



JUMMY AT
THE

RIVER SCHOOL

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS



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MASOBE

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For Ayo, Shindara and Seni;
for believing and therefore, understanding.

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CHAPTER ONE BIRDS OF A FEATHER

I woke up startled by the shriek of the cockerel from the backyard. That hardly ever happens. It was the laziest cockerel you could ever meet. Someone must have disturbed it.

Then I heard another sound. A tiny pebble against my bedroom window. I dragged myself from my bed, my khaki uniform crumpled from my afternoon nap, and got to the window just in time to see Owolabi's large frame disappear from view. He must have disturbed the cockerel again because it shrieked even more fearfully than before.

I rolled my eyes. Owolabi lived in the flat above mine and was the most annoying boy—no, scratch

that—*person* I had ever met. Caro's cockerel obviously agreed with me.

Caro! That was when I remembered my problem. I needed to find my best friend fast. She would help me out of this trouble I was in.

Shuffling into my brown school shoes, I stepped on the backs as usual as I peeped through the bead curtains that separated our bedrooms from the living room. Mummy was seated at the dining table, picking rice for dinner. First, she smoothed the rice over on the tray with the back of her hand, then she picked out the undesirable grains and put them into a tiny bowl. She was humming that tune that meant she was a million miles away.

I crept past the dining room and into the kitchen. Made it!

‘Jumoke!’

I jumped out of my skin.

‘Why haven’t you changed or eaten since you came back from school, eh, why?’

Joy, Mummy’s helper, was in the kitchen, her disapproving side-eye judging the ink marks on my uniform as she picked the beans that would go with the rice.

‘I cannot eat and I cannot even think about

changing my clothes.’ I held out my hands towards her. ‘I am in hot soup!’

‘This girl, for someone so small, you get into a lot of trouble. What have you done this time?’

‘Nothing!’ I snapped, and left our flat at top speed. The mosquito-net door shook with just the right amount of gusto.

For someone so small, my foot! What does my size have to do with anything? I muttered angrily to myself. I would have told Joy about my predicament, but now I wouldn’t! I was so fed up of being treated like a small girl at home. When were they going to realise that I was eleven already and no longer a baby? Besides, Joy was not in my school: how would she know if other people got into trouble more than me?

I could not wait to get to boarding school. Maybe then I would be taken seriously. I tried to picture myself in the illustrious River School, the best secondary school for girls in Southern Nigeria. That’s what it says on the brochure and it’s true. People who attend the River School grow up to be very accomplished adults. I had taken the entry exams last term and everyone who knew us was waiting to see if I would make it in. Baba and

Mummy would be so proud if I did. I had worked hard for the first time in my life but I wasn't sure I had done enough. I imagined myself in my River School uniform doing stuff by myself. I would make my own way with no one trying to help me all the time. I thought of midnight feasts, giggling late into the night in the dorms, noisy meals in the big dining hall and, best of all, games and picnics by the river. The results would be out any time now and I was on edge with anticipation.

Owolabi had already received his results. The whole neighbourhood knew he was going to Kingswill College, the boys' school near the River School. He had run out of his flat with the admission letter in his hands, shouting, 'I passed! I passed!' Joy and I had rushed out on to the balcony to see him carrying Caro's brother in the air in celebration. Later they were found sitting in the large dustbin in front of our block of flats drinking soda. Those boys were so strange.

I could not wait to be *finally* rid of primary school with all its silly problems.

For today's particular task, we had been told to finish drawing a map of Nigeria during our short break before the teacher came into class. I

was not very good at drawing but that wasn't even what irritated me. It was one more day till the end of primary school, so the teacher was just being wicked. We should have been playing cards, skipping or doing backflips at the back of the classroom.

I was just about to carry on with my weak attempt at the map when I saw Chigozie staring hungrily as I slid the juicy mango slices that Joy had prepared for me down my throat. Chigozie was the class captain and good at drawing. He sat across from me.

‘Do you want mango, Chigozie?’

I looked directly into his hungry eyes. He nodded vigorously.

‘Do you know how to draw the map of Nigeria?’

He nodded even harder.

I stretched out my hand with the bowl of mango in it, and he appeared beside me in a flash. I left my geography book open and went out to play. But the teacher caught him doing my work and gave me lines, one hundred of them.

That's why I needed to find Caro. There's no way I could write all these lines!



