

CHAPTER ONE

WE ARE MOVING.

The text message had arrived at night, at exactly 12:01 A.M. Reading it now on the blinking family tablet, Cecelia wondered why Therese had waited until she was asleep before sending it. Cece loved and adored her best friend, and if there was anything she thought she knew about Therese, it was this: surely Therese would never abandon her.

And yet, there it was, a single line packed with the possibility of disappointment: *We are moving.*

Cece jumped out of bed and ran the whole way to her parents' bedroom.

"They're moving, they're moving!" She barged through the door.

It was a Saturday, so Iya and Baba were still in bed late, each in their pajamas. They jumped, startled.

"Ei, ei," Baba, who was also "Daddy" sometimes but insisted Cece refer to her parents using the traditional Yoruba terms, said. "Why all this shouting this morning?"

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“And what did we say about knocking before entering?” Iya, who was also “Mummy,” asked.

“Yes, yes, okay, scold me later,” Cece said. “But we must go now.”

“Because?” Baba inquired.

“Because Reesa and her family are moving and I won’t be able to say goodbye if we don’t leave *right now!*”

It took quite a bit of prodding for them to boot up like slow computers and get up to speed. As they had decided it was too early to let her out alone, Cece managed to persuade them to come with. She literally had to drag them out of the house and into the cold morning, both still in their bathrobes. Cece herself was in her bathroom slippers, but who cared? There was *leaving*. All Cece could think about was getting there before it was too late.

Gemshore Estate, their neighborhood in the island part of Lagos, was just waking up as well. The streets were empty but for the Saturday street sweepers. The *swish swish* of their brooms and the call of early birds were the only sounds for miles. Cece’s parents paused to greet one of the sweepers, smiling and saying *È kàárọ oh!* in a singsong voice. The sweeper himself chirped a sugar-sweet *Good morning!* Cece’s way. But Cece was already out of earshot, abandoning her parents behind and running for Therese’s.

The family home of the Njingas, Therese’s parents, was only six houses down from Cecelia’s, but around the bend. Her parents finished their greetings and caught up as she turned the corner. Cece expected to see moving trucks and a lot of activity come into view as they neared the Njinga house. Instead, misty silence greeted them at the detached duplex. The garage door was rolled

down, there was no car parked in the compound, and all the windows were shut.

There was no one there.

“What is happening? Where are they?” Cece turned to her parents, a plea in her eyes. “Where is Therese?”

“Oh, honey,” Iya said, and patted Cece’s shoulder. “I think we may be too late.”

Back home, Cece sat at the dining table and tried to process what had just happened. *How could Reesa do that?* she thought. How could her one and only friend in the world just move away without telling her or giving her the opportunity to say goodbye?

While Baba spoke on the phone, trying to reach Mr. Njinga for an explanation of the family’s sudden disappearance, Iya made Cece her favorite beverage: hot chocolate with honey and marshmallows. Or, her favorite beverage when she was, like, five—not that Iya could be bothered to remember she was not five anymore. Cece *was* in need of warmth, though, and decided, *Hot chocolate is fine, I guess.* However, when it did come, she was too downbeat to drink any of it, and just let it sit there, getting cold.

We were supposed to start Gemshore Secondary together on Monday. Cece picked at her fingers, nervous just at the thought. *How am I supposed to start secondary school all on my own?*

While her mother rummaged around trying to make breakfast, Baba finished his phone call.

“They’re already at the airport,” he announced after hanging up. “They’re getting ready to board. He says they’re moving to a place called Scottsdale. It’s in the USA.”

“Why didn’t she tell me it would happen so fast?” Cece asked, to no one in particular. “Why did she wait until last night?”

“Well, Mr. Njinga says it was quite sudden and there was little time to plan. None of his children even knew they were moving this quickly—not Therese, not her brothers.”

“But still . . .”

“Honey dearest,” Iya said. “I know it feels horrible to lose your best friend, but I’m sure she would have told you if she could. Don’t worry—once they land, you can speak to her on your Baba’s phone.”

Cece ate the rest of her breakfast in uncharacteristic silence. Midway through her meal of wheat bread with mayo and sausages, the tablet chimed again. Iya picked it up, put on her glasses, and squinted at it.

“I think it’s your friend,” she said, and passed the iPad to Cece.

I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, the message from Therese read. *It was very . . . fast.*

Cece put down the tablet and finished her breakfast. Once done, she went to the den, the only other room with a TV besides the living room, where her video gaming console was hooked up. She pulled a beanbag chair across, settled into the plush foam in front of the TV, booted up the unit, slipped on her headphones, and picked up her controller.

