

Chapter 10 – Next Steps

It was three months since Norah began her role as housekeeper to Judge Hugh Barclay. Her confidence grew by the day, as did her popularity with the other staff. Even the irascible Thomas liked her.

Philemon chatted with Stanford about Norah and her time in the household.

‘Every Monday, after Norah cooks dinner for the master, she asks me how I cook that dish. First it was semolina and then it was Maltabella. Now this morning, she asked me how I make rice pudding. I don’t think she knows how to cook European food.’

‘The boss tells me he enjoys her cooking and may send her to classes, like he sent you.’

It was unwelcome news for Philemon, who worried the master might consider replacing him.

Stanford laughed. ‘Don’t worry Philemon, the boss would never replace you. And remember, I’m the one who hires and fires around here.’

‘But Stanford, if he trains her for my job, he may also train her for yours.’

‘Don’t be silly, Philemon. I’m the boss’s right hand. He would never do that.’

‘Some women have powers that make men crazy and make wrong decisions.’

‘The boss is a judge. Do you know what that means, Philemon? It means he’s trained to resist such powers. He could even resist a witch’s spell.’

‘I hope you’re right, Stanford.’

‘Of course I’m right. I am.’

Philemon’s comments elicited a sharp response from the butler. Stanford was certain Norah presented no threat to his position, but somehow he couldn’t stop thinking about Philemon’s words.

Norah missed little John and Tadiwa. Her only contact was letters from Tadiwa, and her replies, sent through the beer hall for collection. She planned to ask Stanford for time off over the July Rhodes and Founders long weekend. But in June, in the middle of winter, Norah suffered a bout of flu. Either way, she was too sick to arrange a trip back to her village.

Stanford banned her from the house in case she passed it on to the others. She was confined to her room and her only visitors were Stanford or Philemon with her meals, and to her surprise, the doctor, who gave her pills and cough medicine.

‘You can thank the boss for the doctor’s visit,’ said Stanford. ‘He called him to come to the house to see you.’

Norah was determined not to miss out on the Christmas break and was euphoric when Stanford agreed to four weeks’ leave. But how would she make the journey? Buses passed the dirt road that led to the beer hall and on to her village. But while a walk from the beer hall to her village took only half an hour, a drive from the main Umtali Road to the beer hall took forty minutes.

On a Sunday when Stanford was on duty, Norah thought of paying an early afternoon visit to Sandra. The nurse gave her a lift to Salisbury and put her up in her house’s kia for two weeks, and Norah was keen to maintain the relationship. She caught the Borrowdale bus and got off at Dornie Road and walked from there to Sandra’s house. As she entered the front

gate, it occurred to Norah she should have phoned to make sure Sandra was at home and willing to see her. It was too late to worry about it now.

Norah knocked on the front door and held her breath. Moment later the door opened, and Sandra stood there beaming.

‘Norah, how nice to see you! And you look so smart!’

‘Yes, Madam, in the clothes you gave me.’

Sandra put the kettle on for tea and she and Norah sat chatting at the kitchen table. Sandra’s maid, Daisy, was away for a family funeral.

‘I shouldn’t say this, Norah, but her uncle has died half a dozen times over the past few years. But I don’t mind giving her time off. I’ve told her she needn’t give me a reason the next time she wants to go away for a few days. Everyone needs an occasional break from work.’

This was the perfect segue for Norah to raise the matter of her Christmas visit to her village. ‘Madam, when will you next visit my village or another village nearby?’

‘Do you need a lift home, Norah?’

‘A lift back to the city after Christmas, Madam.’

‘I can visit anytime I want. If you let me know when you want to return to Salisbury, I’ll put it on my schedule. Andrew, my driver, enjoys those long country drives.’

Norah told Sandra all about her new job and how she was doing. Sandra was delighted Norah’s dream for a good job in a wealthy household had come to fruition. After they shared buttered rolls with sausages from an early evening braai, Sandra gave Norah a lift back to the judge’s house. On the way, they chatted.

‘Norah, how much do you know about Judge Barclay?’

‘Not too much, Madam. Sometimes, I see his name in the newspaper, but the other servants don’t talk about him.’

‘You know, he’s an important man. If someone commits a serious crime, Judge Barclay can send him to jail or even condemn them to death.’

Later that night, Norah lay in bed thinking what a good friend Sandra was, and how lucky she was to meet her. She’d secured the return trip from her Christmas visit to her village, but how would she get there? Then an idea came to her. She smiled to herself as she pulled up the blanket around her ears before falling into a deep sleep.

The weather was cooling, and one morning, unannounced, the man from the uniform company brought jumpers for the staff. Stanford and Norah received burgundy-coloured ones, while the rest of the staff received a dark grey. Norah also received two pairs of dark grey winter-weight trousers. Later, in the afternoon, two large Dimple oil heaters arrived for her and Stanford. Winter was around the corner.

