

## A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

**I**t's a new term at the wonderful and really rather lively River School! Join Sabine's great characters in another fantastic boarding school adventure, where friendship and fun meet a perplexing puzzle with the environment at its core. But above all this is a book about JOY and HOPE – what more can I say?!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barry Cunningham', with a stylized, flowing script.

**BARRY CUNNINGHAM**

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*For the rivers that water our  
imagination of a better world.*



# CHAPTER ONE TOGETHER AGAIN

I smoothed down my orange check dress, fluffed my afro and hopped towards my friend Caro. Another term at the River School – our final term in Form One. I couldn't wait! It was going to be so much fun.

We were queuing at the coach park in Lagos and I could barely keep still. The sun was blazing hot and the air was buzzing with the chatter of excited girls.

The other side of the park was full of Kingswill College boys, prancing around in khaki shorts and green polo shirts. Owolabi, my annoying neighbour, was one of them, a camera around his neck.

Caro had beautiful cornrows all neatly woven to the back and her orange check dress fitted her perfectly.

‘Look!’ she said, nearly yanking my arm out of its socket. ‘It’s Gemini and Tayo!’

Gemini’s slippers made flip flopping sounds as she ran towards us, and Tayo’s arms were akimbo, her eyes dancing behind her thick spectacles.

‘Hope you are ready for your final term. Delicious tests and scrumptious exams!’ Tayo rubbed her hands together.

‘Ahem, don’t forget the first ever canoe race on the Shine-Shine River and no seniors in our rooms because Form Four girls will be prepping for mocks and Form Five girls have their finals!’ Gemini’s American accent was very distinct as she snapped her fingers at Tayo.

Caro giggled. I wondered how our room would be without the soft voice of Senior Funmi and the cheekiness of Ngozi. I hoped we would still get to spend time with them a little.

‘It’s going to be a brilliant term!’ I said decidedly.

‘Who wants ice lollies?’

Baba had given me money just for this, and a

crowd of girls was already surrounding the ice lolly truck that had parked in the perfect spot behind the Nile house and Zambezi house coaches. The crowd was a brilliant mix of orange and red check dresses with girls from the other houses approaching fast.

‘I’ll help,’ Gemini offered.

‘No, I can do it,’ I insisted. I was almost in Form Two. I could handle a bunch of rowdy girls hustling for ice-lollies.

I somehow managed to get to the front of the crowd and shout out my request, but when it was time to collect my four jumbo orange ice lollies, four girls pushed ahead of me. Three of them were in red Zambezi dresses and one was in Nile house like me. I knew her a little – her name was Ola and she was in Form Three.

‘Hey!’ I started to protest but they all turned towards me hands on hips, daring me to continue. All four of them had their hair gelled to the max and pulled back, making their faces as taut as a longbow set to fire an arrow.

I gulped and was just about to step away when someone’s arm went over my head and collected

my four lollies.

I turned to find an unfamiliar and very tall girl in an orange check dress. She was taller than any senior I had ever seen, but all the seniors had already been in school for a week studying for their final year exams. Who was she? Her face was unsmiling and she had deep set eyes that seemed to suck you in but told you nothing.

When she handed me the lollies, the four girls looked at her up, then down.

‘Ola, do something about this little Nile mouse and her giraffe friend,’ said one of the Zambezi girls.

Ola hesitated.

‘Unless you don’t want to be part of the Atlantic Four?’ the girl went on. ‘Maybe we were much better as a group of three. Am I right, girls?’

‘Look here, we are the Atlantic Four!’ Ola said, finally finding her voice. ‘When you see us coming, you move out of our way next time. Understood?’ She was trying to sound menacing but I was not convinced.

The tall girl who had helped me didn’t even wait for Ola to finish – she just walked away.

‘Thank you!’ I said after her but she was already too far ahead. A whistle blew and that meant it was time to get on the coaches.

‘It’s crazy out there,’ I said as I rejoined my friends and handed out ice lollies. ‘If it wasn’t for a new girl, we wouldn’t have got any.’

The whistle blew again. We tore open our ice lollies and rushed towards the coach.

Mrs Aliu, our Nile housemistress, stood at the front counting us before we were allowed on.

‘Finish those ice lollies outside,’ she said. Her high-pitched voice showing some irritation.

