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Cloth Girl

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For wisdom is more precious than rubies,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.
Proverbs 8:11

PART I

The Gold Coast, British West Africa

March 1937

Chapter One

Robert Bannerman, still happy to display his body in the privacy of his compound, walked on to the upper veranda of his house with a towel wrapped around his waist. Later on in life, he would put on weight, but for now his body still showed the benefits of having led an active life in England, where he had participated eagerly in most sports, making up for his mediocrity with fervour. In his opinion, his only personal sporting failure was that he had never learned to swim. The truth was that he was afraid of water. When he was a boy, he witnessed a childhood friend drown in the sea, which scarred him with the unwavering respect that comes from recognising one's uselessness in the face of a vast unconquerable. What a peaceful death once the waves had silenced the screams. Anyhow, it would be inappropriate for a man like Robert to be seen swimming in public. There were things that he could not do here that he might have done freely, without a care in the world, back in England, where he had been anonymous and unaccountable; here, he was a pillar of society, respected by many, and the least he could do was try to live accordingly.

He stood gripping a cup of tea in one hand and surveyed his household while his extended family and servants carried out their tasks. He had always wanted his work and play in one place, and as he watched the stable boys and trainer working with the horses and

his children playing in the yard, he felt he had achieved that. It had definitely been worth returning home; he belonged here.

He had turned to go back into the house when he noticed a girl whom he did not recognise in the courtyard below. He was transfixed. He did not want to stop looking at her, and for a while took no notice of his wife, Julie, who had appeared beside him and was talking to him. Reluctantly, he turned his head towards Julie, allowing his eyes to linger on the girl as long as he could. He looked at his wife fleetingly, long enough to recognise the contempt in her face, and then turned back to look at the girl again. Julie stood and stared with her husband for a few moments. Then she took the unfinished cup of tea from his hand and stormed into the house.

Matilda stood in Lawyer's compound looking around anxiously for Uncle, clutching the bundle of documents in her hand. Her brow was glistening with sweat, and her palms were damp. She transferred the bundle from one hand to the other so she could wipe her palms on her dress. There was a strong scent of warm horse manure, which mingled with the smell of burning coals and cooking food. The smell of sweet, thick cornmeal made her stomach rumble.

She had never been inside the grand house or its compound before. Built on a corner plot, the house and compound were bigger than they seemed from the street. She squinted to protect her eyes from the glare of the sun, which was rising confidently in the sky, and looked around slowly. The house was a two-storey wooden rectangular building painted the colour of dirty honey. It had a low-pitched roof covered with corrugated-iron sheets, which glittered like a mirage. On both levels, two huge glassless windows, flanked by big blue shutters, opened on either side of a door on to a covered veranda that ran along the width of the building. From where she stood in the light, the rooms upstairs seemed to be in darkness.

Along the far side of the compound, opposite the gate, were stables for Lawyer's cherished racehorses, which Matilda had often seen being ridden to or from the racecourse. One horse had stretched its neck to rest its head on the stable door as though in exhaustion. There were several people in the yard. A thin man with a wizened face sat on a shaky wooden bench in the middle of the courtyard

underneath the shade of a gigantic neem tree giving instructions to two boys who were grooming horses. The boys moved slowly in response to the man; the heat from the tropical sun, even though it was still early in the morning, discouraging any hurried activity. Two mongrels with tick-infested, patchy fur, one of them with oozing eyes that were plagued by flies, lay on the ground perilously close to the man's feet. One of the dogs neglectfully allowed a stray paw to touch the man's leg and received a sharp kick from him in return. The dog yelped in disgust and moved away the offending limb but failed to move far enough to ensure that he would not intrude in the same way again. Next to the man, an old woman sat heavily with a fat, happy baby on her lap. Whenever the woman shuffled her feet and readjusted her bottom on the hard seat, the bench wobbled, although neither the man nor the woman seemed to notice.

A woman was washing a little girl underneath a running tap close to the house, paying no attention to the child's screams as she scrubbed her all over with a sponge, covering her entire face and body with foamy soap. Soon, she would have talcum powder doused all over her just like her brothers, who had survived their wash and were now playing on the lower veranda in the shade of the house, their smooth bodies still streaked with white powder, like blackboards smeared with chalk. Several dazed chickens wandered around the yard, pecking at the dry brown earth, hoping to find the kind of juicy worm that did not thrive in Lawyer's compound. They clucked persistently in a self-assured manner that was irritating, unaware that they were only ignored because one day soon they would form a special meal for the household.

Matilda was eager to keep a safe distance between her and the dogs. Breathing in deeply through her mouth, she moved cautiously towards the old woman and stood close enough to her to avoid having to speak loudly and risk being told off for being disrespectful.

