

1

JUNE 1945

FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD Merab Nantamu knew that this was the day when, upon returning home from school, she saw her aunt Abigail chatting with her father Levi under the mango tree in the front yard of the house. Merab suspected that the conversation was very important because the talkative Abigail rarely sat to speak to a person for long.

Not this time.

Levi was sitting on a wooden folding chair and Abigail was sitting on a mat facing Levi, her big brother. Merab knelt about three metres from where her father and aunt were seated to greet them.

“Come closer, dear. I don’t bite. I am very glad to see you, Merab,” Abigail said as she stretched her hands out to hug her niece. Her unusually enthusiastic greeting made Merab even more suspicious of her aunt’s intentions.

Merab went inside to greet her mother, Dolosi, but soon found that her mother was not in the house, but in the outdoor kitchen, preparing dinner. The aroma of smoked beef was a sign to Merab that it was going to be a special dinner; the family never ate beef on weekdays. She stayed in the house, hiding behind the front door so she could eavesdrop on the conversation still going on under the mango tree.

“...don’t think he is a Christian. When I asked what his Christian name was I got no answer,” Merab heard Abigail say.

“I knew his father,” she heard Levi reply. “He was not a Christian. We can therefore conclude that since the father was not a Christian, his son is not a Christian.”

When Merab saw her aunt rise up from the mat, she quickly went to her bedroom, put her books on the floor and changed from her school uniform. Before Merab could leave the room, Abigail came in and closed the door behind her. She had done the same thing the year before, Merab remembered, when she had turned fourteen and her aunt had talked to her about sexuality.

“Merab, I am an unannounced visitor this evening,” Abigail said, “and...”

Of course, I know that, Merab thought.

“I have come specifically to see you,” Abigail continued. “I have got great news for you. Sit down.”

Merab took a mat that was in a corner and spread it on the floor so that she and her aunt could sit. She now had no doubt what the news would be.

“We have found a man to marry you,” Abigail said.

I didn’t know that you have been on a quest all along.

“He is from a well-known family in Kalasa...”

Oh no! Merab had been looking forward to completing her primary education, going for further studies to become a teacher, and marrying an important man in Kampala, not someone from a rural area like her own. She did not want to live in the country all her life. Her cousin Philemon, one of Abigail’s sons, worked in the city, and judging from the stories he told, it was a great place to live. She’d aspired to marry there.

“Not only is he from a well-known family, he is a successful farmer, from a family that both your father and your aunt Namagembe know well,” Abigail

continued. “Actually, your aunt Namagembe is the one who recommended your future husband to us.”

So my father and Aunt Namagembe know the man well—but I don’t.

“Your future husband will be coming to pay us a visit in two weeks’ time.”

That’s too close. It leaves me no time to prepare myself, and I am not interested in marriage! I am still very young—why should I get married now when I am still in school?

“...and there will no longer be a place for you in this home,” Merab’s aunt’s words broke into her thoughts. “You are marrying for life. As I am sure you know, no woman in our family has ever divorced her husband.”

I guess staying in the marriage or not depends on what kind of man one is married to, Merab thought, looking at her finger nails.

“Last time I talked to you about cleanliness, but I must emphasize it again...”

Can’t you talk about something else? I’m known for my cleanliness.

“Before you serve a meal, make sure you are clean. Never serve meals while wearing soiled clothes or when you are sweaty after working in the garden. And when you serve food, serve your husband first. Give him enough food, preferably on a large plate. He should never ask for a second serving. When you cook beef, goat meat, chicken or game meat—I don’t know if your future husband enjoys hunting—his piece or pieces of meat should be special and bigger than the other pieces.”

How well did her aunt Abigail and her father know the man they wanted her to marry? Merab wondered but she couldn’t dare to ask; her parents had trained her to listen, not to talk back. But she’d wished to marry an educated man, maybe even the headmaster of a school, so that her life could be different, more exciting.

“...a string if you have one,” her aunt’s instructions continued. “That way it will be easy for you to identify his piece of meat. Do you understand?”

Abigail had noticed that Merab was only half-listening. “You’ve got to listen to me attentively, young woman! What I am telling you will be important in your marriage. Remember, we are marrying you off for good. You will still be welcome here in your father’s home but only as a visitor. There will no longer be a place for you here.”

Of course there will always be a place for me here. This is my father’s home.

“Listen attentively. I don’t want to repeat myself,” Abigail said, raising her voice a little. “In some homes when they cook meat, the whole saucepan of meat is given to the man of the house, the head of the family, to serve himself first and to choose the pieces he wants before the other people in the household are served. However, this is not what I am suggesting you should do. Do whatever you can for your husband to know that he is special. When you choose his piece of meat before you cook it and tie it with a string, you can easily identify it when you serve him.”