We joined a group of girls doing the same.

‘We’re going to get rubbish seats now.’ Tayo was annoyed.

‘It was worth it,’ Caro said, licking her lolly and tapping her foot to some imaginary music.

‘Ola Martins, will you get back here this minute!’ Mrs Aliu called.

Ola’s Zambezi friends had tried to sneak her onto their own coach. Their Housemistress, Mrs Kolawole, who was laughing and chatting, was oblivious to the scam about to take place under her nose. Mrs Aliu was much more astute and had



spotted the splash of orange like an eagle sifting out its prey.

‘Ah look at this girl o. You want to disgrace me?’ Mrs Kolawole said in her deep smoky voice. ‘Return to your house this minute. I trust Mrs Aliu will deal with you.’ Mrs Kolawole was our Yoruba teacher and she was known for her sense of humour. She was trying very hard to be taken seriously by Mrs Aliu, but discipline was not her strongest point.

Ola’s three friends got on their coach without looking back at her even once.

We’d just finished our lollies when a car screeched to a halt beside us and a girl tumbled out. It was our friend Lola. All of us rushed towards her.

‘There was so much traffic,’ she gasped, yanking her suitcase out of the boot. ‘I can’t believe how late we are. We left on time but who could have predicted a herd of cows deciding to sit on the road!’

Tayo was right – there were hardly any good seats left on the coach. We all had to sit with random

people. Caro was in front of me – beside the mysterious tall girl. I smiled at her but she quickly turned to face the window.

Lola, Gemini and Tayo managed some seat swaps and soon we were all near each other. There was only one spot left behind Caro but it was next to Ola Martins. She was still staring after the Zambezi coach as it pulled out of the station. I had already had enough of her and we hadn't even arrived at school yet. I sat down reluctantly.

'I hope we are still in the same room,' Caro said, turning round to me.

'Me too!' I looked anxiously at Mrs Aliu who I could see was just about to do the roll call.

'Keep an open mind,' Tayo warned, pushing her glasses up her nose. 'You know the rooms will be different because the seniors are in their own rooms to study.'

'I shall start with Nile house room one,' called Mrs Aliu from the front of the coach. 'When you hear your name, say present Ma.'

Before she could continue, to our surprise, there was a knock on the door of the coach and a group of Kingswill boys bundled on. I groaned

when I saw one of them was Owolabi. They spoke to Mrs Aliu, every single one of them dwarfing the Nile housemistress in her purple kaftan. I couldn't hear what they were saying.

'Well girls,' she said, turning to us, 'these are members of the Press Club at Kingswill College and they would like to take a picture of you all. It's for an article for their school newsletter about how our two schools are reducing the amount of traffic on the roads by using coaches.'

Owolabi grinned at me.

I groaned again and thought everyone would join in, but almost all the girls began to rearrange their dresses and put on the most elaborate smiles. I rolled my eyes at Tayo who I was sure would be just as irritated as I was, but even she removed her thick glasses and flashed all her thirty-two teeth at Owolabi.

I looked at Ola Martins beside me. She hurriedly spit on her palms and used it as a gel for her hair. Then, she pushed herself towards me to make sure she got into the shot.

I shrugged and grimaced into Owolabi's camera.

When the boys left, Mrs Aliu launched back into her roll call, and called out Caro's name right after mine and Gemini's.

'Yes!' Caro and I cried out. We were together! I was over the moon.

Mrs Aliu shot us a look

'I mean, Present Ma!' Caro corrected herself.

Mrs Aliu went on. 'The two seniors in Nile House room one have been replaced by Tayo Coker—'

Gemini squealed with delight and nearly fell out of her chair.

'Present Ma.' Tayo smiled wide as she and Gemini high fived.

'... and Dongo Karkananshi in Form One O.'

'Present Ma,' the tall girl beside Caro answered in a low rasping voice and turned to face the window again.

So she was in my room and in my class. I wasn't sure about it. Sure, she had helped me with the ice lollies but she seemed quite strange and unfriendly. I didn't want her to spoil the flow of Nile house room one, the best room in all of River School.

Finally, the roll call was done. Mrs Aliu tapped the driver's shoulder. 'Oya Baba Wale, let's go.'