'Please, good morning. I am looking for Uncle Saint John. Please, do you know where he is?' she asked in her polite voice.

'Lawyer's clerk?' replied the woman in a hot, bored voice, without really looking up. Before Matilda could reply, she continued, 'In the office,' pointing with her chin in the direction of an alleyway that ran towards the front gate.

'Thank you.' She nodded and walked in the direction the old woman had indicated.

As she approached the office, Matilda could not help wishing that Lawyer would be there. She was curious to see what he was like close up. She had seen him occasionally as he drove past in his car, and she had heard a lot about him, in tones often covetous but always reverential. Outside the office, she paused to look at the sign that stood at the front gate with the inscription in peeling paint: 'Robert Bannerman, BA (HONOURS), Cambridge University, ENGLAND, Barrister-at-law & Commissioner for Oaths.' Matilda knew what the sign said because her uncle had told her many times. He often recited the words, merged together but with the appropriate emphases, in his singsong, heavily accented African-English, not pausing until he had reached the full stop at the end.

She went round the corner and up the steps leading to the office. She saw through the open double doors that Uncle was alone. He was hunched over a desk covered with piles of books and papers, studying a document and looking bewildered. The office was dark and gloomy, a serene haven from the noise and brightness outside. An unlit bulb hung from a lead in the ceiling. The only light in the room came from an old green lamp on the desk. Shelves, heavy with rows and rows of hefty, dusty books, lined the walls. The gold lettering on the book spines was fading, but apart from the big Bible that the minister had on the pulpit at church, these were definitely the most impressive books that Matilda had ever seen. The cement walls of the room were cracked in several places and had probably once been white, but with time, dust from the earth outside had yellowed everything, enhancing the dimness of the room. Piles of paper and folders tied with pink ribbons covered most of the floor and every surface in the room. In the corner was a large dark-brown leather armchair that had seen better days. It looked comfortable. Matilda was amazed; she had never seen such a grand room or so many books in one place.

'Excuse me, Uncle,' she said softly.

Saint John looked up, and when he saw her, he grinned with his whole face and took a deep breath, pushing back his shoulders as if shaking off some imaginary burden. 'Oh. It's you,' he said. 'Come in,

come in. Lawyer is not down yet. Come and see my lovely office.' He gestured welcomingly. He was sweating, constantly wiping his brow with a folded handkerchief that had once been white. Saint John was short and eager. If it is ever fair to generalise, then he had a typical fisherman's physique – stocky with well-defined strong arms and oversized calves. His head was shaped like a cocoa pod with a conveniently positioned bald patch, which he did not yet have to confront on a daily basis. He had a moustache to emulate his employer's and wore the same brown-flecked, gabardine wool suit to work each day. It was one of Lawyer's old Oxford baggie suits – oversized pleated trousers with a three-inch waistband and wide lapels on the jacket – which Saint John's wife had altered, taking up the sleeves and trousers a little crookedly and a little enthusiastically, so that too much of his socks now showed above his shoes.

Matilda walked into the room, relieved after all that Lawyer was not there, and turned to look at the wall behind her, which was covered in framed cartoons of men in red gowns and wigs. There were several gilt-framed photographs of Lawyer. Matilda breathed in the cool musty-paper smell, relishing the calm of the room, and peered closely at the grainy black-and-white paper, wondering how much it would cost to have such enormous pictures taken. The album at home had two small pictures in it. On special occasions, Matilda's mother carefully took the album out of its protective box and proudly showed off the small, shadowy photographs, which were now browning with age and desperate to curl in submission to the humidity. In one of them, Matilda's parents, Ama and Owusu, looking uncomfortable and dressed in their best clothes, smiled uncertainly, almost quizzically, into the lens. The second portrayed Uncle Saint John and his wife looking startled. Matilda and her sisters joked secretly about how Aunty Amele was staring slightly agape, with a hint of fear in her face. And at every given opportunity, Matilda's mother reminded Aunty Amele exactly what it had cost the family to capture this unrefined expression, which was, to be frank, quite upsetting, apart from being a waste of good money. But to destroy the photograph would have been even more shameful, so it remained in its rightful place in the family album for all to see.

