

## *Chapter 8*

---

A male servant welcomed Tayo to Aberleigh and ushered him into a brightly-lit room abuzz with the animated chatter of people mingling with drinks. Tayo looked for Vanessa but couldn't see her. Everyone was dressed in fine clothes and seemed at ease in the grandiose setting; enormous chandeliers hung from the ceilings and festive swathes of holly and ivy decorated the large bay windows. Waitresses in frilly white caps and starched aprons wove through the room, balancing silver trays on their fingertips. One stopped to offer Tayo a canapé, which he accepted with a glass of wine and made as if to mingle, peering at flower arrangements or gazing at paintings until, to his relief, Vanessa appeared. She wore a midnight blue sequin dress that clung to her body all the way down to her ankles, where the material fanned out, hiding her shoes. She hugged him in greeting, which surprised him.

‘Come and meet my family!’

First, she introduced him to her grandfather who had difficulty hearing and started talking about India, before Vanessa was able to make him understand that Tayo came from Nigeria. Then the grandfather's eyes lit up as he launched into a series of stories about Lord Lugard and their family ties. Vanessa kept

muttering apologies for her grandfather's unabashed support of the British, but Tayo didn't judge the old man for his colonial fervour. He was simply a man of his times and it was clear to Tayo that he was generous at heart. Next was Vanessa's mother, whom Tayo found charming and strikingly beautiful. She chatted to him about Nigeria, saying how much she missed the country and its people. She wanted to know how he was finding England. If the evening had ended there, it might have been a perfect party for Tayo, but meeting Vanessa's father was less than enchanting. It didn't help that one of his South African friends mistook Tayo for a servant.

The meeting with Vanessa's best friend also seemed odd to Tayo. Vanessa had described Jane as shy, but he had an uncomfortable feeling that she was flirting with him whenever Vanessa wasn't around. But perhaps he was only imagining it. Sometimes shy people could be socially awkward, he reasoned. At any rate, he was glad when the party was over. Vanessa had told him beforehand that he could spend the night at her grandparents' home and all evening he had been dreading sharing with one of the South Africans. But he need not have worried. The house was big enough for him to have a room of his own.

His room was large with beautiful antique furniture but it had no fireplace so Tayo was thankful for the woollens he'd brought to wear beneath his pyjamas. The cotton pyjamas were hardly appropriate for winter, but his mother had sewn them and he treasured them, even though their Nigerian flag green and white stripes had faded to lime-grey. He also wore two lambswool cardigans, an extra pair of socks, some gloves, and his Balliol scarf.

He did a few jumping jacks to get warm and then sat down with the intention of writing to his father. He stared at the paper in front of him, knowing what his father would like to hear, but delayed while his mind wandered back to thoughts of Vanessa. At least Vanessa's mother seemed to like him, so that was a good sign. She'd seemed pleased with the thorn carvings and sherry he'd brought as gifts, making room to display them on one of the tables. 'Isn't he delightful?' he overheard her saying to her husband, who he suspected did not share her opinion. 'In which case,' Tayo muttered aloud, 'I'd better stop thinking about his daughter.'

He stood up and, still feeling cold, took the blanket from his bed and wrapped it around his shoulders. He removed a glove and wrote the date, remembering that this time last year he'd been with Christine. He hadn't spoken to her for several weeks but knew that she and Ike would be spending the holiday together.

*Dear Baba,*

*I am writing this letter to you from Aberleigh, the family home of a fellow student. I've learnt that it is the custom here for country houses to be given names.*

Tayo paused. The words 'fellow student' made Vanessa sound like she was nothing out of the ordinary, but he knew Father might still question it. The fact that his son had not written for several weeks, plus the sudden mention of a woman was likely to signal something—even though, for the moment at least, the relationship had been quite innocent. They'd seen each other several times over the holidays but all that had taken place was friendly teasing and the normal flirting. However, if Tayo were being honest with himself, there was something

more. The fact, for example, that she'd been on his mind for much of the night and that he'd cared about what her family thought of him. He was also pleased that her friends, Mehul and Charlie, were not there.