The coach purred to life and we all drummed on the windows. I knew the exact song we were going to sing and I joined in with all my might.

*Baba Wale, show us your driving power!*

*God be with us this hour!*

Dongo looked at us blankly. I thought back to my first time at the River School and felt for her. Perhaps she was just homesick.

'Don't worry,' I reassured her. 'You'll soon know all of the songs.'



## CHAPTER TWO UP THE RIVER

It seemed that no matter how hard I tried I could never stay awake for the full forty-five-minute ride to the River School. The smell of freshly baked bread woke me up as we passed the Redbrick Bakery. Light grey smoke from its chimneys swayed into the clouds.

The coach mounted the bridge and even Tayo stopped talking as Shine-Shine River came into view. We all jostled to be the first one to see our beloved river. Many girls pulled down their windows and put their heads out.

The smell that hit us before we could even see the river was nothing short of disgusting. It was as

if a million rotten eggs had been unleashed. The smell went straight to my stomach and was soon rising up into my throat.

Everyone began to close the windows and cover their noses with their white under-tops.

I leant forward to see the river for myself.

As usual, the sun was shining over it, but this time the river didn't shine back. There were no *Leke Leke*, the white egrets that usually graced the banks of the river with their long necks and skinny legs. The array of fishermen's canoes along the waterside were nowhere to be seen. What had happened here?

'It smells like death!' Gemini gasped, breaking the silence.

Everyone started talking through covered mouths.

'Girls, I wouldn't worry too much about the smell. It will disappear as quickly as it appeared, I am sure.' Mrs Aliu tried to sound convincing but she looked very worried herself.

'It smells a thousand times worse than the Lagos canal!' Tayo cried indignantly, leaping out of her seat.

‘Madam Tayo, please sit down!’ Mrs Aliu warned.

‘But Ma, look over there!’ Tayo pointed to a large white-chested bird perching on the branch of a leafless tree.

‘What about it?’ Gemini said.

Tayo rolled her eyes. ‘If I am not mistaken, it’s an African fish eagle and I have never seen one here before. It eats fish of course but . . .’

Tayo paused and looked around at us all.

‘It . . . also . . . eats . . . Leke Leke!’

We gasped in horror.

There was no keeping us quiet now. Our precious white egret, which we sang for each time we crossed the bridge, was nowhere to be found and in its place was this big fat eagle.

At last, we reached the welcoming gates to the River School and everyone cheered as they opened before us. At least, our school did not disappoint. We waved at Baba Green, the school caretaker, and he waved back, his lanky frame disappearing into the distance behind us as the coach drove up the long driveway. We were extra grateful for the



lemon and orange trees that lined the road. The beautiful scent filled the bus.

The coach parked in its usual spot in the manicured square outside our principal's white cottage. Several other coaches had already arrived but we were not the last. The red hibiscus and yellow allamanda that surrounded the cottage seemed brighter than ever and Mrs Ayodele – Princey, as we called her – came out of her cottage to greet us. She was dressed in a bright orange kaftan and Barky, her black and white cat, stalked about beside her, tail upright and assured.

We tumbled off the coach. It was as though every flower on earth was in bloom at the River School. Gone were the hustling and bustling sounds of Lagos car horns and people selling their wares and in came the crickets, chirping of birds and the flipflopping of a thousand slippers.

‘Hey Jumoke, stop daydreaming and take care of your new room-mate.’ Mrs Aliu’s voice pierced my thoughts.

‘Yes Ma!’ I said proudly. ‘Dongo, get your things and follow me.’

It felt really good to be the one showing a new girl around.

‘Don’t worry if you struggle with the luggage,’ I said, remembering how I had struggled the first time I’d arrived at the River School. ‘We can stop and rest.’

Dongo shrugged and put her bucket, with all the tools inside, on her head like the street hawkers in Lagos. Then she carried her suitcase in one hand and her travelling bag in the other. She didn’t even need to hold on to the bucket. It was as steady as the stacks of bread on a bread seller’s head. If I thought she looked tall before, she now looked like a giraffe taking a leisurely walk in her tropical garden.

Caro and I stared at each other. Dongo was going to take getting used to, I thought.

We made our way to our dorms, passing the dining hall with its metal roof drooping over the concrete walls like an unwilling coat.