Matilda wondered when she would be able to have her portrait

taken, and if she would look as nice in print as Lawyer did. She noticed her reflection in the glass of the picture and focused on it. She had recently reluctantly become aware of her appearance. She had been told she was fine-looking and shapely, and everyone commented on her complexion, which was a shade lighter than her sisters, a colour that her mother, who constantly reminded her to avoid standing in the sun unnecessarily, had told her was a distinct advantage for a girl. Her face was round, childish, with dimpled cheeks, large brown trusting eyes and a full mouth with a lower lip that curled downwards somewhat, revealing the soft pink of her mouth. All her friends and female relatives praised her neck; it was long and had two rolls of flesh, a beautiful neck, they said. Embarrassed by what she saw, she blinked and concentrated on Lawyer's image again.

But the man on the wall looked at ease, like someone used to having his picture taken. In one shot, he was sitting on a chair, probably in a studio, smiling comfortably and holding a roll of paper tied with a ribbon. His other hand was majestically positioned on his thigh. Matilda took an imperceptible step closer to the wall and examined his face. It was not black-black, as very dark children, likely to be alternately pitied and teased by their friends and families, were described. He was a refined brown-black, the colour of the bark of a neem tree, a little lighter than Matilda herself. His face was square, and his head, covered in black hair, had looser curls than anyone Matilda knew. She envied his sisters if they had hair like his. Hair like his grew fast and long, lending itself to the more intricate hairdos that Matilda longed for: long braids that would reach her shoulders, or, better still, which would venture down her back. But her hair would never grow that long. Unconsciously, she reached up and stroked her head just behind her ear with her fingers. As a schoolgirl, Matilda's hair had to be kept short, just a little longer than was acceptable for a man. Her tight, springy curls, which when pulled straight at least trebled in length, was the most inflexible of African hair and could not be combed into submission without some pain. She thought her friend Patience would think Lawyer was handsome, but she thought that he had stern eyes. They were bulbous and sleepy, and his long nose and mouth – accentuated by a

trim moustache, which made him look quite distinguished – were much thinner than Matilda's.

'Please don't touch anything,' warned her uncle.

Matilda walked over and handed him the papers.

'These are the law reports. They contain important cases that Lawyer reads when he is preparing for court,' Saint John explained, waving grandly at the books. 'Lawyer is a very clever man.' He told anyone who would listen to him, and many who would not, about Lawyer's qualifications, emphasising their exceptional brilliance – the sign of a great man, a good man, actually. Saint John Lamptey believed emphatically that the fact he worked for such an outstanding individual was an indication of his own importance. Look how his place in society had been raised to a level which, it had to be said, was far beyond where one would have expected the son of a fisherman to reach! That Saint John should take pride in his employer's achievements was simply not something to be questioned.

Matilda turned back to the wall.

'Uncle? Please, what does that say?' She pointed to the caption at the bottom of the photograph.

'Cambridge University, 1928,' he replied without hesitation. 'The best university in the world.'

She turned to look at another photograph, a group of men all wearing similar gowns to the one Lawyer wore in the individual portrait. Matilda counted four rows of six or seven people. She leaned further forward and saw that one of the people in the front row, who were all seated, looked like a woman. Lawyer was not hard to find. His face, the only black one, was there in the third row, right in the middle of the picture. Everyone in the photograph looked happy, but he looked ecstatic. He seemed to be smiling more energetically than most of the others, who Matilda assumed were his classmates. She wondered whether it took a particular type of courage to be the only one of a kind. But the expression on his face was not that of someone who thought he did not belong.

Matilda had only seen whites from a distance. The colonials did not live near Jamestown, the part of Accra where Matilda lived. Jamestown, named by the English who originally settled there, was

a neighbourhood, not a town, on the Atlantic Ocean, just southwest of Accra proper, inhabited almost solely by the Ga tribe. The Ga people were renowned for their fishing skills, and they often lived up to their reputation for being aggressive, but they described themselves as sophisticated, mainly because they had had hundreds of years of exposure to Europeans and also because Accra, the administrative centre of the Gold Coast, which was part of British West Africa, was Ga territory.

The Europeans had since moved on to leafier suburbs nearer to Christiansborg Castle, the Governor's base, and Matilda, who rarely had reason to go anywhere beyond her immediate environs, had never spoken to a white person. Looking at the photographs, she wondered what whites were like, whether their skin felt as it looked, cold, translucent and fragile, and whether, amongst themselves, they too had colour distinctions indiscernible by her, such as white-whites or even yellow-whites, or whether they were all simply white. She also wondered whether there was any truth in the rumour that white women were happy to be thin and that they did not mind being flat.

'Well, now you have seen the office, you'd better get back to help at home and let me get on with my work,' said Uncle, interrupting her thoughts.

Dismissed a little sooner than she would have liked, Matilda set off.

