

## Chapter 12 – Ducks in a Row

Norah was pleased to return to her work in Salisbury. She'd adapted with surprising ease to her new life as Judge Hugh Barclay's housekeeper. Her decision to bring young John to the city at the earliest opportunity was more than justified when she compared her existing circumstances with her life in the village. Occasionally, she missed the smell of the village fires and the simple meals, but there was no denying she was developing a taste for city life and Philemon's cooking.

Norah realised she'd need Stanford's approval to have John staying with her, but she'd lived up to, if not exceeded, his expectations, and that should count for something. The judge was also most supportive of her efforts. As second in command to Stanford, all the servants now followed her instructions without question.

Everyone welcomed her return with enthusiasm when Sandra dropped Norah at the judge's house after her Christmas break. 'Thank goodness you're back!' said Stanford. 'We all missed you. Things run more smoothly when you're here. And we were worried about you.'

'Why were you worried about me?'

'Haven't you seen the newspapers?'

'There are no newspapers in my village.'

'Another woman has gone missing in your area. The papers are full of the news, so we kept them for you to read.'

'When did that happen? In my village, there was no news of it.'

'No one knows when it happened, and her family reported it only a few days ago. They said she planned to visit relatives in the city for Christmas, but the relatives didn't know she was coming, so they didn't realise she was missing. Her family contacted the relatives when she didn't return from the visit, and that's when they discovered she never arrived there. The last they saw her was five days before Christmas.'

'Five days before Christmas? That's when I travelled to my village. I can't believe it! No women have gone missing for over a year. The villagers thought it was now safe. Even the police thought so.'

Norah returned to her room with the newspapers Stanford kept for her. As he'd said, the papers were full of articles about the missing woman, who they identified as Miss Farai Nduma from the Buhera district. Each day's newspaper gave more details, with the most recent showing the woman's family photo. The hair on the back of Norah's neck rose as she studied it with increasing consternation.

Stanford was selecting a bottle of wine for the boss's dinner when she found him in the dining room. Norah explained how she believed she'd seen that same woman walking along the dirt road, only a few kilometres from the beer hall near her village.

'I'm sure it's the woman we passed because she wore the same dress as in the photo. I recognise the flower pattern on her dress.'

'You must tell the boss. He'll know what to do. Come, let's talk to him now.'

Stanford led Norah into the lounge, where the judge was sitting at his desk with his usual glass of Scotch by his left hand. The butler explained why they were there, and Norah filled in the details.

‘Hmm! That’s most interesting, Norah. I’ll call the police in the morning and let them know. I’m sure they’ll want to interview you. Stanford tells me you enjoyed your holiday with your family.’

‘Yes, Sir, with my son. He is the only family I have. The others were my best friend’s family. My friend looks after my son when I’m not there.’

‘Norah, you’re seldom there.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Well, anyway, it’s good to see you back safe.’

‘Thank you, Sir.’

Norah considered herself fortunate to have two families—one in her village with Tadiwa and the children, and another in the city with Stanford, Philemon, and the boss.

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The next day, when the boss returned mid-morning, Norah realised something was afoot. Soon after, a police car with two men arrived. One was a European, the other, African. The judge called Stanford and Norah into the lounge and introduced them to detectives Smith and Shamiso.

The detectives asked Norah for details of her sighting of the missing woman and questioned her about every aspect of her trip.

‘Who drove you to the beer hall? The driver might have seen something on his return trip. Can you tell us the driver’s name and the name of their employer?’

Norah hesitated and shuffled her feet.

‘What’s the matter, Norah? Don’t you know the driver’s name and employer?’ said the judge.

‘Sir, the drivers aren’t supposed to give lifts to anyone. I don’t want trouble for the driver. The company might dismiss him.’

‘Don’t worry, Norah, said Inspector Smith. We won’t tell the company he gave you a lift unless we must, but we need to question him. He might help us solve this case, and those of the other missing women.’

Reassured, Norah gave the detectives all the information she possessed. As she watched them walk down the driveway to their car, she wondered what came next.

She waited for news, but soon the case of the missing woman moved from the front page to the middle pages, and then disappeared altogether from the newspaper. As time passed, and nothing happened, Norah forgot about the case.

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One morning, when Norah was checking the bar stock, Stanford called her to the phone. ‘It’s a woman for you.’

‘Hello.’

‘Norah, this is Sandra. I’m visiting my sister in Umtali for Easter, and I wondered if you’d like a lift to your village. I can drop you there on Good Friday and pick you up on Easter Monday. There’s no Andrew this time, so I’ll be driving in my car.’

‘Yes, Madam, I’d like to come, but I must ask Stanford and get the boss’s approval.’

‘OK! It’s still a couple of weeks away. Phone me if you can come.’

‘Thank you. I will.’

‘By the way, please call me Sandra. You make me sound old when you call me madam.’

‘Yes, Madam Sandra, I will call you Sandra.’

Stanford agreed to Norah’s absence over Easter, and it thrilled her to be seeing John again, so soon after Christmas.

Easter loomed up quicker than Norah expected. This time, with no beer hall stops, she relaxed and enjoyed the drive despite the heavier than normal traffic. It surprised her how short the trip was, and nothing like the exhausting day with Elijah. When Sandra dropped her at the village, Tadiwa was both surprised and delighted to see her.