‘This is where all the action happens.’ Caro said. ‘The noise when everybody is inside is louder than on a Saturday market day.’

‘Plus, the food isn’t half bad, except for the

weevils in the beans that they serve every resumption day. It's like they want to remind us we are no longer at home.' I added.

'Do they serve tuwo shinkafa?' Dongo asked in her low voice.

'What is tuwo shin . . . whatever you called it?' I asked.

'Never mind—'

'They don't serve it,' Caro put in, 'but I know it is mashed sticky rice and you eat it with okro soup.'

Dongo looked at Caro in disbelief. 'How do you know?'

'My mother is not from the North but she can make it very well,' Caro explained.

'Well, we better hurry, we are the last to get to the dorms,' I said, noticing everyone passing us by. We quickened our steps, Dongo having no trouble. The bucket on her head did not shift even a tiny bit!

When we got to the dorms, we stopped suddenly – staring in wonder, our mouths dropping open. Dongo put down her bucket.

The dorms had been transformed. Every

cottage had received a fresh lick of paint in the colour it represented and the names of the six houses – Nile, Niger, Congo, Zambezi, Limpopo, Senegal – were bolder than before. But that wasn't what made us stop in our tracks. The wild scrubland bush in the centre of the dorms, which we had to tame every Thursday during manual labour, was now a beautiful garden.

'Wow!' Caro and I said together.

Each house had flowers in its section to match the colour of the house. My eyes went from house to house.

Niger house, which was next to Nile house, had vibrant green palms, with huge leaves. Next was Senegal with a bed of blue diamond flowers while Congo had yellow allamandas glowing in the afternoon sun. Limpopo's purple orchids were planted in pots and a young red hibiscus bush was starting to bloom outside Zambezi. A large yellow butterfly flew past us and landed on one of the orange heliconia blossoming beautifully in front of Nile house. I beamed with total satisfaction.

'As soon as I'm packed, I'm coming back

outside to walk through the gardens,' Caro said in a determined voice.

'But before that, I'll race you for the best bed,' I shouted over my shoulder as I rushed up the Nile house stairs.



## CHAPTER THREE

# ROOM FOR EVERYONE

‘Hello strangers!’ Tope, our Form Three roommate, greeted us with a smile.

She was wearing a badge that said ‘Room Captain.’

She caught me looking at it and grinned. ‘I have powers now!’ she chirped. ‘And look how clean our room is. My dad has been beautifying the school and I’ve been doing my bit here.’

Our room really was clean for a first day. Tope’s dad was the caretaker Mr Lawanson, who we called Baba Green, though never in front of her. The window louvres and the lockers shone. I could see Tope had been hard at work.

‘So you are Dongo Karkananshi? Welcome to the best room in the whole school.’ Tope shot her hand out and, after a moment’s hesitation, Dongo shook it.

Gemini, who was swinging her feet back and forth on her bed, whistled. ‘You’re in Form One?!’ she asked incredulously. ‘But you’re so tall!’

Caro shot Gemini a look. ‘Yes, she is in Form One. Let’s get you settled, Dongo. ‘You can take the bed below me.’

I went over to the bed below Gemini’s – the one I’d had for two terms now – to unpack but before I could, Tayo barged into the room with Lola and Michelle. They were giggling so hard.

‘I am not responsible for the fake addition to your precious room list o!’ Lola managed to get her words out as tears of laughter ran down her face.

Tope ran out to check and came back looking quite amused too. ‘They have added their names to our room!’

Michelle and Tayo were best friends. We called them the twins even though they looked nothing like each other. They were always together except

on the coach to school because Michelle lived at the River School with her mother, the French teacher. She came over and gave me a big hug and two kisses, one on each cheek.

‘Ah mon amie, Jummy! So good to see you.’ Her eyes danced around behind her red-rimmed spectacles and her two plaits sat neatly on her shoulders. ‘I have missed everybody!’

‘I bet you played with Barky so much you didn’t miss us one bit!’ Gemini added and we all laughed.

Michelle loved Princey’s cat so much that we always said if he went missing we would know who had taken him.

‘I cannot wait for assembly tomorrow,’ Lola said excitedly. ‘Princey will announce all the fun things to look forward to this term like the canoe race between the north and south sides.’