Robert Bannerman belonged to the educated elite of the Gold Coast. Unusually, he came from a family of educated men. His great-grandfather had been sired by a British merchant and a local girl and had been sent to school in England. Through the generations, the Bannermans had continued to educate their males in this way. After primary school in Accra, Robert too had been shipped off to boarding school in England, and then to obtain a law degree at Cambridge. He had been away from his country and family for many years when he returned as a barrister to claim his rightful position of privilege and power.

Robert had loved his time in England unashamedly, and he still esteemed anything English, but he knew that there was really only one place where he would be able to be the man that he was

destined to be. Now, only five years after his return, he was one of the most respected lawyers in the colony.

No one, least of all Robert, was sure where the Bannerman family's money came from, or questioned how there was enough to educate its sons in this lavish manner. There were rumours that their progenitors had been involved in the slave trade, but this was not something that Robert gave much thought to.

He turned to go back into his room when he saw the unfamiliar girl walking towards the back gate. He caught only a glimpse of her face as she walked past. He watched, transfixed. She had big hips that swayed from side to side as she glided in a way that belied her generous proportions. She walked lazily, scraping the heels of the unwieldy sandals as she moved, scooping up dust and dirt to sit moistened between her toes. Robert didn't want to stop looking at her. He wanted to know in which direction she would go, hoping for some clue as to who she was, but she disappeared behind the big wall.

He remained distracted all morning, wondering about the girl. He was slightly more irritable than normal with Julie and with the maid who brought him his breakfast. Surely his reaction to the girl was the usual excitement that precipitated the chase he would embark on as soon as he knew who she was.

'Lawyer, it is time to go or we will be late.' Saint John was running up the stairs to the veranda where Robert sat contemplating his breakfast.

Robert noticed that they were already nearly an hour late. 'Morning,' he replied gruffly.

Saint John hovered next to Robert while he drained his cup, then the men made their way down to Robert's car, a dark-blue Austin 16 four-door saloon with maroon leather seats, footrests and picnic tables that folded out from the back of the front seats, which had arrived from Liverpool only a few months ago. On a day like today, typically sunny and hot, the sun visor above the front windscreen was a wonderful accessory. The driver spent a considerable amount of time polishing the car each morning, and today it gleamed in the sunlight as though in gratitude. The driver held the door open while Lawyer climbed in and sat behind Saint John, who was seated in front, tall

and puffed with pride. As the car eased slowly out of the compound and on to the unmade road, several small children stopped playing and started waving at it. They saw the car almost every day, but it had lost none of its magic, and some of them ran beside it until it reached the main road, waving all the while and trying to catch a glimpse of their toothy grins reflected in the sleek hulk of the car as it rolled along gracefully.

Robert and Saint John, ignoring the children as usual, were engrossed in a discussion when Robert saw the girl buying something from a street vendor at the edge of the road just ahead of them. His desire was unmistakable and oddly overpowering. He leaned forward and shook Saint John's shoulder vigorously.

'Do you know that girl in the green dress? She was at the house this morning.' The driver had slowed down close to where Matilda was standing and was preparing to turn into the main road. Robert continued to shake his clerk's shoulder as though that would force a reply from him. 'That girl there. Do you see her? Find out who she is.' No one in the car could have misunderstood the excitement in his voice.

Saint John looked out of the window in the direction Lawyer had been gesturing. The frown on his face lifted in recognition. 'Lawyer, that is my niece Matilda. My favourite. A good girl.' He was nodding his head to emphasise his words and grinning with idiotic pride, taking more than his fair share of credit for the girl's allure.

The driver crept on to the main road and increased his speed a little. He drove gingerly, even though there were few motorcars on the streets.

Robert could not stop thinking about the girl, whose name he now knew. His usual style would be inappropriate. To seduce his clerk's niece and then walk away would fall outside the behavioural code by which he strove to live. But he was overwhelmed by how fiercely he wanted her. Certainly, she would not be the first such girl to have this effect on him. Yes, he had married well and had acquired precisely the sort of wife for the kind of man he was; stylish, educated, bright, and with the right background. Julie was very English in her ways, which Robert liked. In some ways, she was even more English than he, which was an advantage for their children. They would attend English-speaking schools from the start, none of this

vernacular nonsense to confuse them. He wanted them to be brought up well, to acquire the superior tastes he had, and Julie was the right mother for all that. And she was presentable, which helped a great deal. She knew what to wear, what to say and how to comport herself without his input. Even her name, Juliana, had always impressed him with its ring of imperialism, but he too had succumbed over time, albeit unwillingly, to the abbreviated form that she preferred. So why, as soon as he had returned to the Gold Coast from his studies, and ever since, it had to be said, had he needed to dally with girls so far beneath him? Girls he usually met in secret, girls who satisfied something in him that Julie, with all her finesse, was unable to. He shrugged and stared out of the window, allowing his thoughts to return to Matilda. He began to consider where and how they could meet in a way that would be best for all concerned. There had to be a solution; he just had to think of it. Or, alternatively, he thought, I could simply allow this desire to run its natural course unaided. There was, after all, no likelihood that he would cross paths with the girl again soon.

