



TIME TO SHINE

AT THE RIVER SCHOOL

SABINE  
ADEYINKA

Chicken  
House

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Somerset BA11 1DS  
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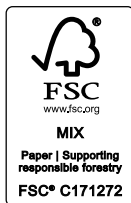
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*For the rivers that water our  
imagination of a better world.*

Also by Sabine Adeyinka

*Jummy at the River School*



## 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 on to 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.'