



Three

The girl sat quietly in the rickety, jerky taxi.

‘Ugh!’ her mother said irritably to the driver. ‘This car is so slow—and *dirty* as well.’ She turned to her daughter. ‘Efua, sit straight, you’re looking dead.’

Efua ignored her mother, knowing it would irritate her further.

‘Well, I trust we’ve found a place where even *you* will find it difficult to get into trouble,’ her mother said, eyes glittering.

The car stopped in front of a grey building. A small, round woman wearing a gold wig and bright red lipstick was standing by the gate.

‘Fumi! Efua!’ the woman shrieked.

Her mother smiled. ‘Moni, this is Efua.’ Efua’s aunt embraced her. Efua stood a little stiffly, somewhat embarrassed at her aunt’s warmth. She smelt of a queer but not unpleasant mixture of strong perfume and oranges.

‘Such a long time. You remember me? You—’

‘All right,’ her mother interrupted. ‘I’ll be off.’

‘So soon? You’re not getting down? My girl prepared egusi soup and—’

‘I have a plane to catch. I’ll write you a cheque. Efua, bye-bye and be a good girl. Don’t give Auntie Moni any trouble.’

The taxi sped off and Efua helped her aunt carry her bags inside. Her aunt kept chatting in a high-pitched voice. ‘Forcados is a nice school. They always have excellent results every year. Such a pity you were exp—er, had to leave your former school. I told a few people you were coming.

‘Remember Nene Ekpo? Her father is Pastor Ekpo and she’s

such a sweet girl...'

Later that day, as Efua was in her room unpacking, she heard her aunt calling shrilly, 'Efua, come out and meet someone!'

Oh dear, Efua thought. She took a deep breath and went out. Nene and her mother had dropped by.

'Nene, this is my niece Efua Coker,' Aunt Moni said. 'Efua, this is Mrs Ekpo and her daughter, Nene.'

Nene stared at Efua. She'd had a hazy memory of her and she had been expecting—well, she wasn't sure what she had been expecting, but certainly not the girl standing in front of her.

Efua was tall and slender, with large eyes and long eyelashes. Her hair fell in tangled plaits across her shoulders. She had a delicate, mysterious beauty that made Nene think of a freshly blossoming flower. She certainly didn't look like someone capable of being expelled.

'Good afternoon,' Efua greeted her visitors, curtsying a little. She had a surprisingly deep, almost masculine voice.

'Come here, you pretty child,' Mrs Ekpo sang out. 'I hear you will be going to the same school as my daughter.'

'Hello,' Nene said, feeling a little awkward. 'I don't think you'll remember me; I'm afraid I don't much remember you.'

'Why don't you both step outside and talk?' Aunt Moni suggested.

The girls stepped out to the balcony.

'I'm a commercial student,' Nene began. 'What class do you attend?'

'Science.'

'Oh, you're a brainy one. Well, I suppose it doesn't matter whether we're in different classes. Let me tell you a little about our school. Morning assembly starts by eight, so I'll come over at seven-thirty, if you like. You must plait your hair in the week's style. I'll show you where I do mine.'

'I'd like that very much, thank you.'

'So tell me about your former school. Girls only, wasn't it?'

Forcados is mixed – it may come as a shock.’

‘I hope not,’ said Efua. They both laughed, suddenly discovering they liked each other.

Nene continued, ‘Do you remember two boys called Ansa and Jimi?’

Efua frowned, ‘I think I do. Very troublesome boys, am I right?’

‘Only one of them was.’

They laughed again.

‘Hope you’ll like it here’ Nene said.

★

The next day, as the students stood in front of the hall laughing and talking just before assembly, Jimi joined the other prefects trying to organise everybody into lines.

‘No more chains on trousers or dangling earrings for the girls. There will be an inspection of fingernails and socks during assembly. Principal’s orders,’ he said. Then he noticed Nene standing with an unfamiliar girl.

Efua clung close to Nene. She felt queasy, the object of curious stares.

Jimi moved over to Ansa. ‘Who’s that girl, the one with Nene?’

‘Oh, that must be the new girl she was telling me about yesterday,’ Ansa said.

‘A new student joining us?’

‘Strange isn’t it? Nene said she once attended our primary school, so she might recognize us. Ef—something, um—yes, Efua.’

Efua. Jimi had never heard of her, but she looked rather nice—not bright, though. She had probably failed at her former school. Well, Jimi Solade to the rescue.