*Miss Richardson is a student at Oxford who is interested in Africa and has invited a group of us to her grandparents' home for the Christmas celebrations. The home is spectacular—more than 200-years-old, with seven bedrooms, as well as stables, and servants' quarters. It belongs to Grandpa and Grandma Hume (Vanessa's mother's side) who lived in India for many years. Grandpa Hume was in the Army as was his son-in-law, Mr. Richardson, who later served in Sierra Leone and in our own country in the Northern Province.*

Tayo wondered what his father would have thought of the likes of Mr. Richardson. Father always spoke with pride of his years in the Native Administration, but surely it must have been irritating to serve younger British men who knew so little yet felt naturally entitled to power. For a moment, Tayo considered telling Father the names of some of the artists and politicians who'd been at the party. But the more he named, the more he would have to account for later. He'd already made the mistake of telling Father that the former Prime Minister's grandson resided in college. Ever since, he'd been hounded by questions as to the possibility of a visit to the Macmillan home. He was about to write something else when he heard a knock on his door.

'One moment please,' Tayo called, jumping up as he pushed the blanket off his shoulders, throwing it back on the bed. He glanced at his watch. Midnight. Quickly, he removed his scarf and tugged at his gloves, wondering what to do with the rest of his layers, when the knocking resumed.

‘Tayo, it’s me,’ came the whisper.

He opened the door a crack. ‘Oh, Vanessa! I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was you.’ He opened the door wider, wondering if he ought to ask her to wait while he changed, but what would he change into? He had no decent pyjamas, not even a dressing gown. He ought to have heeded the British Council’s advice on what clothes to buy for England. Vanessa still wore her lovely dress, now covered at the neck by a mohair stole.

‘May I come in?’ she whispered again, pushing her face closer.

‘Yes, yes of course. Come in,’ he stammered, feeling foolish for keeping her waiting. They now stood awkwardly, in the middle of the room, while she tugged at her stole.

‘I hope you weren’t too disappointed,’ she said.

‘Disappointed?’

‘Well it’s just that my father, especially when he’s with those friends, can be dreadful.’

‘Oh, please don’t worry about that,’ he smiled. ‘Come. Please sit.’ He pointed hesitantly to his bed, which didn’t quite seem the decent thing to do, but it was the only place to sit apart from the chair and that was cluttered with his things. ‘Please, sit.’ He straightened the blanket. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I’ll just change into something more appropriate.’

‘No, really, I mustn’t disturb you, and I see that you’re working.’ Tayo watched her as she moved back towards the door, stepping so as not to make a noise on the floorboards. He guessed from the way she wobbled on her heels that she was not used to them; tall women rarely wore them. He smiled as she tried, unsuccessfully, to creep gracefully away until he remembered his own fluffy, green slippers bulging at the sides from the extra layers of socks.

‘I must look ridiculous,’ he said, abandoning all thoughts of a change now.

‘You look perfectly handsome, as always, Tayo.’ She smiled.

‘And you, Vanessa, look like a lady of the night.’

‘A what?’

‘No, I’m just being silly,’ he laughed. ‘Please stay.’ She sat on his bed and he moved the chair from the desk, placing it near the bed.

‘Seriously, you look lovely tonight, Vanessa. I mean, you always look lovely but tonight even more lovely if that’s possible.’

‘Oh, Tayo, stop!’

‘So,’ he said.

‘So,’ she answered. ‘I’m just embarrassed by my father.’

‘We all get embarrassed by our parents; it’s normal,’ Tayo replied. ‘Besides, if I were your father I think I’d be wary of any young man near my daughter, too!’

‘Well, I’m sure your parents are wonderful,’ Vanessa replied. ‘Will you tell me about them?’

She wanted to know especially about his mother and so he told her what he thought she’d find interesting, beginning with his mother’s profession as a cloth trader.

‘And what does she look like?’