Merab almost burst out laughing but restrained herself. In their home Levi, her father, was not treated in the way that her aunt was describing. Although he sat alone at a small table in the living room to eat while everybody else in the family sat on mats on the floor, his meals were served just like for the other family members. He was neither served special pieces of meat nor given any overly special treatment. But Merab was also aware that because Levi was a catechist—a teacher of the Christian religion—he was mild-mannered compared to the rest of the men of the village.

“You’ve got to cheerfully welcome all visitors to your home, whether they are invited or not, whether you like them or not,” Abigail added, her voice loud and authoritative. “You should never be a sulking wife. Sometimes, it may be hard to deal with members of your husband’s family but for the good of your marriage, don’t quarrel with them. Treat every one of them respectfully.”

I guess I, too, deserve to be respected.

“It also goes without saying that you’ve got to be hospitable. Every person who sets foot in your home must be fed. Don’t be a miser. You’ve got to cook enough food for everyone in your home and when you cook, it is better to

prepare more than you would for the members of your household, assuming that you will receive visitors, than to receive visitors and not have enough food to offer them...”

That’s assuming there will be someone to help me with the cooking. I can’t cook for the entire village day in and day out.

“...cleanliness. Your bedroom must always be neat and tidy. Your husband would not want to spend a night in your bedroom if it was not clean.”

Here we go again—another lecture on bedroom matters, sexuality, whatever! Merab recalled the last time Abigail had visited, embarrassing her with explicit sexual talk.

“Your future husband has three children. I know it is not easy to deal with stepchildren but you should love and care for them as if they were your own children.”

What? I’m going to marry a man who already has children?

“Your future husband and some members of his family will be visiting soon to be formally introduced to our family. I am going to finalize the details with your father,” Abigail said as she rose to go to the living room for dinner.

Merab stayed in her room, crying. She wanted to stay in school. She did not want to get married.

When her older brother Absalom came in for dinner and noticed that his sister was not seated in her usual place, he went to her bedroom and asked her to come out for dinner, and she came. He saw that she was upset but didn’t want to ask her why, not at least in the presence of the entire family.

* * *

Two weeks later, Merab, her mother Dolosi and her aunts Abigail and Namagembe thoroughly cleaned the house. Absalom and his father swept

the bare ground in the front yard and trimmed the shrubs near the house. When the cleaning was done, Abigail and Namagembe sat with Merab in her bedroom, giving her more tips about marriage while two women friends of the family, who'd arrived in the home early that morning, helped to prepare a sumptuous lunch, cooking plenty of chicken stew, beef stew, groundnut sauce, *matooke* plantain and sweet potatoes.

When the visitors arrived towards noon, Merab's uncle Mulinda met them at the front door. Merab's future husband thirty-two-year-old Lutalo, was accompanied by his elder brother Lumu, their sisters Nakirijja and Nalwanga, and Lutalo's friend Kabali. Mulinda greeted them formally, and then asked in the customary way, the reason for their visit.

"We are here to request you to let us become children in this wonderful family," Lumu, who was the visiting party's spokesman, answered. Other than the greetings, Lutalo was not expected to utter a single word.

"You want to become children in this family?" Mulinda asked, pretending to laugh. "In our family, children don't ask to become children here. They are just born into the family."

"Somebody told us that we can be born into this family and since we very much love to be a part of this family, we didn't hesitate to come," Lumu replied.

"And the person who told you that is a member of our family?"

"Yes, she is a member of your family."

"Then I will allow you inside our house. Please come in," Mulinda said, stepping aside to let the visitors enter, as was customary after the initial greetings.

There were three extra wooden chairs for the men and two mats for the women, who sat down while the men shook hands with Mulinda, Levi and his brothers-in-law Reverend Mukuye, who was Abigail's husband and Kyazze, the husband of Levi's sister Namagembe.

After the greetings, Mulinda addressed the men of his family. "These people,"

he said as he turned to face the visitors, "are here to request our permission to become a part of our family. Do you think it would be a good idea for us to welcome them?"

"Yes indeed," Reverend Mukuye answered.

"Where are you from?" Mulinda asked Lumu, as if he did not already know.

"We are from Kalasa, about thirty kilometres from here."

"Oh, that's quite far from here. You came all this way just because you wanted to become a part of our family?"

"That is the major reason," Lumu said and paused. "But there is another reason. We know how great your family is. The man of this house has an excellent reputation as a great teacher. We couldn't wait to meet him."

Levi beamed, happy to hear that he was known beyond his village.

