

Chapter 8 – Getting Down to Work

Tuesday morning, the first full day in her new job. Norah bounced out of bed. It was only six-thirty, and despite her late night, she felt fresh and raring to go. In the shower, the warm water caressed her body. She would have loved to linger in the embracing spray, but her wish to make a good impression on her new colleagues drove her.

Norah dressed in her smart, new, grey uniform and admired herself in the mirror. Satisfied with her appearance, she stepped out into the fresh, early morning air. All her senses were alert as she listened to the crunch of her shoes on the backyard's sandy surface. She could see Philemon, busy in the kitchen, and hurried to join him.

'You're too early, Mrs. We eat our breakfast after the master leaves for work.'

'That's OK Philemon. I'd like to see how you're getting on.'

Norah watched everything the chef did in preparing the judge's breakfast. Fluffy scrambled eggs with crisp bacon and mushrooms were new to her, but she was confident she could replicate the dish. She reasoned, if she did this every morning, she'd soon be able to fill in for Philemon at breakfasts. They seemed to be a lot simpler than the dinner dishes she'd seen in the cookery book.

Aside from the process of cooking the breakfast, Norah focused on the routine Philemon followed, such as the condiments he set out, and when he served the tea and toast. Philemon attended to the judge, making sure everything was as it should be as he ate his breakfast. Afterwards, he cleared the table and emerged from the dining room to announce the judge had left for his office.

Minutes later, Stanford appeared at the kitchen door. 'Well, Philemon, what's for breakfast this morning?'

'Scrambled eggs this morning, Mr Stanford.' Philemon dished out three plates with scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, and mushrooms. It was the same breakfast as the judge ate. Stanford took one plate and Philemon carried the other two out to a table sitting under Stanford's veranda roof.

'Come on Norah,' Stanford shouted. 'You don't want to let your breakfast get cold.' Stanford and Philemon chatted, laughed, and joked. The two had a good relationship. Norah, being new to the company, was a quiet observer, enjoying their repartee.

'After breakfast, Norah, I'll show you the books.'

'The books?'

'Yes, the accounts for the household expenses.'

For Norah, this was an unwelcome surprise. She'd bought things at the beerhall shop, and made sure she got the correct change, but she knew nothing about household accounts. She never imagined her claim, she could handle money, would lead to something like this.

Norah was still worrying about how she would deal with the record of household expenses when the young housemaid, Abigail, arrived. It disappointed Norah to see the maid also wore a grey uniform like hers. But then, she noted with satisfaction, the maid's uniform displayed a grey collar and cuffs, not like her white ones that asserted her authority.

After breakfast, Philemon went off duty until his two o'clock return. Abigail set about washing the breakfast dishes and putting away the items. Stanford led Norah to the lounge to

view the books. A hinged section of the bookcase swung open to reveal a built-in safe. Stanford used a large key to open it and took out a foolscap-sized black book.

‘This first column shows the money the judge gives us each month. That money is to cover all the expenses of running this house. The last column shows the cumulative balance of money remaining. Each week, we count the cash to make sure none is missing. The columns between the first and the last keep track of the expenditure categories.’

Norah’s eyes grew wider at all the figures on the page. Cumulative balance! what did that mean?

Stanford continued. ‘This column is for all the perishables, including fresh vegetables, fruit, meat, bread, and milk. Then there’s the packaged foods from the supermarket. This one is for cleaning products and gardening expenses. This important column is for the alcohol. You must make sure the bar is always fully stocked for the judge’s dinner parties. Whenever you see any of the spirits are less than two full bottles, or the beers and mixers are less than two full crates, reorder that item immediately. You don’t have to worry about the wines. The judge likes to buy those himself. And this column called miscellaneous is for everything else.’

Norah’s head was spinning. She was sure she’d need help, but she would save her questions until she made a careful study of the black book. That way, she hoped to avoid asking silly questions that betrayed her ignorance. Her mother mentioned nothing about black books and household accounts. Norah wondered if she’d somehow got herself into a job way beyond even her mother’s experience.

While Stanford left to oversee Abigail’s work in the judge’s rooms, Norah pored over the big black book. It all sounded so easy the way Stanford explained it. She could add and subtract figures, but keeping track of what items needed to be reordered would be a problem. First, she would familiarise herself with all the items in the pantry. Then she’d tackle the bar. She needed to know each item’s appearance and where it was stored.