Two days later, Robert was fed up with being plagued by exciting thoughts of her. While they were preparing for a case, he asked his clerk to send for Matilda.

'Tell her to find the papers for the Acheampong case, which you took home.'

Bewildered, Saint John asserted that he had not taken those papers home. They had to be in the office, although he had to admit that had not seen them in a while. Anyone looking at the piles of papers and files in the office would be suspicious of Saint John's claims that he always knew where any particular piece of paper was. Yet, time and time again, he astounded Robert by the speed with which he found the necessary documents.

The message was dispatched. Robert was edgy with anticipation. He wondered whether the girl would be as he had remembered. Time passed slowly. Robert wondered whether the girl would come. And if she did come, what would he do? He would cross that bridge when he got there, he thought eagerly. For the third time, he called for the boy who had taken the message to Saint John's house and

again asked him, 'And when you got to the house, who did you talk to?'

The boy's answer had not changed since he was last asked the question. 'Please, I saw Sister Matilda and asked her to find the papers that Uncle left in his room and to bring them here as soon as possible. I told her that if she cannot find them, she must come and tell Uncle.'

There was nothing to do but wait. The silence was tense. Saint John continued to search the office, visibly concerned that his filing system should let him down so decisively, particularly in circumstances where he could not share the blame with anyone if the documents were indeed missing.

Robert continued to pace up and down the office with a mixture of exhilaration and intense irritation. How preposterous was it that this young girl had rendered him so weak over the past two days? He had intended asking Saint John how old she was, but something had prevented him from wanting to know. He convinced himself that her school uniform wasn't necessarily a true reflection of her age. Girls in this country go to school at all ages, he reflected. There is no legal age limit for schooling, no legal start date. In fact, he would have to stop thinking of her as a girl; she was probably a woman; it was quite possible that she was already eighteen. When the girl's outline appeared in the doorway, he was walking away from the door with his back to her. He reached the wall, turned round and saw her standing there. He smiled. She was lovely. More striking than he had remembered in the image of her that had occupied his thoughts unceasingly since he first saw her.

'Come in.'

Matilda took a hesitant step into the room and stood just inside the doorway, blinking while her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room.

Robert could see that she was anxious. Naturally, she had not found the papers, and she probably expected to be in trouble now.

'Did you find them?' Saint John asked.

Matilda shook her head and pursed her lips, waiting for the onslaught.

'Don't worry about the papers,' said Robert, not taking his eyes off

the girl. He could sense his clerk's perplexed expression. 'I have just remembered that I took them upstairs yesterday. Go and get them.'

Saint John hurried off.

'Sit down.' Robert gestured to the armchair in the corner.

Matilda could hear her heart thumping as she walked towards the chair.

'Don't worry,' Robert continued, 'the papers are upstairs. I just wanted to see you.'

Matilda frowned. She tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry. She wondered whether she should say anything. But what could she possibly say to this man? To Lawyer? She tried to sit on the very edge of the armchair, but she slid down into the wide seat. The chair was not as comfortable as it looked. She knew she was frowning and tried to smile but couldn't. Her palms would not stop sweating, although she kept wiping them on her school uniform. As soon as they were dry, they needed wiping all over again. It seemed the safest thing to keep looking at the floor. If only he would turn away from her, then she might dare to have a good look at him.

Robert stared at her. She was indeed handsome. Untouched, he could tell. Her innocence increased his desire.

'What is your name?' He couldn't think of anything better to say.

'Please, Matilda,' she replied, still avoiding eye contact with him. For what purpose did he need to know her name? she wondered, and why was she here? She also wondered whether he was like the men her mother warned her about. 'The older they are, the more you need to remain on your guard,' Ama had often said.

'Well, Matilda, I am Lawyer Robert Bannerman. Your uncle talks highly of you. How old are you?' Not being able to say what he wanted was alien to him, but he knew he had to exercise restraint for now.

'Please, fourteen,' she said, pinching her fingers.

'So, when will you finish your schooling?' He stared at her more closely now. Fourteen was rather young, even for him. She was a child still.

'Please, I will finish next year.' She looked longingly at the door, wishing her uncle would hurry up and return so that she could leave.

'And when will you be fifteen?'

'Please, on the twenty-first of May is my birthday.'

