

Chapter One

The Wrong September

The first thing Esosa noticed about her new school was that the girls had already decided who they were.

There was the group that used the same type of hair packers, the group that played hand-clapping games beside the assembly hall, and the group that spent break time discussing whose mother had bought a new car. There were girls who could borrow one another's erasers without asking and girls who asked before borrowing anything, even a pencil sharpener. There were girls who called one another by nicknames that had clearly survived several years of quarrels and reconciliations.

Esosa stood at the classroom door on her first morning, holding her schoolbag with both hands.

Her father had told her to smile.

"Not the kind of smile you use when you are writing an exam," he had said over breakfast. "A normal smile."

She had wanted to ask him how one distinguished a normal smile from an examination smile, but she had already been late twice that week, and her mother had begun to say that moving house was not an excuse for moving slowly.

So she smiled at the class teacher.

"Good morning, ma."

The teacher, Mrs Okeke, looked up from her attendance register. She wore a brown skirt, a cream blouse and the expression of a woman who had spent the morning settling arguments about rulers.

"You are Esosa, abi?"

"Yes, ma."

"Come in. Children, we have a new pupil."

Twenty-seven faces turned towards her. A boy in the back row was chewing something. A girl with beads at the ends of her plaits stopped whispering. Somebody's shoe squeaked against the floor.

"This is Esosa. She has joined us from Benin City. I want all of you to make her comfortable."

"Yes, ma," the class answered.

They said it with the weary obedience of children who had heard many instructions about making people comfortable and had rarely been told how.

Mrs Okeke pointed to an empty seat in the third row.

"Sit beside Chike."

Chike was a round-faced boy with a small scar near his left eyebrow. He moved his books to one side without looking at her.

"Good morning," Esosa said.

"Morning."

He returned to his exercise book.

That was the beginning.

The school was in Enugu, in a neighbourhood where the roads were red with dust and the compound walls carried the names of churches, contractors and political aspirants. Their house stood on a street with a bakery at one end and a woman who sold roasted corn at the other. In the evenings, generators hummed behind high gates. During Harmattan, the leaves of the mango tree outside their sitting room became pale and dusty, as if somebody had rubbed them with chalk.

Her father had been transferred to the Enugu branch of his company in July. He had announced it at dinner in Benin, between a spoonful of soup and a question about Esosa's mathematics homework.

"Enugu," he had said. "We will settle there before the new school year."

Her mother had asked whether the company would pay for the relocation.

Her older brother, Osahon, had asked whether the new house would have a television in his room.

Esosa had said nothing.

She had been preparing for the Common Entrance examinations, and she knew precisely what moving would cost her. She would lose the teacher who understood how she solved fractions in her head. She would lose the girl who lent her a blue pen every Friday because Esosa always forgot to bring hers. She would lose the school library, where the librarian sometimes allowed her to read during lunch if she promised not to bend the pages.

Most importantly, she would lose the end of Primary Six as she had imagined it.