After Lumu had answered more questions satisfactorily, Abigail was called into the room in the company of Namagembe, her younger sister, to confirm that these were indeed the visitors that she'd been expecting. The women seated themselves on a mat before greeting the visitors. Then Mulinda asked Abigail, as was the custom, "My sister, look closely at these people and tell me if you know them."

"Yes, I know them."

"Were you expecting them?"

"Yes, I have been expecting them."

"What do they want?"

"Sir, my niece Merab is ready for marriage and before us is the gentleman who would like to marry her," Abigail said, then paused.

"Please go ahead," Mulinda said after a few moments. "This is going to be very interesting."

“Before I go ahead let me bring Merab out,” Abigail said as she and Namagembe rose.

While they waited for Abigail to return Levi sat silently while Mulinda chatted with Lumu. When the women returned, Lutalo gazed at Merab, whose eyes quickly scanned the visitors as she wondered who of them was her suitor.

She is a beauty, Lutalo thought. I wish they could let me take her home today.

“My brother,” Abigail said as she shifted on her mat to face Mulinda, “I would like to introduce to you and to all who are gathered here today the gentleman who would like to marry my niece Merab.”

She then turned to face Lumu who touched Lutalo’s shoulder, saying, “He is the one.”

Merab glanced up to see who it was she was about to marry. *He is so old! I wish they would realize how old he is and send him away.*

“Sir, I would like to thank you for welcoming us to your home,” Lumu said to Levi, “and it will be a great honour to us if you accepted my brother’s proposal to marry your daughter.”

“Please introduce yourselves before we respond to your request,” Mulinda replied. “We wouldn’t like to marry our daughter off to a long-lost relative.”

Lumu stood up. “Gentlemen and ladies, I would like to introduce my brother to you,” he said, touching Lutalo’s shoulder once again. “His name is Lutalo. He is a son of the late Chief Lumu of Kalasa...” Levi nodded in approval. He knew the late Chief Lumu. “...a grandson of Lutalo, a great-grandson of Kulumba. He is of the Sheep clan. He is a successful farmer and businessman. He lives in Kalasa.”

“Good,” Mulinda said. “You are not our relatives. We don’t have any relatives in the Sheep clan. You are in the home of Levi Bukulu, son of the late Geresomu Bukulu, grandson of the late Lwere and great-grandson of Sentamu. We are of the Buffalo clan.”

“We are very glad to meet you,” Lumu said, “and happy to be here today.”

Namagembe escorted Merab back to her bedroom.

Mulinda then motioned for Levi to follow him outside for a consultation. While her brothers were still outside, Abigail brought in her sister-in-law Dolosi, Merab’s mother, and Merab’s older sisters Eseza and Nawume to greet the visitors.

After this last greeting, Lumu and Kabali went outside to where they’d left their bicycles leaning against the outdoor kitchen’s wall, loaded with goodies they’d brought with them. They’d also brought a calabash full of banana beer, which they now untied from one of the bicycles along with some empty gourds, bringing them back into the house just as Mulinda and Levi were also coming back in. “Sir,” Lumu said to Mulinda, handing him a filled gourd, “please drink our excellent beer.”

“My sister, should I drink this beer?” Mulinda asked Abigail as he raised the gourd to his lips.

“Yes, sir, drink the beer,” Abigail answered.

Mulinda sipped the beer twice, then said, “Men of the Sheep clan, you’ve travelled this far in search of our beautiful daughter. And I’m glad to say that you have our permission to marry our daughter Merab.”

“We thank you for accepting my brother’s proposal,” Lumu said, beaming. He and Kabali then went back outside to their bicycles and untied the presents they had brought for Merab’s family. Lumu gave them out on behalf of Lutalo: for Levi a *kanzu*—a robe—and for Dolosi, Merab and each of Merab’s aunts enough cloth for making *gomesis*—ankle-length dresses. There was even a live rooster for Absalom, Lutalo’s future brother-in-law. After thanking Lutalo for the presents, Mulinda served a gourd of banana beer to each person in the room. The two women who had helped Dolosi with cooking helped to serve lunch then they and a few friends ate outside, under the mango tree, leaving Levi, Dolosi and their visitors to have lunch in the house. The sumptuous meal was accompanied by cheerful conversation.

Lumu thanked the hosts for what he called “the best meal they had ever had the pleasure to enjoy.” Then to symbolize the sharing of both friendship and new kinship, Mulinda opened his woven bag and took out some packets of dried banana fibre containing roasted coffee beans, carefully opening each of the packets and passing the beans around to share. Levi ate the roasted coffee beans to show how happy he was with his younger brother’s gesture, but inside, he was fuming. Why had his brother not sought Levi’s permission to perform this custom in his home? Mulinda was not a Christian, but as a staunch Christian and a catechist, Levi was not sure whether the age-old custom was in line with Christianity and he would have liked to think about it first.