Robert smiled and considered what she had said. In about two months she would be fifteen. Clearly old enough. He chewed his lip. There was no law prohibiting him from seducing her now, only his blasted inconvenient principles. And his irksome clerk, on whom he had come to depend quite heavily these days.

Saint John rushed into the office clutching the elusive papers. He looked pleased. 'Lawyer, you were right. I have found them. They were in your room.' As soon as he saw Matilda sitting in the armchair, he shouted, 'Get up. How dare you sit in Lawyer's chair? Did I raise you to be disrespectful?'

'Saint John, it is fine,' said Robert. 'I told Matilda to sit down. We were just talking. Your niece is not disrespectful; in fact, I can tell that she is very polite.' He turned to Matilda and smiled. A smile that normally got him what he wanted. 'Thank you so much for coming, Matilda. You can go home now.'

Robert did not take his eyes off her as she hurried out of the room. He had made up his mind. He would have to have her; it was clear that this desire, these thoughts, so overpowering that they made him dizzy, had to be satiated. He was prepared to go as far as, well, as far as marriage even, if that became necessary.

Matilda set off to the local school where one of the teachers was giving English lessons over the holidays. She was relieved that Lawyer had let her go in time for her lesson, but as she walked, she pondered the strangeness of their meeting. She had gone to the office filled with fear after searching in vain through Uncle's things for the documents that the messenger had said were supposed to be there. It was odd, and very unlike her uncle, who never misplaced Lawyer's papers at home, that she could not find them. He normally kept work papers in one place only – on the table in his room – and no one was allowed to touch them. Matilda knew Uncle, and probably Lawyer too, would shout at her if she did not find them, and yet she couldn't; there were no papers anywhere in Uncle's room. And there weren't many places to look in the sparsely furnished room. There was a bed in the corner underneath the window, through which a small amount of light filtered after finding its way between

the little houses, which were barely three feet apart on either side of an alleyway. Beside the bed was a table and chair on which Uncle Saint John and Aunty Amele battled for space, she for her cheap ornaments, jewellery, bottles of scent, yellowed with age, and her English Bible, which she could not read, and he for his newspapers and, when necessary, for Lawyer's documents. There were two chests side by side on the floor in which Uncle Saint John and Aunty Amele kept their clothes. The whitewashed concrete walls had been dirtied with smudges of miscellaneous unidentifiable substances over the years, and on the wall between the bed and the table, Uncle Saint John had sometimes scribbled things when he could not find a piece of paper. Other than a crucifix, which hung above the head of the bed, the walls and the undulating cement floor were bare.

Despairing at the thought of having to go to the office empty-handed, she had begun to look in the most unlikely places. She had bent down to look under the bed. It was dark and dusty and filled with clutter: some shoes, a battered brown suitcase, a box of books. Each time she pulled something out from underneath the bed, her nostrils filled up with disturbed dust, which promptly resettled wherever it could. She had even sneaked a look in the chests on the floor. When she opened the chest filled with Aunty Amele's clothes, the scent of camphor escaped first, then the smell of crisp new cotton. There were several bundles of unused printed batiks, possibly left over from Aunty Amele's dowry, neatly piled in one corner of the chest. Matilda could not resist running her hand delicately over the top bundle before she closed the chest.

When she arrived at his office, she had quickly noticed that Lawyer was much taller and imposing than he had seemed in the photographs. Matilda had been taken aback when he asked her to sit down. She had never been offered a seat in the presence of any of the adults she knew. It did not make any sense to her that he should want to see her. She could not imagine why such a prominent lawyer would have time to be interested in a girl like her. She panicked as the thought materialised. Please God, let him not be interested in me, she thought, then smiled at the ridiculousness of her overactive mind. Yet, try as she could to make sense of it, she remained perplexed about their encounter. She would tell Patience about it.

Patience would be impressed and would certainly have some theory or other about the meeting.

Matilda was going to start learning English that morning. It had taken a while to convince Uncle Saint John that she should learn English. He said that the education she received at her school, the local mission school, was sufficient. There, lessons were conducted in the Ga language. The missionaries, originally from Switzerland, were here to spread the Good News and to raise healthy converts; intellectual advancement was not really part of their mandate. So, in addition to religious studies, they concentrated on teaching the girls handicrafts, domestic science and other necessary skills for motherhood.

Uncle Saint John had said he could not see any reason why Matilda would ever need to speak English, but his sister, Matilda's mother, Ama, had a gift for making everyone around her do what she wanted and so Matilda was going to learn English.

