

## Chapter 9 – Beautiful One Day...

Things couldn't have worked out better. Or so Norah thought. The cocktail party could have been a disaster for her because of her lack of experience, but thanks to her self-confidence, it helped reinforce her position in the household. The boss even congratulated her on her performance at the party.

Stanford was supportive and appeared to believe in her. He'd left her to look after the party guests for at least half an hour, during which period she'd refilled all their glasses.

Abigail, the young housemaid, followed Norah's instructions without question. Only the irascible Thomas presented any challenge. She'd yet to meet Mortimer, the driver, but Philemon and Stanford both spoke well of him.

On her day off, Norah sat at the table in her room studying the black book of accounts. On most days, she'd be in the kitchen helping Philemon prepare the boss's breakfast. The old chef seemed to enjoy her presence. He took pride in his cooking and offered little tips about his dishes. But today was Sunday, and it was Stanford's turn to cook the breakfast.

Norah was aware Stanford questioned the need for her to help prepare the breakfast each morning, and she didn't want him to see her inexperience with cooking European food. She thought another week helping Philemon in the kitchen would prepare her for the next Sunday, when it would be her turn to serve the boss's breakfast.

What concerned Norah was the prospect of preparing dinner the following Sunday. She'd already guessed breakfast offered only a few choices, but dinner was another matter. Once the boss chose the eggs he wanted for breakfast, the accompaniments were standard, but dinner offered an enormous range of dishes, accompaniments, and side dishes.

Norah returned her focus to the black book of accounts. For the umpteenth time, she reviewed the columns, noting where each purchase was listed. She saw the entries were in date order and resolved she would record the purchases each day, not letting the transactions accumulate. But she noted several days of purchases lay unentered in the cash box. Catching up would be the biggest challenge.

'Eish!' Norah put her hands up to her head. It occurred to her that Friday night's party would have put a dent in the 'two unopened bottles' rule. She should have placed an order on Saturday to top up any shortfalls. She made a note in her diary to attend to it first thing on Monday morning.

Norah resumed her examination of the black book, intrigued by several entries marked 'no invoice.' All were in the cleaning and gardening expenses column.

When Norah broached the subject with Philemon, he explained he bought the cleaning items and got invoices, but items that required specialised gardening knowledge, he left for Thomas. These included various live plants such as flowers, bushes, and grass seeds, and other items such as soil and mulch.

'How do you know the amount he spent?'

'He gives me change and a list of what he's bought.'

'Can't he get invoices from his suppliers?'

'Mrs, that one has a temper. I have told him but—'

'Why don't you get Stanford to tell him?'

‘I think it’s better if you do that, Mrs.’

Norah realised she wasn’t the only one a little nervous of the gardener. When she next spoke to Stanford, she asked him why several purchases had no invoice. Stanford studied the black book Norah placed in front of him. ‘Hmm! It looks like your predecessor allowed this situation to develop. Don’t worry, I’ll sort this out with Thomas. You seem to have everything under control, so now you can reconcile the book of accounts with the cash box.’

Taking over the cash box was not the outcome Norah intended or relished. Stanford opened the safe behind the bookcase and took out the cash box and a lever arch file.

‘First, enter all the loose invoices into the book of accounts. Those that are already entered should be in this lever arch file. Then enter the lists of purchases without invoices. Your predecessor reconciled the book of accounts when we got the last cash reimbursement. So that’s about a month of expenses you must reconcile. Call me if you have any problem.’

‘Reimbursement?’

‘It’s when the boss last topped up the cash.’

Norah thought she understood Stanford’s instructions. She took the cash box, lever arch file, and the black book to the judge’s desk in the corner of the room. This would not be fun. She started by putting all the loose invoices in date order. The first problem was Thomas hadn’t dated the transactions on his lists, so she entered the invoices in the book, putting Thomas’s lists last. Next, she used the hole punch on the judge’s desk and filed the invoices and Thomas’s lists in the lever arch file.