‘She’s slender,’ he said, ‘so she wraps towels around her waist to make herself look bigger.’ Skinny, he had to explain, was not considered beautiful, and then he remembered having seen Vanessa at Charlie’s party with a towel wrapped around her waist too, which made her laugh. He was enjoying telling Vanessa about his family and found it easy to talk to her. She seemed genuinely interested in what he was saying. Even though she didn’t understand everything about where he came from, she was so far removed from his culture and so intrigued by it that

Tayo felt no need to embellish his childhood as he'd sometimes done with Christine. He even felt comfortable enough to admit that his mother was one of several wives.

'Four?' Vanessa repeated. 'I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound surprised but ...'

'No, you mustn't apologise. It's permitted and when my father became a Christian, well, he couldn't easily change his marital status.'

'And did you live together in one place or in different locations? Do you mind me asking?'

He liked the fact that Vanessa wanted to learn more, except that now she was looking puzzled.

'I was just thinking,' she explained, 'that in one sense, you could argue that polygamy is not terribly different from people here in England marrying, divorcing, and then remarrying, only in one situation the marriages are simultaneous and, in another, consecutive. But do you think your mum's happy? I mean, to have other wives around? Am I asking too many questions?'

'No, not at all,' he smiled. 'Yes, I do think my mother is happy; she's certainly very independent. In fact, you could almost say she practiced a form of polyandry because she left my father for a time to be with another man. It was when I was a boy so I don't know the full story, but a year or two later she returned to my father. Maybe it happened because my father decided to make the family Christian. I'm not sure.'

'It's so interesting. I'd love to meet your mother one day.' 'Then you will. She's also quite jovial, just like you,' Tayo added. 'And what else can I tell you about her? Well, she carries the tribal marks on her face, like my father—three parallel marks on each cheek, from cheekbone to jaw. What are you thinking?'

he asked, watching her smile lift in its sensuous way, a little higher on one cheek than the other.

‘I’m thinking you’ll marry someone like your mother because isn’t that what they always say? That a man looks for someone like his mother?’

‘And a woman? Does she look for someone like her father?’ he asked, alarmed as he considered Mr. Richardson.

‘I certainly won’t. At least not someone as conservative as my father.’

All this time she’d been tugging at her hair so that now most of it had fallen in loose curls onto her shoulders. More than ever, Tayo wanted to touch her. He moved from his chair to the bed, close to where she’d slipped her feet beneath the blanket.

‘I almost wish that my mother had the polyandry option that your mother had,’ Vanessa added, looking more serious.

‘Why?’

‘Maybe it happens in all marriages at some point, and this sounds awful, but I just think Mother would be happier with someone else. For a few moments, Vanessa sat lost in thought as she ran her pretty fingers along the embroidered edge of the pillowcase.

‘You don’t have to stop,’ Tayo whispered.

Vanessa sighed as though she were tired, but then she sat up and patted the pillow.

‘So, what suits Tayo Ajayi? You never told me. Polygamy or monogamy?’

‘I note the absence of polyandry,’ he remarked.

‘Somehow, I didn’t think you’d go for that,’ she laughed.

‘Oh, I don’t know. I quite like the idea of getting other men to fix things round the house. I’m not good at that. But as for the sexual part ...’ Tayo laughed. ‘Well no, I couldn’t share



my woman. I'm afraid I'd be too jealous. Monogamy, happy monogamy, I think that's what I would pick. And it would have to be a woman who is gentle and loving. Someone intelligent, able to put up with me, of course, and God-fearing. What do you think?'

'God-fearing or Tayo-fearing?'

'Now why should anyone fear me?'

'I don't know.' She laughed. 'But it's late and I should be going.'

'Afraid?'

'No. It's been lovely.' She smiled, pulling her feet away from the blanket and rubbing her bare arms.

'Lovely,' he repeated, sensing that this was the moment to do something if he was going to do anything but given where they were, and the fact that her father was somewhere nearby, he hesitated.

She stood up, slipped her shoes on, and took the stole from where it had fallen next to the pillow.

'Don't catch cold,' she said, placing her hand on his shoulder.

He watched as she slipped out of the room and tiptoed down the hall.

'What's wrong with you?' He muttered to himself, slowly closing the door. '*O-de!*' he cursed himself in Yoruba.