Soon, the swirling blasts of wintry winds blew dust in the eyes of passersby. Winter was a revelation for Norah. She remembered winter in the village, wearing her old jumper with holes and an icy wind under her skirt, chilling her bare legs. Now, her winter was comfortable in her cosy, warm room, and in the boss’s house with the open fireplaces burning. Aside from Sandra’s braai, it was the first time since she left her village that she saw leaping flames, spitting, and crackling. It made her homesick. At Christmas, she would take leg warmers and

a jumper for her best friend, Tadiwa, and jumpers for five-year-old John, and Tadiwa's four-year-old daughter, Aneni.

With winter, dinners in the dining room replaced the boss's cocktail parties in the lounge. After the first cocktail party, Norah became quite expert at manoeuvring past certain guests with the tendency to get fresh with her. At the dinners, she could relax more around the seated guests whose movements were more restricted. Norah loved dressing up in her formal uniform and white cotton gloves, which she felt gave her status and a sense of authority. Her preferred guests got their drinks and other requests dealt with faster, while the irritating guests needed to wait a little longer.

Stanford and Norah would be on duty serving drinks, bowls of hot soup, large trays of roast beef and vegetables, and the steaming puddings Philemon conjured up in the kitchen. After-dinner drinks invariably included Irish coffees prepared with much ceremony by Stanford. Norah asked Stanford to show her how they were made, but that was one skill Stanford intended to reserve for himself.

Inevitably, Stanford and Norah heard much of the learned guests' conversations. Most of those assembled were fellow judges and other members of the legal profession, and the dinner table discussion centred on serious issues affecting the country. For the pair, it was an informal education on matters of the state.

Norah found the discussions interesting, and later, she and Stanford would discuss what they'd heard. Often, she'd lie in her cosy bed, with the winter winds rattling her high transom windows, thinking about the guests' discussions earlier in the night.

One morning, six weeks before Christmas, Norah got on the phone to the beer hall manager to find out which Salisbury businesses delivered their supplies to the beer hall. The manager was curious about her enquiry. After she explained she lived in a nearby village and needed a lift, he gave her the names of two businesses and took Norah's phone number, 'just in case.'

Norah phoned the businesses to see if she could get a lift to the beer hall on one of their pre-Christmas deliveries. Both businesses gave her the same response. 'We do not permit our drivers to pick up hitchhikers or give anyone a lift.' She was disappointed. What to do now?

She could catch a bus, but it would leave her a long way from her village. It would be a long, arduous walk, especially if she was carrying her suitcase. It could involve walking at night, with no safe place to stop. That wasn't an appealing prospect.

Norah resigned herself to the long walk from the Umtali Road to her village. She'd not seen little John in almost a year, and nothing would stop her now. Then, a fortnight before Christmas, Stanford called her to the house. 'There's a phone call for you.'

'Hello.'

'Is that Norah?' It was a deep voice she didn't recognise.

'Yes.'

'Do you need a lift to the beer hall near your village?'

'Yes, how do you know about that?'

'The beer hall manager told me. I'm doing a delivery on the Friday before Christmas. If you want a lift, it will cost you two pounds.'

'Yes, OK! What's your name?'

‘My name is Absalom. I’ll pick you up at half-past eight in the morning on the Friday before Christmas. What is your address?’

Norah couldn’t believe her luck. She got Stanford’s approval for her departure and return dates, and phoned Sandra to confirm the date to pick her up at the village. Everything was falling into place.

In the house, the sole Christmas decoration was a large Christmas tree in the entrance hall. Stanford explained there were fewer decorations than normal because the boss would be away. He planned to visit Cape Town over Christmas.

The Christmas dinner was on the Friday before the start of Norah’s scheduled Christmas break. The same group of cheerful, elderly men sat around the table with their Christmas crackers and coloured paper hats, talking in loud, excitable voices.

There was no talk of serious matters on this occasion, but reminiscences of Christmases past and their days of youthful exuberance. One guest with fanciful claims to Cossack ancestry tried to demonstrate their traditional dance. All went well until he fell on his backside, getting up, complaining alternately about a pain in his foot and another in his knee. Norah found the men’s playful mood empowering. Never again would she be nervous or unsure in their company.

The food Philemon cooked intrigued Norah. It differed from anything she’d seen before. The main dish was a delicious smelling turkey with roast potatoes, Brussels sprout, red capsicums, green beans, and cranberry jelly with thinly sliced ham on the side. Dessert was a flaming Christmas pudding soaked with brandy and covered with creme.

Later, when the last guest had gone, and they’d cleaned up the mess, the boss gave her, Stanford, and Philemon a colourful Christmas envelope with a thirteenth month’s pay. Inside each envelope was a personal note thanking them for their year of loyal service.

The trio then sat under Stanford’s veranda roof, eating the same dinner that the boss gave his guests. They shared a bottle of white wine Stanford brought from the bar. Norah was surprised. ‘Doesn’t the boss mind if you take wine from the bar?’

‘The boss allows me to take whatever drinks I want. He knows I won’t abuse the privilege. I could have taken a bottle of Champagne, but I know they’re very expensive.’

Norah giggled when she realised they were pulling the same crackers and wearing the same colourful paper hats. Small talk and laughter filled the night. Norah was living her dream.