Dongo’s eyes lit up for the first time since I had met her. ‘I know about canoes. My father is . . . was . . .’ Her face fell. She zipped up her empty suitcase, then laid down on her freshly laid bed reading an old notebook. She was done unpacking and I hadn’t even started.



‘Last year we had a picnic in the playground overlooking Shine-Shine River. That was a blast!’ Gemini jumped on her bed with such gusto that the whole bunk shook.

‘More like smell-smell river!’ Tayo said.

‘The seniors are here!’ Lola interrupted, pointing at the window.

Sure enough, coming towards Nile house were a bunch of seniors in their orange check skirts and blouses. Studying for mocks and finals was serious business. They had everything they would need to both study and sleep hard. Some of them had tied wrappers around their housewear, some carried pillows and big textbooks in addition to their school bags.

We ran outside and cheered their arrival. They looked so tired from all their studying, but our arrival seemed to rejuvenate them.

Senior Moradeke swayed her hips from side to side as she belted out a popular Nile house chant. We all joined in.

*Winner ooo Winner!*

*Winner ooo Winner!*

*Nile House, you don win o, Winner!*

*Pata Pata you go win for ever, Winner!*

We hugged them and helped them carry their things.

‘My efiko runner!’ Ngozi had called me that since I won the race for Nile House two terms ago.

‘How is our old room?’ Senior Funmi smiled. Her hair was in its usual neat cornrows pointing to the sky and a beautiful gold heart pendant hung on a very delicate necklace around her neck.

‘We are doing great. I want to talk to you both about something please . . .’ Tope said as she, Senior Funmi and Senior Moradeke walked away.

‘Tope has already started bossing us around,’ Gemini was saying to Ngozi.

Other girls came out to greet their former roommates and there was a lot of noise in the house. I had really missed this place. Even Dongo who had only been here a few hours didn’t look too out of place. That was Nile House for you, a second home for us all.



## CHAPTER FOUR UNDER THE STARS

‘I hope you don’t think the room one club are getting the box room this time around?’ Ola Martins said from inside the box room.

Bukky and I had come to get it ready for our usual start-of-term midnight feast – and we always had it in the box room that held all our empty suitcases at the end of the dorm. Bukky, with her larger-than-life smile and jumbled-up teeth, was the first friend I had made at the River School and it was at my first midnight feast. It was one of the highlights of the term, all of us huddled together sharing good home cooked food in the middle of the night.

‘Room one club?’ I stared at her blankly.

Ola was plaiting the hair of one of her Zambezi friends who was seated on a metal bucket with a pillow on top. The other two Zambezi girls were there too, sitting down on people’s suitcases and crushing them in the process.

We didn’t know how to answer her because she was a Form Three girl and it had also never occurred to me that others may want to use the box room.

‘Don’t you know that’s what we call you and all your attachments?’ the girl getting her hair done said meanly. The middle part of her hair was yet to be plaited and so it stood up in the air making her look like a cockerel.

‘Look, there’s only one club worth talking about at the River School and that’s us. The Atlantic Four. My name is Yinka and I’m the leader of it.’ She stood and came towards us. ‘You know how the Atlantic Ocean is bigger than the Shine-Shine River? Well, that’s how much bigger we are than anything around here. Now, Ola, finish my hair so you can start on the others.’

‘She’s the one who is an attachment!’ Bukky

said crossly, as we went to get Gemini and the other form two girls to reason with her.

When we arrived with the Form Two girls, the door of the box room was locked and so we knocked.

‘Yinka said that erm . . . what should I say again?’ The speaker attempted timidly behind the locked door.

‘Say Miss Yinka this time,’ we heard her prompt.

‘Miss Yinka is preparing for her midnight feast in the box room.’

We all burst into fits of laughter.

‘What is so funny?’ Yinka barked, barging out of the door, her hair still only half done.

‘Look girl, we don’t need to fight about it. Can’t we share the box room? How many people have you got?’ Gemini was being uncharacteristically cool.

‘I don’t want to share anything with your stinking room one club! I have my own sophisticated club here,’ Yinka snapped.

‘Yes, we are the Atlantic Four and we plan on doing our hair and talking all night in the

boxroom,' Ola added.