Before accepting defeat, Uncle Saint John had cautioned the women in his house one final time. 'Mark my words. You go ahead and over-educate the girl and you will see how you will just complicate everything,' he said. 'It is not as if I am against education; after all, am I not educated too? But the wrong education is dangerous. What is the use of educating Matilda as if she is a British girl? So that she starts to wear British dresses? So that she abandons her culture? Too much education is just a hindrance for a girl who is only going to be a wife and mother.'

'Yes, yes,' Ama had replied. 'But it might improve her marriage prospects. Anything that might improve those prospects must be done.'

Matilda had stood with her hands behind her back in the corner of the compound as Uncle Saint John spoke, rejoicing internally as it became evident to her that her mother was getting her way. But it would be a bad idea to appear too victorious, so she scrunched her lips to repress a smile. She ached to know more than how to cook and sew, and she had a nebulous notion that there was a world of knowledge she could not access because she could not speak English, a world she was determined to enter some day. The first step would be to learn English, and then she could start her journey of discovery, to

find what, she did not know. To date, her schooling had been haphazard; whenever she was needed to run some errand or other or help her mother at the market, she had to miss school. It was the same for all the other girls, and the teachers could hardly penalise them for their absences.

Today, as she walked towards the school, she wondered why her mother was in favour of her learning English; they rarely wanted the same thing, making Matilda careful to conceal her real desires at all times.

As Matilda entered the schoolyard, she saw a group of girls all in the same green school uniform she was wearing. They were being entertained by the vivid gestures of one girl who was holding court. She wondered what made-up stories Patience was telling this time.

The schoolyard was an area of red-brown compacted earth surrounded by a low brick wall. The soil, thirsty for the rainy season that was due in a few weeks, defied the elements by sprouting patches of grass that browned as soon as they emerged. The girls were sheltering in the shade of two mature mango trees, which stood proudly, close to the centre of the yard, where they were beginning to sag under the weight of their ripening fruit. Scraggly pink and white frangipani shrubs were dotted around the periphery of the wall, the legacy of a teacher who had been determined to beautify the school and had supervised while pupils planted them some years ago. Not much aftercare was given to the plants, however, and in time, only a few survived.

The classroom block was a long, single-storey concrete building, which was divided into four rooms. The roof sloped away from the covered veranda that ran along the length of the building, so that when it rained, the rainwater was channelled away from the entrance to the classrooms. Each room had three gaps in the walls on either side, which served as windows. On a normal school day, when classes were filled with pupils of mixed ability and age, those sitting closest to the windows had to concentrate to hear the teacher in their room, especially if the teacher in the next classroom was particularly enthusiastic.

'Hey! Matilda,' Patience shouted as she saw her friend, waving frantically at her.

As soon as Matilda was close enough, Patience grabbed hold of her arm. 'Wait till you see the teacher. I tell you he is handsome,' she continued almost breathlessly, with her eyes wide open.

Patience dramatised the most minor events, particularly if they involved men, and Matilda had learned to take little notice of her most of the time.

'You always think about the wrong things,' she said. 'We are here to learn English, not to find husbands. Our elders are doing that job full time for us, and they don't want our help. Hello, everyone.' Matilda recognised most of the girls from school. 'You won't believe where I have just been,' she whispered to Patience.

'Tell me, then.'

'Lawyer Bannerman, you know, the one Uncle—'

'Everyone knows who Lawyer Bannerman is.'

'He sent for me today,' said Matilda, enjoying the amazed look on her friend's face.

'Just like that?'

Matilda told the story, but before she could finish, Patience interrupted. 'He must have seen you somewhere and decided that he likes you. What are you going to do about it?' she asked, grasping Matilda's arm with both of hers.

'Don't be stupid, Patience. I am not looking for a boyfriend. And if I was looking, he would not be so old. And he is married. I don't want to be a second or third wife.'

'Whether or not he is married is irrelevant. If he can support you and your children . . .'

'Anyone would think that your head is filled only with husbands and babies. As for me, there are things I want to do before I settle down. I want to be educated.'

Their conversation was halted by the sound of a bell. Looking in the direction of the noise, Matilda noticed a man standing outside one of the classrooms ringing the school bell vigorously.

'Hurry,' said Patience, pulling her friend's hand as she made her way towards the classroom block. 'I want to sit right at the front.'

Patience was successful, and she and Matilda sat at the desk nearest to the teacher. From this close, Matilda could not help but study the teacher while she waited for the lesson to start. He was rather

small and nervous-looking with black horn-rimmed glasses that seemed a little too big for him. He was very dark and had very short hair. Matilda noticed that his white shirt was immaculately pressed. She took this to mean that he was overly preoccupied with his appearance, which seemed to her a little at odds with his otherwise scholarly look. Probably he just had doting women at home who were concerned on his behalf; none of the men in her house ironed their own shirts. They considered the effort of heating the coal iron beyond them, and if Matilda or one of her sisters did not iron her cousin's clothes, he simply went out looking like a crumpled envelope.