After she’d spent an hour rummaging through the pantry, Philemon’s curiosity got the better of him and he enquired what she was doing. The chef laughed. ‘Mrs, you mustn’t worry about the food. I know when to order everything, and I buy them.’

‘Well, the next time you go shopping, Philemon, I’ll go with you. What about the cleaning products? Do you also order those?’

‘Miss Abigail gives me a list for the laundry and cleaning, and I know what’s needed in the kitchen. Thomas, the gardener, also gives me a list of what he needs.’

Norah exhaled. She only needed to worry about the bar occupying one entire end of the dining room. Norah knew what wine bottles looked like, so she ignored the racks of bottles lying on their side and focused her attention on everything else. At first glance, it looked like an enormous selection of spirits. It was misleading because the duplication of each item meant the variety of drinks was a lot smaller. Most labels in the bar had an open bottle alongside two unopened bottles. Norah breathed a sigh of relief. She was about to turn her attention back to the big black book when Abigail found her.

‘Mr Stanford told me to come to you.’

‘OK, Abigail. You’ve cleaned the lounge, dining room, and entrance before. Show me what you do.’

Abigail set about her work as Norah watched, occasionally pointing out the dust the young maid overlooked. The first thing Norah learnt was supervising a task was a lot easier than

doing it. She pointed out the house's concrete front steps and veranda needed another coat of the red Cobra wax polish she'd seen under the laundry sink. The unused guest wing gathered dust, and Norah instructed Abigail to keep the area clean in readiness for unexpected guests.

In the afternoon, Norah told Thomas, the gardener, to whitewash the bottom one metre at the base of the tree trunks. This was something her mother told her kept the white ants at bay. Unlike Abigail's silent acceptance of her instructions, Thomas seemed resentful of the new housekeeper. Norah still needed to learn the skills and pitfalls of managing staff.

Stanford and Norah sat in the shade under Stanford's veranda roof, enjoying their afternoon tea.

The butler explained a little more about their respective roles. 'We work on Saturdays, so you'll have Wednesdays off, and I'll take off Thursdays. Every second Sunday, one of us needs to make breakfast and dinner for the boss. We'll take it in turns, so I'll do this Sunday, and you can do the next.'

'What about Philemon?'

'Philemon doesn't work on Sundays and is free every weekday between breakfast and two o'clock.'

'And Abigail?'

'She works from Monday to Saturday from half-past eight to one o'clock.'

'And Thomas?'

'He works from two to five on weekdays. It's best you stay away from him for now. Thomas has a problem with taking instructions and can get angry for no reason.'

'Thomas acted surly when I asked him to whitewash the trees.'

'Yes, he complained to me about it. He said a housemaid shouldn't give orders to the gardener. I told him you were the housekeeper, and he must follow your orders. But I don't want him to resent you, so for now, until you've established yourself here, pass your instructions through me.'

'Yes, all right, I will.'

Despite Stanford's instructions, Norah was up early, helping Philemon in the kitchen on Wednesday morning. She didn't intend to miss any opportunity to gain the practical experience she needed to back up her theoretical knowledge.

When Stanford saw her, he was amused. 'Norah, you can still have breakfast with us, even on your days off. You needn't be on duty to have breakfast.'

'I like to see what breakfast Philemon is preparing.'

'OK! It's up to you.'

Norah spent the rest of the morning in her room, alternating her study between the cookery book and the black book of household accounts. At two o'clock, she was in the kitchen, ready to help Philemon.

Stanford shook his head. 'I suppose you want to see what dinner Philemon is preparing for us tonight?'

Norah smiled but said nothing.

On Friday Morning, Stanford announced the judge was holding a cocktail party that evening, and he and Norah would be on duty in their formal attire. For Norah, it was exciting news. She remembered Sandra's cocktail party, the best party ever!

The house buzzed with activity. Stanford and Norah kept Abigail busy, and Norah asked Stanford to get Thomas to sweep the driveway. At two o'clock, Philemon arrived and set to work preparing snacks. Norah shivered with anticipation. At four-thirty, Philemon went to the storeroom next to Stanford's rooms to change into his formal uniform. Stanford and Norah returned to their rooms to do the same.