Norah laughed. ‘I told you I’d find a job where I’d get holidays and long weekends.’

‘Only you, Norah, only you. You’re so determined, fate has stepped in to help you achieve your dreams.’

‘Where are the children?’

‘John and Aneni are off exploring with their friends Simba, Takunda, and Chipi.’

‘Isn’t that dangerous, after what happened to Tendekai? Aneni is only four years old. You can’t trust the boys to watch over her.’

‘John will watch over her. Those two are never apart. Children need the freedom to take risks. That is how they develop their bodies and their minds.’

The heat of the afternoon dissipated in the early evening, and soon the piping voices of the returning children filled the air. On this occasion, John rushed to greet Norah, wrapping his arms around her legs and burying his face in her skirt. Aneni was only seconds behind, mimicking John’s greeting. The excited children related the story of their walk and how they’d seen a buck.

The open fire crackled and spat as Tadiwa cooked the evening meal, and after the fire died down, the stars twinkled with a brightness Norah had forgotten in her time in the city.

When the children were asleep, Norah and Tadiwa chatted about the missing woman. Norah explained how she’d seen her walking on the dirt road.

Tadiwa was aghast. ‘She came from a neighbouring village, just a mile distant. Everyone is so worried. We thought it was all over, but now it’s started again. It was lucky you got a lift, but walking here from the beer hall was dangerous.’

Norah spent only three nights in the village, and the time passed so fast. The Easter weekend was a lot of fun for everyone. Tadiwa and the children loved seeing Norah so soon after her last visit.

John announced to the two women he’d asked Aneni to marry him when he grew up, and she’d accepted. The women laughed. The children’s friendship was wonderful, and Norah felt reassured John was happy in her absence. When Sandra arrived to pick her up for her return to Salisbury, she didn’t experience the heavy heart she’d left with on the two earlier occasions.

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Back at work, Norah blossomed in her role. She and Philemon managed one of the boss’s dinners on their own when Stanford was called away for a family emergency.

Sunday night suppers remained a problem for her, but the boss didn’t seem to mind. Norah suspected he ate Sunday lunch elsewhere and wasn’t too hungry in the evening. The

rumoured cooking lessons hadn't materialised, but in the meantime, she'd learnt a lot from helping Philemon in the kitchen, and she was getting better at preparing a variety of European dishes.

In his absence, Norah learnt a lot about Stanford's role. Much of his work was just an expansion on her existing duties, but now she needed to supervise Abigail, the maid, in cleaning the boss's rooms. She'd always wondered what lay behind the closed door to his wing, so it disappointed her to only find an empty passageway leading to a bedroom with a walk-in robe and ensuite bathroom.

Stanford was gone for over a month and returned one Sunday evening looking tired and thin. His family emergency was over, but it was clear his comfortable city life did not help him endure an extended period in the bush at his parent's village. The boss, Philemon, and Norah were pleased to see him.

The next two months sped by, and in late June, Sandra phoned Norah. She planned to visit her sister in Umtali over the Rhodes and Founders long weekend in early July and offered Norah another lift to her village. Whether Stanford felt guilty about his long absence, or for whatever other reason, he again approved her request to take time off. Norah was elated. This would be her third trip to her village within the last half-year.

As with Easter, the Rhodes and Founders long weekend raced up and sped by. The visit proved as enjoyable as the last, but a worry niggled at Norah. She knew that in only six months, after the Christmas break, she'd take John with her to the city. Tadiwa was concerned how it might affect the children, but Norah pointed out the frequency of her visits and assured Tadiwa she'd be bringing John just as often. She hoped she'd be able to keep her promise and couldn't help feeling guilty about the hurt the parting would cause Tadiwa and Aneni.

On the return trip to Salisbury with Sandra, Norah expressed her concern about breaking up the two children.

'Don't worry, Norah. Lots of children, particularly farmers' children, go to boarding school. John won't be going to boarding school, but for Tadiwa and Aneni, it will feel like it.'

'At least John and I will be with Tadiwa and her family for four weeks over Christmas.'

'This year, Norah, I can schedule a visit to your area just before Christmas, so I can take you to your village. But I'll be overseas for two months, so I can't bring you and John back to Salisbury. You will need to make other arrangements.'

Christmas was more than five months away, and Norah wasn't too concerned about Sandra's early warning. It was something to worry about later. Perhaps she and John could get a lift back with Elijah in his truck.

Only days following her return from the Rhodes and Founders long weekend, the newspaper held exciting news. A man was helping the police with their enquiries regarding the four missing women in the Buhera district, about one hundred and ten miles by road, southwest of Umtali. The paper didn't give any further details. The members of the household were interested in the case because they knew it was Norah's district and her family tribal home.

When the boss returned from his office that evening, Norah went to the lounge with the glass of Scotch she'd poured for him and asked about the news reports.

'Goodness, Norah! I know nothing about it. I only hear details of cases if they appear before me in the court. Besides, I wouldn't hear this case because you might be called as a

witness, and you are a member of my household. You may have been the last person to see that fourth missing woman alive.'

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