After breakfast on weekends was often housekeeping time, then homework time, then screen time, which could be a game or TV. But the housekeeper had come early the day before—a public holiday—and helped Cece with folding her clothes and arranging her books and putting her socks in the washer. Today being a weekend following a public holiday also meant she had done her homework the day before. Now, all she had was free time to do whatever she wished with.

But only as the game world wrapped around her did she remember that with Therese gone, she had no one to play Minecraft with.



I spawn right at the heart of Silver Oaks Park.

That is what Reesa and I named this Realm. There is no silver here, really, or oak trees. It was just the name we could come up with the first time we learned how to craft a sign out of wood planks and a stick. We stuck the sign in the ground, wrote in the letters, and named it our own private corner of the big world of Minecraft.

What I'm calling the "heart" is really the house Reesa and I built three years ago at what is now the center of Silver Oaks. Three years ago, I was goofing around on a public server for players around the estate, hiding from mobs in a tiny wooden shack. But instead of a zombie, *i_am_therese* spawned where I was, peered into my hiding spot, and asked if she could come hide with me.

She explained to me that there were Peaceful Realms where monsters didn't exist. Just things like polar bears and iron golems, which don't bother you if you don't bother them. She told me she had a private Realm set to Peaceful, and invited me. I later found out that her father was paying to host this Realm for her for the same reason I was trying not to play Minecraft elsewhere. And that was to avoid venturing into the big bad world of public servers on the internet.

We became friends that night, and have been ever since. She told me her name was really Teresa, but that her grandparents, who were originally from Congo-Brazzaville, opted to call her Thérèse, after a once-popular French princess where they grew

up. It had stuck, and everyone called her Therese now. But she asked that I call her Reesa for short. It was what she let only her best friends call her.

I walk through the house we built together. It is no longer a small hiding spot, but now a mansion with more rooms than we can manage. We have crafted beds, books, bookshelves, carpets, banners, fences, gates. We have a small basement we built with cobblestone where we keep most of our booty. Our large living room has tall, floor-to-ceiling, stained glass windows. We crafted a few framed paintings and placed them around the house.

But it is not only the mansion at Silver Oaks that is our stamp on the world. As I look over the balcony of the first floor of our house, I can see all the farms we have created. Wheat, beetroot, cocoa beans, melon, pumpkin, mushrooms, sugarcane: all growing around us. There is even a barn where we keep sheep whenever we have the time to tend to them.

Even some things that we once did that are no longer here I remember now just by looking. Like that one time we decorated for the new year holidays. Or the time we made eggs and hid them and then tried to do an Easter egg hunt thing. I hid mine high up in a tree, and Therese tried to climb it once she had figured it out, but just kept falling. The memory comes to me now and I can't help laughing.

Silver Oaks Park is our paradise. Or *was*. Because for the first time in the existence of Silver Oaks, it is not friendly and fun chatter that greets my arrival, but a lonely silence. And staring back at me, everywhere I look, is the realization that one thing about this place that might not change for a long time is this: *i_am_therese is offline*.

CHAPTER TWO

MONDAY WAS GOING TO BE a drag, and Cece knew it.

The day began with a gray and grumpy sky that matched Cece's foul mood. Breakfast tasted like the sadness that filled her chest. And though it didn't rain as Iya drove her to her first day of secondary school, the wind was whooshing past the car and making a sound like a TV without a working channel.

When their car pulled up at the school parking lot, Iya reached out and kissed Cece's forehead.

"I know you're feeling down, dearest," she said. "But you're only ten years old—"

"Ten and a half," Cece said.

"Okay, okay, ten and a half," Iya said. "Still, I want you to remember that you have a whole life ahead of you. I understand that you have lost contact with Therese, and that she has been your best friend throughout primary school." Iya pointed to the school building before them. "But maybe you should think of this as an opportunity to make new friends. You are nice, sweet, and

funny. I'm sure there are many children in that building right now who can't wait to meet you and become your friend."

With that, Iya bid her goodbye and drove off. Cece stood on the pavement, bag in hand, and stared up at the front façade of Gemshore Private Secondary School.

It wasn't entirely new *new*, the school. They had ridden past it many times, because it was located within the estate, and was the sister secondary school to Gemshore Primary, which Cece had attended until now. Half the new students at the school would simply be her former classmates from primary school, mixed with some new ones from outside the estate. Still, this was only the second time Cece would be entering the building, the other being when she and Iya had come here for registration months ago.

And this was the first time she would be entering the building *alone*.

"Therese, you mad girl," Cece muttered under her breath. "We would have been doing this together. I guess I'll have to do it alone now."

