

Chapter 7 – Settling In

A beaming Stanford opened the door. ‘Norah, welcome. Please come in. Here, let me help you with that suitcase. I’ll show you to your quarters and let you settle in before we make a more detailed tour of the house.’

Stanford led Norah through the entrance hall and dining room to the kitchen.

‘Philemon is not here at present. He usually comes on duty at two o’clock to prepare the evening meal. We don’t worry too much about lunch. We have a sandwich and a cup of tea.’

They passed through the backdoor onto the neat, sandy, compacted surface of the backyard. A building reflecting the style of the main house ran along the back fence. The right quarter of the building was taller, while the lower remaining part of the building boasted a roofed veranda that ran its length.

Stanford noticed Norah’s surprise and explained the tall part used to be a squash court, and the rest of the building was once a row of stables. ‘The tall part is your room. The entrance is around the corner. Our accommodation here is quite luxurious and not like a typical kia. You have only a single room, but you’ll find it most comfortable.’

‘And the rest of the building?’

‘Those are my rooms.’

‘Oh! I thought your rooms would be in your house.’

Stanford laughed. ‘That’s not my house, Norah. It’s the boss’s house.’

‘The boss’s house?’

‘Yes, Judge Hugh Barclay.’

‘I thought you were the boss.’

This amused Stanford. ‘No, I’m the judge’s butler. I’m in charge of all the servants, so I am your boss, but the judge is the big boss. When he comes home this evening, he will probably want to meet you.’

‘I wondered why you were polishing your silver the day I came for the interview. Now I understand. So, what should I call you?’

‘Call me Stanford and call the judge, sir.’

Stanford led Norah to the door of her room and opened it, handing her the keys. ‘Get settled in and come to the house when you’re ready. There’s no hurry.’

Norah entered the room and stopped in surprise. The spacious white room with its narrow transom windows running around the entire high ceiling looked bright and inviting. She thought her room in the kia at Sandra’s house was luxurious, and perhaps it was, compared to her hut back in the village. But the kia was dark with a tiny window set high on the wall, and it was unfurnished apart from the single bed. Here, the room boasted a double bed, bedside table, table lamp, cupboard, dining table with two chairs, and a colourful carpet spread out on the floor.

After taking in the scene, Norah opened the cupboard door and slid open the bedside table drawers. She bounced on the bed with its thick mattress and laughed with delight. A door in the back wall caught her attention. Curious, she crossed the carpet to the door and turned the handle. Norah’s mouth dropped open as she saw the sparkling white tiles of the bathroom, complete with shower, hand basin, and toilet. On a benchtop stood an electric kettle and a

toaster. Surely, these couldn't be the servant's quarters! She wondered what Stanford's rooms must be like. The importance attached to her role was sinking in.

The cupboard held several hangers, and Norah hung up the new clothes Sandra gave her. She put her other possessions on the shelves in the cupboard, and the smaller items in the drawers of her bedside table. She tested the bedside lamp; it worked. Two enormous globes hung from the ceiling. Norah looked around for the light switch. There it was by the door. To her delight, they also worked.

Norah locked her room and went to the house. Stanford met her at the backdoor. 'A man will come this afternoon to check your size for your uniforms.'

'Uniforms?'

'Yes, the boss likes us to wear uniforms. Do you remember Philemon's white coat, trousers, and hat? That's his day uniform. He has an even smarter one for when the judge entertains.'

'Er, yes.' Norah wondered about the chef's odd choice of clothing. She'd not before seen anyone dressed like that.

'Your uniforms will include two dresses for your everyday wear, and one for the judge's formal evenings, when you will help me serve the guests.'

Norah was pleased to hear that. She'd served guests at Sandra's house, though she suspected things might be different here. She remembered Sandra's gentle chiding of her overfamiliarity with the cocktail party guests.

'Come, I'll show you around the house.' Stanford led Norah through one of the three internal doors, exiting the kitchen. 'This is the guest wing. There're three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a toilet. The entrance hall and the lounge, you've already seen.'

'There was another door in the kitchen?'

'That leads to the judge's rooms. No one must go in there unless I'm with them. I'm the only servant allowed in there alone. A young maid, Nancy, comes every morning to do the cleaning and laundry. I supervise her in the judge's rooms, and you will take charge of her in the rest of the house. She's not here today, but you'll meet her tomorrow.'

'The boss has a lot of servants.'

'Yes, there's also Mortimer the driver, and Thomas the gardener. You and I are the only ones who live on the premises.'

With so many servants, Norah wondered what her job would entail. Perhaps she'd be free to learn to cook a few of the judge's favourite dishes. But then, if they discovered she wasn't as experienced as she'd intimated, they might decide they didn't need her. Norah resolved she would keep her wages and the luxurious accommodation, no matter what. This was the job she'd dreamt about all her young life. Her mother would have been proud of her.

Soon after their lunch of tea and sandwiches, old Philemon arrived, greeting them both in his respectful manner. Moments later, a white van pulled up in the driveway. It was the man from the uniform supplies business. He'd brought two or three sizes for Norah to try on, based on Stanford's estimates, which proved to be correct.

The day uniform was a dove grey, long-sleeved dress with a flared skirt, and white collar and cuffs. Two full-length white cotton aprons would come in handy when needed. The formal uniform was like the one Stanford wore when Norah first met him. It included black

trousers and bow tie, a white shirt, and a burgundy waistcoat. A shiny black leather belt did for both uniforms.

‘You will need another pair of low-heeled black leather shoes, but in the meantime, the ones you are wearing will do.’ It seemed Stanford had thought of everything. ‘The judge will be back by six o’clock, so be ready to meet him. I suggest you now change into your everyday uniform and then check on Philemon to see if you’re happy with the dinner preparations.’

