

Chapter 6 – A Testing Time

The Land Rover slowed to a halt in front of Norah. Sandra and Andrew, the driver, looked at her with expectation. ‘Why the glum face, Norah? Didn’t the interview go well?’

‘Yes, Madam, but four other people also applied for the job. Perhaps they have more experience than me.’

‘Well, you must wait and see. There’s no point being glum about it.’

The drive home progressed in silence, with conflicting thoughts swirling in Norah’s head. She didn’t want to discuss things in front of the flippant Andrew. He seemed to enjoy her lack of success and was prone to making comments such as, ‘Well, you can always try again next year.’

Norah was now concerned how she’d exaggerated her experience. After dinner, she went to the house to give Sandra more details about her interview.

Sandra was aghast. ‘Norah, you can’t tell lies in an interview. They’ll soon find out you can’t do much cooking. Especially the dishes they’re likely to want.’

‘Sorry, Madam, but I had to try. Mr Stanford said he’d ask you for a reference.’

‘A reference! How can I give you a reference? You don’t even work for me.’

The phone rang, and Sandra walked to the hallway to answer it.

‘Hello. Yes, speaking. Yes, that’s right. Only for a few months, but she’s ambitious to improve her situation. Yes, she’s been a great help with my cocktail parties. Honest and hard-working. Yes, I’ll be sorry to lose her. Hold on, please. I’ll call her.’

Sandra put her index finger up to her lips and held the receiver tight against her thigh. It was only a couple of minutes, though it seemed much longer. ‘It’s for you.’ She handed the phone to Norah.

‘Hello.’

‘Miss Ziyambi, this is Stanford.’

Norah’s heart sank. For Stanford to phone so soon must mean she was unsuccessful.

‘I completed the interviews this afternoon and want to offer you the job. None of the other candidates could match your experience. Would you be able to start on Monday? If you accept the position, you can move in straight away.’

‘Thank you, Mr Stanford. I’ll be there just after eight on Monday morning.’

‘Please, just Stanford. We look forward to seeing you then. Goodbye.’

Norah turned to Sandra. ‘He says I’ve got the job. I must start on Monday.’ She put her hands to her face. ‘Madam, you said I mustn’t lie, but when you answered the phone—’

‘Never mind that, Norah. You got the job, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, Madam. Thank you. But now, can you show me everything a housekeeper needs to know?’

‘Goodness, Norah! I can’t teach you everything in one weekend. Tomorrow morning I’m busy, but tomorrow afternoon and on Sunday we’ll see how much we can achieve.’

‘Thank you, Madam.’

Norah couldn’t sleep. Tomorrow she’d learn everything a housekeeper needed to know. At last, tiredness overcame her, and she drifted off into a restless sleep.

Norah woke a little later than usual. Despite her restless night, she didn't feel at all tired as the adrenaline surged through her body. She hurried to shower and dress and eat breakfast. Sandra had already gone out in her own car, which she used on weekends and at night during the week.

What if Sandra came back late? It would eat into the time available for learning everything a housekeeper should know. In the back garden, Norah paced back and forth. Patience was never her strong point.

She walked next door and paid Gladys the six shillings she owed her for the haircut. Before now, she'd been loath to spend any money, but soon she'd earn good wages. Only now, she realised Stanford never mentioned the wages the housekeeper would receive, but she was sure it would be ample for her purposes.

Sandra returned at midday to find Norah waiting by the gate. 'My, you are keen to get moving. OK, you can come and help me prepare my lunch.'

It disappointed Norah to discover Sandra's lunch was only a ham and cheese sandwich with lettuce, and not something cooked.

'Here, try one, Norah, so you know what it tastes like.'

Norah spent the afternoon learning about the machines and other equipment in the house. She learnt how to use the vacuum cleaner and all about the cleaning liquids and powders that sat under the kitchen sink and bathroom cabinet. Thanks to her mother's stories of working in the city, this part proved quite easy for Norah to learn.

Later, Norah helped Sandra prepare afternoon tea, and assisted Daisy with cooking Sandra's dinner. It was a simple meal of steak, egg, and chips. After Norah washed the dishes with Daisy, Sandra suggested she return in the morning to help Daisy cook the breakfast.

Norah and Daisy talked until the early hours about household duties, though Daisy could only speak from her limited experience. Norah wanted something more sophisticated.

She was up and ready early the next morning, hurrying Daisy to start the preparations for Sandra's breakfast.

After breakfast, Daisy left, but Norah stayed behind for more lessons from Sandra.

'Now, Norah, you have learnt all about the equipment and machines in the house. I've shown you the liquids and powders we use for cleaning and washing. The rest of today, we'll learn as much as possible about cooking the sort of food your employer might want. But goodness knows how much you can learn in one day.'

Because of the limited time, Sandra could only show her the basics of cooking, including boiling, frying, roasting, and steaming. For her Sunday night dinner, she tried to include as many of the cooking processes as practical. She showed Norah how to cook rice, steam vegetables, and boil an egg, and made her sample everything.

'If I were you, Norah, I'd spend as much time as possible with the chef at your new job. You can only learn through experience. Help him prepare the meals if he'll let you. Some cooks don't like anyone else coming into their kitchen. And remember what I said earlier. Be careful. When you can smell your cooking, it's often a sign the food is about to burn.'

That night, Norah's head was spinning. There was so much to learn, and Sandra said she'd hardly got started. Unfortunately, her mother seldom spoke about cooking and recipes. How would she cope in the chef's absence?

Monday morning already! Norah wasn't sure how much sleep she got. It seemed she'd lain awake all night worrying about her new job, but perhaps she dreamt it. Either way, morning came fast.

Norah jumped out of bed and hurried to the shower. She dressed in her smart new clothes and packed everything else into her small suitcase. She shared her last breakfast of tea and jam on buttered toast with Daisy. The maid was much friendlier, now Norah was leaving.

At half-past seven, with a tinge of sadness, Norah shut her room door behind her. She'd stayed there only a fortnight, but it felt like she was leaving home because Sandra made her so welcome. As she passed the kitchen, she shouted her goodbyes to Daisy. She walked to the front garden and waited by the gate for Sandra to appear, and for Andrew to arrive. When Sandra came out of the house, she carried a large plastic bag bulging with its contents. 'Norah, I've found some more clothes I don't wear anymore. Perhaps you may find them useful.'

'Oh! Thank you, Madam.'

As they drove towards the city, Norah took a quick peek inside the plastic bag. She saw several new looking, neatly folded items, and wondered how she could ever repay Sandra for her kindness.

Andrew slowed the Land Rover and pulled up at the usual drop-off point.

'Now, Sandra, you won't forget us, will you?'

'No, Madam, I will never forget.'

'When you're settled, come and visit us. We'd love to know how you are getting on.'

'Yes, Madam, I will come for sure.'

Nora waved Sandra and Andrew goodbye and stood watching the vehicle until it disappeared from sight in the jam of the early morning traffic. She felt a little sad she wouldn't be meeting them at half-past five anymore, but her new job soon occupied her mind. She picked up her suitcase and the large Gretermans shopping bag full of the clothes Sandra gave her and set off towards her new home.

Again, the worrying thought niggled at Norah's mind. How long would it take Stanford to discover she wasn't as experienced as she'd claimed? He said the other applicants couldn't match her experience, but she possessed little or no experience. She had knowledge in certain limited areas, but little or none in others. She may well have been the least experienced candidate for the role.

The walk to the house passed faster than she hoped. Norah's concerns caused her to hesitate at the gate of her new workplace. She looked up the path towards the steps leading to the front veranda, took a deep breath, and opened the gate.