleased to hear that, though she didn’t want to overstay her welcome at Sandra’s house. Job hunting was a new and exhausting exercise for her. In the bush, she’d walk for kilometres with ease, but going house-to-house in the suburbs, facing rejection at every door, drained both her energy and her will.

Daisy and Norah sat on chairs at the back of the kia, chatting, and enjoying a meal of sadza and spiced meat.

‘Madam Sandra is holding a party tomorrow night, so she’ll need me to help her prepare.’

‘Can I help?’

‘No, you don’t work here. It’s my job to help the madam get ready.’

Daisy’s response disappointed Norah. Two whole days with nothing to do! Why couldn’t she help? Many thoughts ran through her mind as she lay in bed that night. She thought about her village, little John, and Tadiwa. With no means of contact, they seemed so far away. How were they managing without her? Soon, she drifted off to sleep.

Norah dreamt she heard voices; one calm, and the other protesting. Backwards and forwards the voices went until Norah realised she wasn’t dreaming. It was morning, and Sandra and Daisy were discussing something of importance in the garden, outside the kia.

‘Daisy, you’re not well enough to work today. Not only will you make yourself worse, but you’ll pass your cold on to me.’

‘But, Madam, what about the party? You can’t do it all by yourself.’

‘I will manage somehow. You mustn’t come into the house with your heavy cold. Perhaps Norah can give me a hand if she’s available.’

Daisy’s response was inaudible.

Norah jumped out of bed and hurried to the shower. She dressed and went to check on Daisy. Before she could knock on Daisy’s door, Sandra appeared with a tray holding two plates of toast with butter and jam, and two mugs of tea.

‘Daisy is sick today, Norah. Can you help me get ready for my party tonight?’

‘Yes, Madam.’

‘Come into the house after you’ve had your breakfast.’

‘Yes, Madam.’

Sandra took Daisy her breakfast, while Norah returned to her own room to eat hers. Perhaps it was best not to go near Daisy and her heavy cold, but Norah also guessed Daisy wouldn’t be pleased with the turn of events.

After breakfast, Norah approached the house and ascended the back steps to the kitchen. This was the first time she’d seen the inside of a white person’s house, though her mother’s endless stories gave her a little familiarity with the contents. There stood the fridge, the oven with its hot plates, the electric kettle, and the toaster. She could imagine the contents of the

kitchen drawers and what lay beyond the pantry door. Her mother's endless stories, with their excruciating detail, were now paying dividends.

Everything her mother told her was there. Now she could put a picture to each item her mother described. A shiver of excitement ran through Norah. Any reservations she may have had about her ability to work in a wealthy home evaporated. She was a sponge, absorbing everything she saw while assisting Sandra.

Norah rinsed and wiped dry the wine glasses in the display cabinet. She recognised them from her mother's description of when she was a maid helping prepare for dinner parties. Now was the opportunity to show Sandra how capable she was. The second drawer she opened held the cutlery.

'Madam, I can't find the fish knives.'

'Goodness, Norah! Have you done this before?'

'No, Madam.'

'You've been so much more help than I imagined.'

'My mother told me all about her work as a housemaid in the city.'

'So, you've learnt the theory, and now you are getting the practical experience. How clever of your mother to teach you so well.'

'Thank you, Madam.'

'Your initiative is impressive, Norah, but we don't need to set the table tonight. I'm holding a cocktail party. That means we'll be serving trays of snacks, and drinks of wine and beer. There's no sit-down dinner.'

Norah spent the afternoon helping Sandra with other chores, including sweeping the floors and cleaning the bathroom. Sandra asked her to return at seven to help prepare the trays of snacks, and to stay on duty to wash any glasses or plates that needed to be reused. Norah ate an early dinner, took a shower, and dressed in her best clothes.

The guests arrived, and gradually the noise from their chatter and laughter increased. Although Norah worked in the kitchen, preparing snacks and washing dishes, it felt as if she was at the party. If only her mother could see her now! Looking after the kitchen gave her access to the snacks, which smelt delicious. It also allowed her to sample a drop of the wine, both red and white, between the sips of beer.

Soon, the accumulated samples bolstered Norah's confidence, and she took it upon herself to take out snacks to the gathered guests. They were all so friendly and polite.

'Are you Sandra's maid, my dear?' one lady asked.

'No, her maid is sick. I'm a friend.'

'How nice of you to help her out.'

When Norah started offering drinks to the guests, Sandra thanked her for her help and told her she could take off the rest of the evening.

Norah returned to her room but was far too excited to sleep. It was the best party she'd ever attended. She listened to the loud music and imagined the guests chatting and dancing, and wished she was still there. It was late before the noise from the party faded, and she drifted off to sleep.

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The morning light crept into the room through the narrow windows near the ceiling. Norah blinked herself awake. Her head ached and her mouth was dry. The idea of breakfast was unappealing. The shower did not help her feel any better.

When leaving the party the night before, she promised Sandra she'd return in the morning to help clean up the mess. Now, with her nausea and stomach churning, she made her way to the house to tell Sandra she was unwell.

'I think I have caught Daisy's cold, Madam.'

'No, I doubt that, Norah. I think you may have sampled one too many sips of wine last night. My guests were all impressed with you, offering them snacks and drinks. I'm sure you'll feel much better this evening. Rest today and keep out of the sun.'

Regular visits to the toilet to bring up red liquid led to a bitter taste in Norah's mouth. She vowed to avoid red wine in the future, and possibly even the white wine and the beer.

As Sandra predicted, by six in the evening, she was much better, though her mouth was bitter from the evil-smelling green bile she'd brought up through the day. She needed something to eat to take the bitterness from her mouth. She heard Sandra taking in food for Daisy next door.

Norah came out of her room just as Sandra was leaving Daisy.

'There are plenty of leftover snacks in the kitchen, Norah. Help yourself. You can heat the toasted cheese slices in the oven.'

'Thank you, Madam.'

On her way back to her room with a plate of hot snacks, Norah met Daisy emerging from the toilet. Daisy said nothing in response to Norah's enquiry about her condition, but the look she gave her told Norah everything she needed to know. Daisy was never the friendliest of persons, but she now looked hostile.

Norah lay in bed worrying about the situation. Sandra didn't pressure her to get a job and leave, but Daisy might become a problem. As always, Norah's last thoughts before sleep were of little John and Tadiwa.