A little before five, the judge entered the kitchen, greeting his three assembled staff. It was the first time Norah had seen him since their introduction on Monday. He walked around the kitchen, inspecting the snacks the chef had prepared. 'Excellent, Philemon, excellent!'

Moments later, the first guest arrived. He was an elderly gentleman, driving a shiny black Jaguar. Stanford ushered him to park further down the drive near Norah's room. A grey Rover pulled in behind him, another elderly gentleman, this one balding. The two shook hands and walked to the freshly polished red front steps of the house, where the judge waited to greet them. Norah could hear the loud voices as the visitors greeted their host.

A shiny black Bentley was next to arrive, followed by two more shiny cars. Soon, six cars filled the driveway, and a seventh stood just outside the front gate. The noise from the loud greetings and chatter in the lounge was building.

Stanford sprang into action. 'Right Norah, I will take the guests' drinks orders, and you can help me prepare them.'

Minutes later, Stanford returned. 'Two Scotch on ice, one with water, three with soda, one brandy, and an orange juice.'

Norah reached for a bottle of Scotch.

'No, not that one! Get the Johnny Walker Black Label. Here's the tot measure. Use the large side. Put in one large tot of Scotch and two of water. It's the same for Scotch and soda. For the Scotch on ice, use the large tot and two ice cubes. Put two ice cubes in the orange juice. Use the large tot for the brandy, but no ice.'

Norah used the large side of the tot measure to pour the six Scotches and the brandy into the crystal glasses. She put two ice cubes into two of the Scotches and the eighth glass. Then she poured the orange juice into the eighth glass. Next, she used the tot measure to put two large tots of chilled water into one glass of Scotch and two tots of soda water into the other three.

Stanford watched, nodding in approval. Norah had passed her first big test. Stanford picked up the tray of glasses and hurried into the lounge to deliver the drinks.

Philemon peeked around the kitchen door to inform Norah that the snacks were ready. The tempting aromas escaping from the kitchen reminded her there'd be no dinner tonight. There were two trays with assorted snacks, one hot tray and the other cold. Stanford returned and took the hot tray, telling Norah to follow him with the cold. 'Follow me and say what I say.'

Norah soon picked up the words. 'Good evening, Sir. Would you like something from this tray?' As she walked around the room, she noted what each guest was drinking. Telling the difference between the Scotch and water, and the Scotch and soda glasses, was the most difficult. But the telltale minute, rising bubbles in two of the glasses resolved the question. Norah took it upon herself to refill the guests' empty glasses. Stanford noticed her doing the rounds and felt confident enough to slip out to the kitchen to sample the snacks with Philemon.

Norah looked around the room. She realised all the guests were older men. The thin one with the orange juice was quiet and spoke little. He reminded her of a praying mantis on the lookout for its next victim. The rotund brandy drinker had a round red face and swallowed the snacks as if it were his last meal. One guest even winked at her across the room. That was one of the Scotch and water drinkers.

As she passed three men deep in conversation, one patted her on the bottom. 'Get me another Scotch and soda please, dear.' It shocked Norah, but her polite smile did not betray her feelings. Were all older white men like this? Perhaps she should not be so quick to refill their glasses. They reminded her of some men at the beerhall near her village.

In the kitchen, Stanford relaxed. 'Norah is such a great help, don't you think, Philemon?'

'Hmm! Let's not judge too soon.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Well, she's like you. Good at sampling all the food. But can she prepare dishes for the master?'

'What! You think she can't cook?'

'She watches everything I do, and I notice she takes the cookery book with her each night.'

'For a long time, you also took the cookery book home to read. Let's see how she does on the Sundays when she's on duty.'

After the last guest left, Stanford and Norah helped Philemon clear up the mess and wash the dishes.

The judge came into the kitchen. 'Well done, everybody. You helped to make this a most pleasant evening. Well organised, Stanford. Excellent snacks, Philemon. And, Norah, you did well for your first time at one of my parties.'

'Thank you, Sir,' said Stanford, while Norah and Philemon beamed at the praise.

When the judge left the kitchen, the trio tucked into the remaining snacks. They'd not eaten dinner and were hungry.