‘Come on,’ he said, half dragging Ansa. ‘Let Nene introduce us.’ Ansa sighed; he knew Jimi very well.

‘Hello Nene,’ said Jimi.

‘Efua, these are the boys I was telling you about. Jimi and

Ansa,' Nene said. 'Boys, this is Efua Coker.'

Ansa murmured awkwardly; he always felt shy around girls. Jimi just stared, his mouth open a little, until Nene prodded him.

'Jimi!'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' he said. He stretched to his full height, flashed his brightest Mr Cool smile and extended his hand. 'I'm Jimi Solade. Nice to meet you, although we're supposed to have met before.'

Efua stared at him, not taking his hand. 'I remember you,' she said frostily. 'You once put a dead lizard on my table.'

'Oh,' Jimi was flustered. 'I don't recall ...'

'Yes—but you were just kids,' said Efua. She turned to Nene. 'Can you show me round a bit?'

They both walked off, and Ansa decided he didn't like her at all. *Snooty, just who did she think she was?* But Jimi still had that dazed expression on his face. At that moment, the bell rang.



After classes at the end of the day, Efua walked slowly to the principal's office. It had not been a pleasant day.

In the first class, the teacher, a Mr Bade, came in and stopped short at the sight of her.

'Who are you?' he barked.

She stood up and said, 'I'm Efua Coker, sir,' in her best lady-like manner, the way girls at her former school were taught to speak.

'What are you doing here?'

'What—excuse me sir, I don't understand.'

'Are you supposed to be in this class? A new student in SS3?'

'Ye—es.' He gave a snort and ignored her for the rest of the lesson.

Each teacher kept saying the same thing:

'What is your name?' and 'You are new in a senior class?' until she thought she would scream. The maths teacher, a

portly middle-aged woman added, 'I suppose you know what being in this class is all about?' They didn't like her because new students didn't normally come into school at the senior class. They thought she might lower their results. They must have thought she was a bird-brain who had managed to buy her way in.

What could she answer to that?

The students giggled or whispered and nudged each other. Now, she was supposed to meet the principal and she wasn't looking forward to what he had to say.

Mr Mallum was seated behind his table piled with bulky but neat files. He wore small glasses.

'Miss Coker, you know why you are here?' he began abruptly.

Yes, because my mother gave this school an endowment, she said to herself.

'It was difficult for us to accept you and register you for this final year, but we took some factors into consideration. You are a straight-A student and your former headmistress gave you a glowing recommendation, even though she had to expel you after you ran away from school.'

Efua bowed her head a little.

'I find it difficult to believe an obviously intelligent young girl like you could ...'

Efua knew where this conversation was going and decided to take drastic action.

'Oh sir,' she said quietly.

She tried to make her voice as meek as possible.

'I'm not a bad girl. I'm really not. I was going through a rebellious phase. I promise you I'll never do anything to make you regret taking me here.' She sniffed a little, hoping it sounded real.

The principal stared at Efua. There was something that was not quite right about her, but he could not decide what it was.

'You are under probation for this term. We will be watching your marks closely to know if you can cope and you are to meet

the guidance counsellor once a week. Good luck in Forcados.'

'Thank you,' Efua said and went out.

Once outside, she dropped the meek act. She found a shady spot beneath a mango tree and leaned against the rough bark. The school grounds were deserted now and a small flock of grey and black pigeons strutted and fed on the grass not far from where she stood. Mr Mallum hadn't been too bad, though she would never have thought he would speak to Mrs Obange, her former principal. She thought of Mrs Obange, a large woman, with a gruff, friendly voice so different from thin, stuffy Mr Mallum. The principal hadn't wanted to expel her.

'What is wrong, Efua? Why did you run away?' Mrs Obange had asked after Efua had been brought back to the school. But Efua hadn't been ready to open up.

'You can tell me to leave if you want,' she had replied, defiant. Mrs. Obange had flared at that.

'Very well, if you want to leave, then leave you shall.'

She had got what she wanted, hadn't she? She had left Abuja; she was away from her mother and stepfather, and all of them.

Suddenly, she couldn't help thinking of her former school, St Catherine's, an all-girls boarding school. She thought of all her friends and clubs, and the busy life she used to lead. At this moment, she thought, the girls would be on their way to the dining hall, forming a long row of blue in their school uniforms...

I was a fool, she thought. I only hurt myself. A tear trickled down her face and, suddenly overcome by regret, she burst into tears. The pigeons, startled by the noise, took to the air in a flurry of flapping wings.