The walk to assembly was short and uneventful. The directions were clear at the main gate: *All new students, follow the green arrows to the assembly*, a conspicuous sign had read. Cece followed the arrows, milling among many new students in shiny new uniforms just like hers.

She had seen many films about first days of school, and read books about them, too. And in those stories, the first day of school never went well. She half-expected some bully or troublemaker to bump into her and then size her up and pronounce her a weirdo or nerd. Those stories had taught her that unless someone was the coolest new kid in school, they were always quickly put in their place.

For her, that place was closer to the bottom of the cool-kid ladder than she would have liked. She didn't have any special skills or traits she could think of that would make people like her—her interests were reading fantasy books and playing Minecraft. Not even the hard Minecraft—just simple, fun, goofing-around Minecraft.

Therese was supposed to be here. Together, they were supposed to look out for each other, elevate each other, protect each other. Cece had heard stories—gossip from classmates back at Gemshore Primary—that senior students at Gemshore Secondary were mean. She'd heard they would whistle at a junior student and send them off on impossible errands, like, *Fill up this basket with water, using only a teaspoon.*

However, Cece soon found that real life was unlike the movies. There was no bully, no put-down, no remarkable event. Everyone pretty much ignored her and the other new students. Even those whose faces she recognized from around the estate—new and old students alike—pretended not to know one another.

The assembly was quick and uneventful, too: national anthem, prayer, and a few announcements. Then the new students were shepherded into a corner while everyone else left. Various teachers approached and called lists of names, after which the students went with them to their new classes. Finally, a tall man in a waistcoat said, "Cecelia Alao," and Cece raised her hand in response, then followed him alongside a bunch of other students.

Next were desk assignments. Cece's was smack in the middle of her home classroom. She heaved a sigh of relief. A seat in the middle of class was the kind of invisible she liked: not too conspicuous, but not too hidden, either. Plus, it helped that she didn't

have to contend with the territorial markers that came with class seating.

Cece thought of class seating territories the same way she thought about Minecraft mobs. There were four zones in class seating: the *windowers* sat in the window rows on either side of class; the *teacher's pets* sat in the front rows; the *backbenchers* sat at the very rear of class; and the invisible folks like her in the middle were so invisible they had no name. Belonging to a faction came with certain labels and reputations—some good, some not so great—but they also came with privileges.

Cece thought of the teacher's pets, for instance, as villagers protected by an iron golem. You annoyed this faction at your own peril, because the minute they reported you to a teacher, for any reason whatsoever, you were in hot soup. Even senior students knew to avoid teacher's pets.

Windowers were like neutral mobs: they left you alone as long as you did the same with them. But they were also too unpredictable to be trusted. They were the wolves of the class, in that they came in all shapes and sizes and forms, and would cause trouble only if they were accosted or felt they'd been treated wrongly. Most times, though, they offered protection to those under attack by going on the offense themselves.

The backbenchers were the hostile mobs: the creepers, zombies, skeletons, Endermen. They sniffed out trouble and started something every opportunity they got. And since the teacher's pets were out of reach, they were always seeking out victims in windowers and invisibles who weren't invisible enough.

Cece knew that there were people who didn't really conform to the behaviors and patterns of the areas they sat in. But groups possessed a certain enchantment, and Cece had observed that

belonging to one reputed to be full of mean people turned even the most happy-go-lucky kids mean. Which was why she had avoided making new friends herself, and had so far limited her friendship connections to Therese.

That gamble had now backfired, of course. Therese was gone, and Cece was back to being alone. Perhaps now was a good time to rethink that strategy.

Cece observed the shiny new uniforms around her, everyone setting up their desks. A boy displayed his cool new notebooks up near the front, stacking and arranging them neatly and beaming, likely hoping someone would come by and compliment them. A girl with a very intricate plait that had colored beads woven into them was smiling at everyone who went by her, greeting them with a cheery *Good morning!*

Everyone's already trying to make friends, thought Cece. *Maybe I should stop moping about and try.*

So, when the next new girl went by, Cece said hi.

The girl was only slightly taller than Cece, and just as skinny. She had tight little eyes that she squinted even further as she looked Cece over and tried to determine if she should respond or not.

“Cool bag you have there,” Cece said, even though she had not taken a good look at it. And now that she did, she saw that it was quite frayed, and looked like a hand-me-down. The girl was likely from outside of the estate—the kids who lived on the estate would never be caught dead with that bag. That had to be why the girl didn’t look familiar.

The girl eyed her backpack, then looked over at Cece’s.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing at the sticker of a creeper’s face Cece had stuck on her bag.