All of us looked at each other and tried to not laugh again.

'Wait, what? You're not allowed to use our box room! Go and use Zambezi's box room.' Lola was not finding it funny.

'But I'm in Nile House so I have the right to use the box room! And we got here first!' Ola snapped back. Her three friends stood there nodding, their arms crossed.

'What have we got here, a fight on the first day of term?' Someone must have alerted Tope because she came just in time before the cool switch turned off in Gemini's eyes.

'Ah, if it isn't another room one club member!' Ola said.

'Please say something else,' Lola yawned.

'I am sure we can come to some agreement,' Tope was just saying when the bell went for lights out. You could hear the groans across all the dorms.

Tope dispersed the crowd that had formed and we headed back to our rooms. Would we have a midnight feast tonight or would we have to eat our home cooked food in our rooms? It would be

very unsatisfying indeed on our first night. Worse – there might be no midnight feast at all!

I sighed grumpily as I got into bed.

‘You know what they say Jummy, every disappointment is a blessing,’ Tope said as she switched off our room light.

Over the noise of the crickets, I listened out for the owl that I sometimes heard outside my window but there was nothing. I hoped she hadn’t found another tree to live in. It had been a long day and I drifted easily into a deep sleep . . .

It didn’t seem long before someone was tugging at my arm.

‘Jummy, wake up.’ It was Caro. She was giggling softly. ‘Tope wants us all out on the lawn.’

I sat up to look out of the window. It was pitch black. A single light shone in the distance from Princey’s cottage.

‘What? It can’t be morning yet.’ I protested.

The room door creaked open.

‘Come on outside,’ Tope urged us in a gentle whisper.

Dongo and I got out of bed at the same time. Gemini stirred in her bed and Tayo stood up stretching and yawning loudly.

‘Well, this better be good.’ Gemini was obviously irritated at being woken up.

Tayo led the way and Caro, Dongo, Gemini and I followed her to the Nile House lawn.

My mouth fell open. I looked to the others. Caro’s mouth had dropped too, there was a twinkle in Gemini’s eye and even Dongo had a hint of a smile. We were as quiet as if an angel had struck us mute.

The lawn was lit by several torches and candles stuck on the front and back porch ledges. There were two blankets spread across it and food laid out, with little paper plates and cups. It wasn’t a lot of food but under the night sky lit with a thousand stars, it was magical.

‘Welcome to the Nile House midnight feast,’ Tope said.

We clung to her every word. I thought it was only Senior Moradeke that could command our attention that way.

‘I got us some Redbrick Bakery treats but if you



have any food you'd like to share please bring it and let's have a great time together.'

Our whispers and chuckles filled the midnight sky and the stars lay scattered above us like they too were having their own picnic.

On our blanket soon lay chinchin, plantain chips, and a few bottles of fizzy drinks. I added the fried chicken my mum had made, Caro put in a packet of biscuits and Dongo a snack made from groundnuts which she said was kuli kuli. They looked like brown wooden sticks.

Gemini wobbled towards us, holding her dress up like a bucket, and emptied the contents on to the blanket dramatically. All sorts of American treats lay before us – cookies, candy and chips to feed an army. We began to rip everything open.

'Oh the Redbrick packaging has changed,' I whispered. 'It's so tough to open.' It finally gave way making a popping sound.

Tayo examined the bag suspiciously. 'They've used a thicker plastic material to ensure the chinchin stays fresh.' She bit into some. 'It has worked. Hmm!' She eyed the bag again.

Everyone now wanted to try the new chinchin.

Gemini grabbed my bag when the packets had run out and I made a face at her.

‘It’s the same with the plantain chips,’ Caro observed. She put a chunk into her mouth and made such a crunchy sound that we all reached out for some.

‘I wonder what they did with all the old packets,’ Tayo said reaching forward to pick up Dongo’s snacks. ‘But anyway, this is better – I love kuli kuli.’

Dongo’s face lit up. ‘You know it?’

‘She knows everything,’ Michelle said as she joined us at our little corner of the lawn.

‘My neighbour in Lagos is from the North,’ Tayo explained, ‘and she sells kuli kuli from her house. It’s made from groundnuts isn’t it?’

Everyone took a stick and we all crunched away loudly. It was like peanut butter turned into a biscuit stick and I loved it. So I took another one.