Now for the scary bit. Norah checked and double-checked her entries. She made sure the running balances were correct before she sorted and counted all the coins and banknotes. Something was wrong, so she counted again. The cash was almost three pounds short. Perhaps she’d made a mistake. Norah rechecked all her entries but found no errors.

It was getting late, and soon the judge would be home. Norah put the cash box and lever arch file back in the safe and locked it with the key Stanford gave her. Thanks to this new task, she’d missed much of the dinner preparation with Philemon. It annoyed her because she believed the greatest threat to her position in the household was her lack of experience with European cooking. Her study of the black book was not yet complete, so she picked it up and hurried to return it to her room.

Soon, Norah was back in the kitchen trying to catch up with what she’d missed that afternoon. Philemon chatted away, explaining the steps he took to cook each dish. ‘The master sent me for cooking lessons so I could understand the cookery book better.’

Stanford came in around five-thirty, and when Norah found a few moments alone with him, she reported the cash shortfall.

‘I’m not saying anyone has pinched money, but if we don’t demand an invoice for every item of expenditure, this can happen again.’

‘Yes, I’ve already spoken to Thomas and told him he must always get invoices.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He just grunted, but I’m sure he got the message.’

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Thursday was Stanford’s day off. He sat at breakfast in his smart street clothes. ‘I’ll be away for the rest of the day, so you’re the boss, Norah.’ Philemon nodded, his cheerful smile creasing his face into a hundred wrinkles resembling the delta of the River Nile. It was a

beautiful day, and Norah watched Stanford's jaunty walk as he disappeared around the corner of the house.

Philemon changed into his street clothes and was about to go off duty when Thomas suddenly appeared. It was unusual because he normally came on duty at two o'clock. His scowling face was dark with anger as he addressed Norah. 'Why did you tell Stanford I stole the expense money?'

'I didn't tell him you stole money.'

'You said my list of expenses were wrong and money was missing.'

'Yes, money is missing, and I said you should get suppliers' invoices.'

'They don't give me invoices.'

'If you ask for them, they will.'

'My lists are correct, and I give all the change to Philemon. If money is missing, he may not have given it back.'

At this, Philemon's head jerked up, eyes wide with indignation. 'All the change goes to Stanford. I've kept no money.'

'Well,' said Thomas, 'Stanford might keep the money.'

'Enough, Thomas!' Norah shouted. 'This is why invoices are necessary. If we don't follow the rules, we can make mistakes.'

'Why must you come here and make trouble?' said Thomas, glaring at Norah.

'I am not making trouble, but I am the housekeeper, and it is my duty to enforce the rules. Everyone, including you, will follow the rules. Do you understand?'

Norah's sudden change in demeanour took Thomas aback. Till now, he'd only seen her quiet side, but her new authoritative tone stunned him. Like many contrary people, his aggressive manner melted when challenged. He muttered, 'I must go now.'

Norah looked at Philemon, whose eyes remained wide, as he too recognised Norah's new authoritative demeanour. Yes, today, she was the boss!

'Do you want me to stay, Mrs, in case Thomas comes back?'

'No, Philemon. Thank you. If he returns, it will be at two o'clock, when he's on duty.'

Norah was right. When Thomas returned at two o'clock, he was far more amenable.

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Just three dinners remained before Sunday. How much could she learn about cooking European food in only a fortnight? Would the boss let her choose what to prepare, or would he request something? Norah hoped for the former, but Stanford said he often requested what he wanted for Sunday night dinner. Norah wondered how Stanford learnt to cook. She made a mental note to ask him. Was she the only one who didn't know how to cook European food?

Norah's various tasks kept her busy, and it was Saturday before she remembered to ask Stanford where he gained his cooking skills.

'Oh, I can't cook! The boss always wants simple things for Sunday night dinner. It's no problem.'

Norah breathed a sigh of relief. She might even exceed the boss's expectations with a dish she studied in the cookery book.

