

UNCORRECTED PROOF

MAYOWA and the SEA OF WORDS

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To Tara, Nathaniel, Derin, Jemie, Fara, Jama, Niko,
Ife, Dara and Isobel,
Who all make me an Aunty



CHAPTER ONE
A Ban on Jumping

Mayowa Althea Howard was eight years old when she first jumped on a book. It was a warm summer's day, and all the windows in the Howards' flat were open. Outside on the street, she could hear the noise from passing buses and tinkling cyclists.

Mayowa shut her bedroom door, placed *Oliver Twist* on the floor and launched on to Charles Dickens' masterpiece.[1] Nothing happened. She tried again, landing with a thump. Still nothing happened. On her third try, when the force of her landing ripped the book cover, her father walked into her bedroom without knocking.[2] He was

[1] Depending on who you ask.
[2] A very bad habit.

smiling at the thought of the long summer holiday, stretched out before them.

'We're going to—' he started to say and then he saw Mayowa.

'You know you're not supposed to do that,' her father said, in his sternest, most teacherly voice. Mayowa stepped off the book guiltily.

'But I saw Grandpa Edward doing it when he came here last.'

'And your mother and I said you were never to copy him.'

'Copy who?' Mayowa's mother asked, coming into the room, humming a jazz tune. Mayowa signalled for her father not to tell, but Tommy could never hide anything from his wife.

'She was jumping on a book,' he said.

Mayowa's mother bristled like a porcupine.

'I told you she would pick it up from him.'

'It's not that bad, Wunmi,' her father said. 'It's just a harmless family tradition. Some people smash plates at weddings. Some of the Howards jump on books.'

'It is not harmless. Let me feel the book. Mayowa, bring it to me.'

Mayowa had been hoping to slip away while her

parents debated traditions. Instead, she placed *Oliver Twist* in her mother's hands. Wunmi ran her fingers all over the damaged book. She was blind and her fingers served as her eyes.

'Look. She's torn it,' her mother said. 'What if she jumps on a library book?'

'I would never,' Mayowa said with indignation[3] but her mother ignored her.

'What if she does this at school and gets labelled a troublemaker? Do you want our daughter to get a major strike or worse, be excluded?'

Mayowa wanted to shout, 'Everybody just calm down,' but telling her Nigerian mother to calm down didn't sound like a good idea at that moment.[4]

Mayowa's mother turned to her.

'Mayowa, my love, listen to me. You are never to jump on a book again.'

'But—' she said.

'You heard your mother,' said Tommy.

And that was how Mayowa Althea Howard came to be banned from jumping on books.

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[3] Everybody knows you must treat library books with extra care.
[4] Or at any other moment.



CHAPTER TWO
A Barrier Breaker

The Howards lived on the third floor of a tall brick apartment building, minutes away from where Sherlock Holmes solved all his crimes. Living there was like living in a multi-layered sandwich, Mayowa thought. Some levels were delicious ham and cheese, others were curious coronation chicken and a few were stinky tuna mayo.

Tuna mayo was Mr Dixon on the second floor. He wore grey and had very sharp ears. One plink on the piano after 7pm and he would storm up the stairs demanding Wunmi stop that racket or he'd call the police.

Wunmi was an accomplished pianist and she filled their flat with the complex, beautiful sound of jazz. Mr Dixon had once asked her why she couldn't play any

proper music instead of that jungle noise. Tommy said Mr Dixon's reaction to jazz was R-A-C-I-S-T. This was how Mayowa's parents said racist when Mayowa was close-by.

Tommy could spell most words forward and backward. He was a Maths teacher in a school that ten years ago was always in the news for S-T-A-B-B-I-N-G-S but now made the news for all its pupils that went on to Oxbridge.[5]

Eight days after Mayowa was born, her names were chosen in a special ceremony that her Nigerian grandfather flew from Nigeria to attend. Grandpa Razak gave her the name Mayowa, which meant, 'One who brings joy to the family.' And Grandpa Edward decided on the name Althea after a famous tennis player who won many trophies.[6] When she was old enough to look things up on Wikipedia, Mayowa had seen that the other Althea had 'broken down barriers.' After that, Mayowa always strode purposefully through the turnstiles on the London Underground.

In school, Mayowa averaged average. She was brilliant at Literature, passable at Science and despite her father's

[5] Short form for Oxford and Cambridge University. Camford didn't quite catch on.
[6] Althea Gibson (1927–2003), female African-American tennis player and professional golfer.

best efforts, terrible at Maths. She was neither the tallest nor the shortest, the brightest nor the dimmest, the fastest nor the slowest.[7]

Yet Mayowa knew that one day she would grow up to surprise the world. She had been named after a barrier breaker and a barrier breaker she would be. She just assumed she would have to wait until she was grown up and paying taxes. Her predictions might have proved correct if Wunmi had not gotten her big break in the year Mayowa turned ten …

[7] At this point, you must get the picture.



CHAPTER THREE
The Big Break

Every musician longs for their big break. Some get it too early, when their emotions are still green and their characters unformed. Some get it too late, after many disappointments, when their personalities have soured like old milk. A lucky few get it at the right time, neither so young that success goes to their head, nor so old that chocolate biscuits have lost their flavour.

Mayowa's mother had played with her jazz band for many years. She had played in school fetes, dingy bars, county halls, bar mitzvahs, bat mitzvahs, christenings, birthdays, and weddings, but never funerals, because jazz is too upbeat for death. She had played for audiences that talked over the music, audiences that didn't particularly