Anyway, Matilda was really not interested in men. She was here to learn English. Her dream was about to come true. But she was prepared to admit, if pressed again by Patience, that this teacher seemed nice. At least, he would make a change from the fat, frightening women who taught her at school. Women who seemed to believe that girls were incapable of retaining any knowledge unless they were sufficiently caned. Matilda had always believed that to be a teacher, one had to have a cruel streak. How fortunate that the teacher who had been scheduled to teach this class had become ill after the pupils had already paid for the course. Matilda was certain that her mother would have been less keen for her to attend a course taught by a man.

The man introduced himself as Mr Mensah. It was an Ashanti name, and Matilda wondered whether he spoke Ga, and if not, how he was planning to communicate with his class.

Mr Mensah interrupted Matilda's thoughts. 'Welcome to our English classes. I am glad to see so many of you here today. As you know, Mrs Bonsu has been admitted to hospital and so I am privileged to be your substitute teacher. I hope you will find my tuition beneficial. English is the language of the British Empire, and therefore of our world. It is very important that you, as the future mothers of our country, are able to read and write it. Many illustrious works of culture will be available to you when you master this sumptuous language.'

Mr Mensah must have noticed that there were sixteen girls staring at him blankly, some with their mouths open. He was speaking in

English, and his audience did not understand him. Although most of them knew some basic everyday English, they did not recognise his luxuriant vocabulary. Even if they had, he spoke clearly, intonating the words correctly for the most part, which made the sounds unfamiliar to the girls. He smiled at them, revealing a gap in his upper front teeth, and started speaking very slowly and carefully, nodding in time with the words as he wrote what he said on the blackboard. 'I will not use conventional methods of teaching; I will converse with you as a friend about things that interest me, and you will increase your vocabulary and your general knowledge that way.' He looked approvingly at Matilda, who was fervently but hesitantly copying down everything that he wrote as though she might not have another chance. He pointed at her. 'You. What is your name?'

Matilda was taken aback. She was used to teachers calling on someone who had put up their hand to answer a question. She rose slowly and held on to the desk. Why had she listened to Patience yet again? She cleared her throat. 'Plis, Mateelda Quartey.'

'Good, good, good. You see, you understand more of this language than you may realise.' He was wagging his finger at the class, raising his eyebrows to the ceiling, smiling and nodding his head all at once. 'But remember, when you are conversing with a British man or woman, he or she will not expect you to say "please" all the time. Needless to say, you must be cautious not to abandon your respectful duties to your superiors when you speak to them in English.' He turned back to Matilda, who was waiting keenly to be told she could sit down and stop being the centre of attention. 'So, what is your age now?'

Matilda frowned slightly and bit her lip. What had he said? Was she allowed to tell him in her language that she did not know what he had said? She felt tongue-tied and stupid. 'Plis, erm . . .' Mr Mensah turned round to write the question on the board. Matilda looked at Patience, who looked serene, like a person daydreaming, and gave her a nudge, but her friend just shrugged unhelpfully.

Mr Mensah turned to face his pupils again. He smiled at Matilda and the rest of the girls. 'Aha. Wait. How old are you?'

'Fourteen,' Matilda answered quickly, relieved that she understood this question at least. Please let her sit down.

'Well done. Sit down, Matilda.' He was writing her age on the board for all to see. He wrote it twice. 'Fourteen √. Fourteen X.' 'The correct way to say this word is *four*teen.' He was pointing with a stick to the word on the board with the tick next to it. 'This way is wrong,' he said as he tapped the word with the cross. 'Everybody repeat after me, *four*teen.'

And they did. Repeatedly and in unison, each time stressing the second syllable of the word just as Matilda had done, becoming progressively sure of themselves, saying the word louder each time, all the while smiling back at their teacher because they were pleased with their effort.

Finally, Mr Mensah shook his head and held out his hand to stop them. 'Enough, enough. We will simply have to remain on the alert to this pitfall and, over time, improve your fearful diction.'

When the lesson ended, Mr Mensah asked the girls to practise some of the words they had learned that day and to take every opportunity to speak English at home with each other. 'The BBC Empire Service is an invaluable service that I recommend to you. Borrow your fathers' wireless sets whenever you can and listen to the broadcasts.'

It was home time. Matilda stood up, feeling slightly light-headed as she did, almost like a person who, parched, had drunk too much water far too quickly.