Sunday morning raced up sooner than Norah expected. She leapt out of bed and hurried to the shower. This was the first morning she'd be preparing the boss's breakfast, and she dare not be late. Suddenly, a nervous chill swept over her. Where did it start, her stomach or her

head? She'd studied Philemon's breakfast routine for the past two weeks, but now her mind went blank.

It was not just a nervousness about preparing her first breakfast for the boss. This morning, she would be alone with him. On both previous occasions, Stanford occupied his attention while she stood by, but today, she and her performance would be the boss's focus.

Norah hurried to the house. She set a place at the dining room table and laid out the condiments. Soon, the breakfast table looked the same as when Philemon set it.

At seven-thirty, the judge entered the dining room, where Norah was waiting.

'Morning, Norah.'

'Good morning, Sir. How would you like your eggs this morning?'

'Fried please, Norah, with crisp bacon.'

Norah was relieved at the simple order. First, she served the boss a small pot of tea. As soon as the eggs and bacon were sizzling in the frying pan, Norah's nervousness evaporated, as she'd seen Philemon prepare this breakfast half a dozen times. As she ladled the eggs and bacon onto the warmed plate, the toasts popped up in the toaster. She delivered the breakfast to the boss and set about making another pot of tea.

Everything went well, and when the boss finished his breakfast, he thanked her and left the dining room. Norah exhaled. For her, it was a major achievement, but she couldn't help being a little disappointed the judge didn't seem to notice.

As she washed the dishes, Norah heard the boss's car start. She hurried to the driveway in time to see him drive off. So focussed was she on the breakfast, she forgot to ask him what he wanted for dinner. That meant she couldn't prepare anything in advance as she'd planned. Perhaps it wouldn't be a problem if he liked simple Sunday night meals.

For a change, Norah spent the rest of the day relaxing in her room, as her reward for cooking a successful breakfast. But as evening approached, her nervousness came back. She didn't hear the boss's car return, but it sat in the driveway, so he must be home.

Earlier, Stanford instructed her to go to the lounge at six o'clock and ask the boss what he wanted for dinner. Norah watched the kitchen clock, not wanting to be a minute early or a minute too late. How could five minutes take so long?

At six o'clock, Norah tapped on the doorframe to the lounge. The judge looked up from his desk to see Norah standing there.

'What would you like for dinner, Sir?'

'I'm not too hungry, Norah. A bowl of semolina will be fine.'

'Yes, Sir.'

Norah hurried back to the kitchen and took down the cookery book. She looked at the index. It puzzled her. There was no listing of any dish beginning with the word summer, nor any dish called 'lina.' The judge walked into the kitchen as she was flipping through the pages.

'How are you doing, Norah?'

'Sir, this book doesn't have what you want for dinner.'

'Never mind, Norah, I'll ask Philemon to show you how to make it. Can you make toasted cheese?'

The judge saw the bewilderment on Norah's face as she reached for the cookery book.

‘Toasted cheese won’t be in that book, Norah. Even Philemon struggles with those fancy dishes. Let’s make the toasted cheese together, so you’ll know for next time. Start by chopping up two onions, please.’

The judge took four slices of bread and put them under the grill and lightly toasted them on both sides. Next, he buttered the toast and drizzled a little olive oil on top before adding a slice of salami. Then he covered it with chopped onion and slices of Cheddar cheese. He placed the toast under the grill until the cheese melted.

‘There you are, Norah. Two slices of toasted cheese for each of us. If you know what it tastes like, you’ll be able to tell if you’ve done it right the next time. Remember to keep a close watch on it when it’s under the grill. And if you can smell it, it might already be burning.’

‘Thank you, Sir, but Stanford will be disappointed you had to make your own dinner.’

‘No, we made it together, Norah. Don’t forget, you chopped the onions and made sure the toasts didn’t burn. I just added a few ingredients. Stanford doesn’t need to know I helped you. It can be our little secret.’