After the coffee beans had been eaten, Mulinda asked Lumu when the wedding would take place. When Lumu hesitated it was clear that this matter had not been discussed, and he asked for permission to go out to consult Lutalo.

“Yes, and feel free to walk around and see our property,” Mulinda said proudly.

Once the three men were outside, Lutalo told Lumu that he wanted Merab but did not intend to marry her.

“But since they are Christians, they are likely to insist on a church wedding,” Lumu said.

“I don’t want a church wedding,” Lutalo said, shaking his head. “I am not ready to commit myself to that extent.”

“I know what you mean—you want to have more than one wife, like some of us,” Kabali said. “I understand Christians are not allowed to do that.”

But Lutalo didn’t respond to Kabali’s comment.

“So?” Mulinda asked when the three men returned to the living room.

“My brother is ready to take your daughter but there will be no wedding,” Lumu said.

“What do you mean? Do you think you can take the catechist’s daughter away just like that?” Mulinda said. “Don’t insult us! That cannot happen. You can only marry her in a church wedding.”

Lutalo and Lumu went outside again to confer. “You see? I told you that they would insist on a church wedding,” Lumu said. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Lutalo answered.

“The young woman is beautiful,” Lumu said. “Are you going to let this opportunity pass because you can’t make up your mind?” When Lutalo did not respond, Lumu continued. “Accept whatever conditions they impose on you, and then later you can decide what to do.”

“Okay, tell them that I will marry her in church,” Lutalo said.

* * *

After the visitors had left, it was obvious to Dolosi that Merab was anxious; she was so quiet and preoccupied. “What’s wrong with you?” Dolosi asked.

“Mother, the man is too old and I wouldn’t know what to do as a wife. I am too young,” Merab said.

“You are not so young. I married your father at exactly the same age as you are and although I was unsure about what to do, my aunt encouraged me and everything went well afterwards. There were no difficulties too big to bear.”

“Aunt Abigail told me that the man already has children. I love children but how am I supposed to raise children who are not mine?”

“It is not something that I would wish for you. It is true that I did not have to raise stepchildren, but many women do. Don’t worry, the children are still young. Besides, you love people and you love children. You will raise your husband’s children as you see fit. Love them and care for them.”

“But I don’t want to get married now,” Merab said quietly.

“Don’t say you don’t want to get married! It is our duty as women to get married and to raise families. It is also our duty to look after every member of our families. You *will* get married and I hope you will have children and raise them like I have raised you, your sisters and your brother.”

“It seems Eseza is not happy in her marriage—” Merab, who had seen a look of sadness in her sister’s eyes, began.

“Sometimes there are problems in marriage. However, telling me that you don’t want to get married simply because there are problems in marriage is like saying you don’t want to have children because there is pain in labour.”

“I don’t want to get married now,” Merab said again, her eyes glistening with tears.

“You have no choice; you have to go with the man we have chosen for you. And, remember to treat your husband’s children well, they are your children too,” her mother told her. “And please don’t meddle into your husband’s private matters. For example, don’t ever ask about his former wife or entertain rumours about her. If she ever visits—most probably she will never visit—you must be courteous to her.”

His first marriage failed. Why should I be married to an old divorcee?

“Merab, it’s also important to be careful not to talk back to your husband. Some men don’t like it when their wives talk back to them. Your uncle Mulinda is one such man. In fact, many men will beat their wives for talking back to them. Your father is rare among our men—he lets me and you four children reason with him and even talk back. Don’t take that same attitude into your marriage. If you do, it will get you into trouble.”

Mulinda’s daughter Scovia was the same age as Merab and knew that it would soon be her turn to get married off, too, but she, like her cousin, didn’t want to get married. That evening, when the two girls were alone, she told Merab that she would run away if her family chose a man for her to marry.

* * *

A month later, a crowd of about a hundred people were sitting on the grass under a large jacaranda tree at the village’s fortnightly market, listening to the news that a man with a high-pitched voice was reading aloud. His audience clapped vigorously when he reported that the war that had been raging in Europe had ended. Levi beamed when the newsreader came to local news and announced that his daughter Merab would be marrying Lutalo, a son of the late county chief, Lumu of Kalasa.

Reverend Mukuye, Abigail’s husband, had had to delay the wedding for a month until Lutalo had completed his catechism classes, been baptized and given the Christian name Jonah. *I have been christened but it will not stop me from enjoying my life.* Lutalo thought.