Happy with the dinner preparations? Of course, she’d be happy with them. She would be fine with whatever Philemon did. It would be an opportunity to learn more about the mysteries of European cooking. At least she wouldn’t need an excuse to be hanging around the kitchen.

Back in her room, Norah admired herself in her grey everyday uniform. The uniform looked smart. Just right for a housekeeper. She put on an apron to protect her uniform and headed for the kitchen.

‘Evening Mrs.’ Philemon, as polite as ever, stood stirring a pot on the stove.

‘Evening, Philemon.’ Norah peered into the pot containing a strange dark red concoction. ‘Hmm! That smells good.’

‘Yes, Mrs. The tomato soup has olive oil, garlic, ginger, and basil. You can taste it.’ Philemon took a clean spoon from a kitchen drawer and passed a sample to Norah for her approval. ‘Careful, Mrs. It’s hot.’

Norah blew on the spoon’s contents and sipped it with care. ‘Oh, yes! Very good!’ She licked her lips to counteract the soup’s spicy bite. What were those ingredients again? How could she remember all that? And this was only one dish!

Philemon beamed with pride after getting Norah’s approval.

But for Norah, panic set in. How would she stand in for Philemon when he was absent? ‘Where do you get all your wonderful recipes, Philemon?’

‘From the cookbook, Mrs. See, the one on the shelf. The master bought it for me. When I came here, I couldn’t cook, so I read the book.’

‘If you couldn’t cook, how did you get the job?’

‘I was the gardener. The last chef stole things, so the master fired him. The master said I was an honest man, so he gave me a chance.’

Norah was relieved to hear the master was an understanding man who valued honesty above all. She was honest, except perhaps, for exaggerating her experience. That last thought worried her. Was exaggerating the same as lying? Was she dishonest? She followed every move Philemon made in preparing the dinner. Her head spun from all the processes involved. Just when it seemed she could absorb no more, Stanford appeared.

‘The judge is home, Norah. He’ll see you now before dinner.’

Norah removed her apron and followed Stanford through the dining room to the lounge. Her heart thumped in her chest, and her stomach churned. The judge sat at his desk in the far corner of the lounge beside the window. At his left hand stood a crystal glass containing a tot of Scotch and two ice cubes. He possessed a fresh-looking face and a thick mop of greying hair. Though he was not fat, a little weight betrayed his comfortable lifestyle. Norah took him to be aged around fifty.

‘Sir, this is Norah, our new housekeeper.’

‘Welcome to my house, Norah.’

‘Thank you, Sir.’

‘I hope you’ll enjoy working here.’

‘Thank you, Sir.’

‘With Stanford’s help, I’m sure you’ll soon get the hang of things.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

Stanford ushered Norah from the lounge but stayed behind to talk to the judge.

‘How old is she, Stanford? She looks rather young for a housekeeper.’

‘In her twenties, Sir, but she has a good knowledge of the various glasses and steins and is experienced with cocktail parties and functions.’

‘Do you think she was a waitress?’

‘I don’t think so, Sir. She’s also experienced with handling money, shopping for groceries and other household items, and she can cook.’

‘Well, it sounds like we were lucky to get her.’

‘Yes, Sir, I think so.’

It would have concerned Norah to hear all her exaggerations listed. Stanford hadn’t forgotten a thing. When she returned to the kitchen, Norah saw two trays on the kitchen counter. Each held a bowl of tomato soup with a bread roll wrapped in a serviette. There was also a plate of grilled fish, mashed potatoes and green peas, and a bowl of guavas and custard.

‘That one is yours,’ said a beaming Philemon. ‘You and Stanford eat the same as the master.’

The little perk stunned Norah, and it set her thinking. The more she received, the more she’d need to give. It was a double-edged sword. She took her tray back to her room to eat her dinner. She’d earlier noticed cutlery on top of a little white cupboard in the corner of her room. On closer inspection, she realised the small cupboard was a fridge. She opened it and found a jug with a little milk. A box containing tea bags sat on top of the fridge. That explained the electric kettle.

Stanford hadn’t mentioned her working hours, but Norah determined she’d work from first thing in the morning to when Philemon knocked off at night. Those hours would be more for her benefit than for her employer’s benefit. She needed them to learn the job and cement her position in the household.

After dinner, Norah returned her tray to the kitchen, where Philemon was finishing up. He washed the dishes and put them on the drying rack. Then, he left the kitchen and walked to a room at the far end of Stanford’s quarters, emerging minutes later in street clothes and pushing a bicycle. Philemon waved and called out goodnight and wobbled off on his bicycle, with its dim lamp disappearing around the corner of the house.

As she left the kitchen, Norah took the cookery book down from the shelf. There was no sign of Stanford, and she presumed he’d gone back to his quarters because she could see lights on in his rooms.

Who would lock up the house? Philemon said nothing about locking up, but it appeared she’d be the last one to leave. On her key ring was her room key and a Yale key. Earlier, she’d meant to ask Stanford about the Yale key, but forgot. Norah tried it in the back door, and it worked. Should she lock up or not? It was better to be chastised for using her initiative. She took a deep breath and pulled the back door shut behind her.

Norah usually went to bed early, but with the bedside lamp, she stayed up late, reading the cookery book with its coloured photos. She felt thirsty and walked to the bathroom to boil water for a cup of tea.

As she flipped through the pages of the cookery book, and sipped her cup of hot tea, Norah realised, with each added perk, her obligation to her employer grew. The prospect was both exciting and terrifying!