There was nothing we didn’t talk about. Everything from the latest dance moves to all the new TV adverts we saw over the summer. Tayo tried to bring up the smelly river again but nobody wanted to talk about that.

‘My older sister came to the River School and she would have told me if the river ever smelt and I have never smelt anything that bad in all my life,’ Tayo tried.

‘Was it really that bad?’ Bukky asked. ‘I wish we got to pass over the river like you do from Lagos. All we get to see is wild bush from Ibadan.’

‘You should thank your lucky stars. I’m telling you, it was bad. There were no Leke Leke and the river smelt like rotten eggs.’ Tayo pinched her nose with one hand and held her kuli kuli in her other hand. Michelle grabbed it from her and put it straight into her own mouth.

We laughed till our sides began to hurt.

One minute there were stars shining, the next there were dark clouds and a torrent of rain pouring down so fiercely, there was barely enough time to gather all the picnic things. Dongo picked up the blanket, shook it and turned it into an umbrella. We all huddled under her tall arms and ran to the covered corridors.

The crashing of the rain and the smell of it as it hit the grass made us all just stand there and watch it fall. We were still huddled together under

the blanket even though we no longer needed it. We knew the magical night had come to an end. But it would never be over in our hearts. We'd remember this for a lifetime.



CHAPTER FIVE  
WHAT'S UP  
FOR THE TERM

**T**he next morning, I stood on the front porch of Nile house watching others go by for breakfast. The rain had poured all night and the orange heliconia looked thoroughly satisfied, the soil lush with moisture. A light wind blew, and bugs and creepy crawlies littered the pathway that led to the dining hall. I was the first one ready this morning. Caro had given me water from her large bucket because the taps had been running slow. She had queued for a full thirty minutes to get water.

‘Don’t waste your time, have some of mine,’ she had said. ‘The water is crawling out like an old tortoise.’

I was just about to gently tap one of the millipedes so that it would wriggle its many tiny legs and curl up into a ball when someone called out behind me.

‘Chief Grubido!’

I suppose I deserved that. I must look quite desperate for breakfast standing out on the porch all by myself. I turned to find Bukky and Flanky smiling as they walked towards me. Flanky was not on the coach because she lived at Kingswill College where her dad was principal. She was lean and tall with a jet-black bob.

They both looked quite smart in their green and white cotton summer uniforms, which were perfect for the humidity at this time of the year. Bukky wore brown jelly sandals for the rainy weather.

‘Nice shoes,’ I remarked.

‘You know me, always the pragmatist,’ Bukky retorted.

‘It is too early for big, big English!’ Caro came up behind us with Dongo.

We laughed as we began the short walk to the dining hall.

Dongo was not yet in school uniform. She would have to wait for the class teacher to give it to her. She wore a white cotton dress that fitted her so nicely. It stopped just shy of her knees and her legs went on for miles. She had the richest cornrows all woven to the back.

‘Dongo, you look lovely,’ Bukky said kindly.

‘Thank you,’ Dongo said hunching over and looking down at the ground as if she had kept something there.

‘Tell me, what form are you?’ Flanky asked.

‘Form One O,’ Dongo replied, looking as if she was already anticipating the shock.

‘Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!’ Flanky cried throwing her arms around her. ‘It’s been really lonely up here. We shall be best pals at the back of the Form One O line.’

Dongo smiled awkwardly and straightened her hunch just a little.

As we approached the dining hall, the noise of over 500 girls without seniors to control them was immense.

‘I will miss eating with all the seniors this term, they keep us sane,’ I said.

‘Well, I shall not miss them. They normally finish all the tea with their giant mugs,’ Bukky grinned.

Caro gave Dongo a reassuring look.

We made our way to Mama Tea, the tea lady, who served us piping-hot sweet milky tea. We were just about to return to our seats when there was a lull in the noise.

The cause of the silence was Princey in a bright green kaftan, with all the housemistresses. The other five women towered over Nile House’s Mrs Aliu, but she walked proudly wearing a flowing orange kaftan that left you in no doubt of the house she represented.

‘Good morning girls.’ Princey’s smooth voice boomed across the dining hall.

‘Good morning, Mrs Ayodele,’ we chimed together.