CHAPTER TWO FINE LINES

I found Caro plucking fruit from the tree in front of the staff quarters. It housed all the workers like Joy who serviced our flats. Caro, her six siblings and parents lived in just two bedrooms. I had never been into her place and she had never been into mine. In front of the fruit tree, though, was common ground.

The fruit Caro was plucking didn't come with its own name like the pineapple or pawpaw. Everybody just called it 'fruit' and plucked it from the tree in school as if it showed you had some form of strength. It was not juicy like mango where you could chase its juice with your tongue all the way

down your arm, even if you were in public. Fruit was just dry red flesh and I hated it.

Baba said the nut inside was called an almond. He had crushed fruit with a stone one day on the balcony to expose a flat brown nut. He gave it to me to taste and I spat it out. I could feel its gritty bits clinging to my gums. I was not impressed. I had never seen anyone selling fruit in any kind of market. It was simply on its tree for you to pluck. A very bulky and untidy tree, normally blocking the view of something far more important.

Don't ever confuse fruit with other fruits. They are not the same thing!

'Caro, come and help me,' I called up to her. 'They have given me a hundred lines to write in school and I have to do it by tomorrow.'

'Wait, let me just pluck this one,' she shouted down to me. 'Chei! This one will sweet well, well.'

She climbed down from the tree chewing the fruit like an old man. She spat it on the floor and bit into it again as if she were eating sugar cane.

Her long hair was in its usual four squares of threaded plaits and her big brown eyes were the same rich colour as her skin. We were the same age but she towered over me like a Queen.

‘So, what did they give you to write this time? This girl, every day, you de enter trouble!’

Caro could speak really well when she wanted to, but she was always switching between proper and pidgin English once she was relaxed. At school, if you spoke pidgin, you had to pay ten naira to the English teacher. And ten naira could buy five sweets.

I shrugged. ‘I will never give anyone my homework to do on my behalf again.’ She looked at me incredulously and we both burst into laughter.

‘Spare me the lecture,’ I said. ‘Are you going to help me?’

Caro grinned. ‘No problem, I can finish it in one hour. Wetin you go gi’me?’ Her eyes were wide with hope.

‘I will get you something from upstairs, don’t worry.’

‘I want five big agbalumo!’

There was only one thing Caro loved more than fruit and that was agbalumo. I had to agree with her on this one. Agbalumo is the fruit that Eve must have taken from the snake. It is the most beautiful of fruits. You can rub it between your palms for a long time like a ball until it gets soft. Then, you

pierce a hole through it with your teeth and draw out the sweet pink sap, praying and hoping you are not eating a maggot at the same time. Then you open it and suck on the four or five seeds covered in pink flesh and more sweet sap until they reveal the shiniest chocolate-brown seeds you ever saw. When they are dried, you can use them as counters to solve world-changing arithmetic. Finally, you eat the sweet, succulent pink flesh and chew the skin just like chewing gum. Agbalumo is a big deal.

‘Ehn, five? Are you mad? Where will I get five from? Besides, you can’t finish in one hour.’

‘I can! I will use three pens joined together with elastic. I just did one for ThankGod.’

ThankGod was the youngest of Caro’s big brothers and Owolabi’s best friend.

‘Okay, okay, meet me at the back stairs as soon as they start the seven o’clock news and try not to pour palm oil on the lines this time.’

Caro stuck out her tongue at me and picked up a large metal bucket at the bottom of the fruit tree. I followed her towards the outside tap.

‘Are you going to play ride over, ride over with us today?’ I asked. This was our favourite game in

the compound—there were two teams, one linking hands and the other trying to break through.

‘Ah, I can’t o. I have to fetch water for my family and now you have given me this big work to finish by seven.’

‘You have to play! Tomorrow is the last day of school and everyone will go away to their villages for summer.’ I wasn’t even sure we were going to Ekiti this summer but I was desperate. Caro was the ride over, ride over champion. If she didn’t play, we would really struggle. With Caro on our team, we always won.

Even the day the other team demanded we hand over Owolabi, we still won. They had chosen him because he was the biggest, but he was in no way the tallest or the strongest. That title belonged to Caro! All we had to do was wait until they called Caro’s number: ‘Ride over, ride over, we call number four to ride over.’ The fear in their faces as they realised with horror that Caro was number four! She raced fiercely towards them, and went straight for Owolabi who was linked with a much smaller boy. She raised her hands to break through their link and the smaller boy yanked his hand away in