‘You may all be seated.’ She turned and nodded at us, and I was relieved. For a moment, I thought we’d have to stand there with our cups of tea for ever.

We made our way to the Nile house area and dispersed to our different room tables.



‘Welcome back to third term, which is always special at the River school,’ Princey went on. ‘We can’t ignore the strange smell coming from the river and we have been waiting for a visit from the River and Water Authorities. The good news is with the water shortage, they have promised to visit this morning which is why, instead of our usual welcoming assembly, we decided to bring assembly to you in the dining hall.’

A murmur broke out around the hall and Princey gave us her firm stare which made us all quiet again.

‘Congo, Zambezi and Senegal had no water this morning and the rest of you had a slow flow which is obviously not ideal. In the meantime, I would like to draw your attention to the extensive work carried out on your house gardens during the holidays by Mr Lawanson.’

We belted out loud cheers and clapped to show our appreciation.

I looked at Tope now. She was beaming with pride.

‘In addition to this, we have also cleared the portion of land behind Nile and Niger house for

everyone to plant corn. Each housemistress will guide you in your planting, but the rest is up to you. We will be looking at the best corn yield at harvest time. There will be a trophy for the best produce and roast corn will be served after harvest.'

We cheered again and this time, Princey let us chat for a while.

'I *love* roasted corn!' Caro said a little too loudly just as the noise was going down. Everyone heard her and we all broke out into chuckles.

'And of course, we have the first ever canoe race between the north and south sides of the river. Both Kingswill College and our school fall under the south side and so we will come together to support our rowers, whoever that may be.'

I looked at all my room mates faces. They were as excited as I was. Tayo's eyes were like hair beads dancing around behind her glasses. I knew she would have lots of questions.

'It is great for our two schools to collaborate and strengthen relationships. At the moment, it looks like Mr Lawanson and one other adult will represent the south side.'

This caused the loudest cheer yet. We were just

settling down when there was the sound of a large vehicle arriving outside the dining hall.

Someone banged a door shut and we heard footsteps marching towards us.

A large woman in khaki trousers and jacket strode through the dining hall. She held a pair of thick gloves in her hands and looked formidable with her short afro and black boots. As she walked past our table, I saw medals on the front of her jacket and the words, 'Fire Chief' on the back. I imagined her in charge of a fire truck, driving through the town, putting out fires and saving lives. Her arms looked strong enough to row ten canoes all at once.

'I would like to introduce you to Fire Chief Moni Ogunbanjo,' Princey announced. 'She has kindly agreed to provide us with water this afternoon and for the rest of the week if this water shortage continues.'

Chief Ogunbanjo smiled at us. 'Good morning girls! It is a pleasure to be of service to you. I will arrive after lunch and I understand I'll be starting with Nile House.' She looked at Princey who nodded her approval.

‘Once you see our red truck parked outside, please bring your buckets and we will be happy to fill them up. Do you have any questions for me?’

There was a deafening silence as we all looked around the hall to see if anyone dared ask any questions. A hand went up. It was Tayo. Only Tayo would be so bold as to ask a question at first assembly. The way she peered above her glasses made her look very serious indeed.

‘When we crossed the bridge over Shine-Shine River in the coach, it smelt so bad. Do you think that’s why we have almost no water coming through the taps?’ Her voice was confident and she looked straight at the fire chief.

‘What an intelligent observation!’ the chief said, looking quite impressed. ‘Yes, there have been complaints from the fishermen and others who use the river regularly that the smell is unbearable and it is affecting the fish and other aquatic animals.’

Tayo looked around the room as if to say, ‘I told you so’ to the doubters.

Chief Ogunbanjo smiled. ‘Like the fire department, your school gets its water supply from the

river. We may have to stop that for a while and get water from the borehole situated between your school and the Redbrick Bakery. We hope to get to the bottom of it soon. In the meantime, please try to use water sensibly and only when necessary.'

Tayo put her hand up again. The fire chief smiled.

'Ahem! Ma, what if the river is so polluted that the canoe race can't take place?' Tayo blurted out.

This caused an even louder buzz.

'That is enough! Please settle down, girls!' Princey's voice was now very stern.

We calmed down, but I was not settled at all. I mean, whoever heard of a canoe race without water?