

LEVELED BOOK • Y

# Leaving Home



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## Chapter 1

"Attention, class!" Mr. Tidewell commanded. "I would like to introduce our new student, Desmond Blake." All heads swung in my direction as I stood nervously in front of the entire classroom. "Desmond's family has just moved to Chicago all the way from Jamaica," Mr. Tidewell continued. "Let's give him a warm welcome on this cold February day."

"Wel-come, Des-mond," the class recited in a singsong tone. I felt uncomfortable and glanced out the window, avoiding the forty pairs of eyes staring back at me. It had been snowing **incessantly**, and I wondered if it would ever stop. Goose bumps rose on my arms in reaction to the cold, which I doubted I would ever get used to, and to this new situation I found myself in.

Normally, I loved being the center of attention. Back home I was always popular with my group of friends. But those were friends I'd grown up with, friends I hung out with every day. They knew all my **quirks** and faults, yet accepted me just the way I was. When I was with them, I felt comfortable and confident. I didn't have any of those feelings now as I stood in this strange room filled with strange faces.

I had never been in a situation like this before, and I didn't enjoy this new feeling of **detachment**. I wanted to run out, hop on an airplane, and head back to my old familiar classroom filled with my old familiar friends. But that wasn't ever going to happen again, and I had to blink hard to stop the tears before they started. I quickly made my way down the row of desks, ignoring the curious faces looking up at me, and sank deep into my seat and out of the spotlight.

My **reprieve** was short-lived, however, as Mr. Tidewell decided to take this opportunity to point out some facts about Jamaica. Why did Dad's job have to transfer him to Chicago? I groaned, aware that if I were back home, I wouldn't have to deal with all of this.



## Chapter 2

"Jamaica is the third largest island in the Caribbean," he began. "Does anyone know where that is?"

Mr. Tidewell paused and looked around the room for answers. No one responded. I imagined everyone was probably bored. After all, why would they want to learn about my home, anyway? I sank lower into my seat, hoping Mr. Tidewell would not call on me for the answer. To my relief, he didn't seem to mind that no one answered his question, and instead calmly continued to relate facts about my country to the class.

Every topic brought back memories. I soon slipped off into daydreams of sitting in class with my best friends, Tanya and Lee, all of us struggling to pay attention to our teacher as the warm tropical breeze and noises from the street wafted in through the open windows.

In contrast, there was no warmth in this classroom. The thick double-paned glass windows were shut tight against the snow, which covered the ground in a cold blanket of white. My thoughts drifted back to my life in Jamaica, where just a few weeks earlier I had been riding my bike home from school, the hot sun beating down on me as I pedaled through the neighborhood with my best friends.

“Desmond . . . Desmond!” Mr. Tidewell’s voice pulled me back to the cold, harsh reality of Chicago. Everyone was staring at me. “Will you tell us a little about what your school was like in Jamaica?” He invited me to stand and embarrass myself some more. I turned in my seat and noticed, for the first time, the girl who sat next to me. She smiled encouragingly. It was a small gesture, but it gave me the confidence I needed to pull myself up out of my chair and face the class as Mr. Tidewell asked the first question.



## Chapter 3

"How many children were in your class, Desmond?"

I quickly answered, "Twenty-five."

"And is school in Jamaica similar to or different from ours?" he inquired again.

There were so many differences that I could have spent the rest of the class explaining them all. But instead I chose to **gloss** over them without going into too much detail. I didn't want the class to laugh at me when they heard that

I spoke differently from everyone else. Mr. Tidewell, who was originally from Georgia, pronounced words differently from everyone, and occasionally the class would snicker at his strange accent.

Mr. Tidewell noticed my hesitation and did not pressure me into answering. I thought he would let me sit back down, but instead, he asked if the class had any questions and left me standing there.

The room was completely silent. I shifted from my left foot to my right, feeling awkward and exposed. Finally, a small hand rose up next to me.

“What is the biggest difference between our schools and your schools back in Jamaica?” came a voice from next to me.

It was the nice girl who sat beside me. I found it easier to answer the question if I looked directly at her.

“To me, the biggest difference is that everyone wears a school uniform in Jamaica, whereas up here everyone wears normal clothes,” I responded.

Comments flew around the classroom in reaction to my response.

"You mean everyone wore the same thing, every day?" a tall girl at the front of the class asked. She seemed absolutely shocked at such a thought.

"That's kinda cool," the boy beside her responded.

Another boy, seated behind me, snickered and said he thought people in Jamaica just wore grass skirts.

"Don't be stupid!" said another student, jumping in to put him down. "That's only in Hawaii."

"Settle down, class," Mr. Tidewell demanded. "Desmond, do all schools have the same uniform?" he asked.

"Oh, no," I responded quickly. "Each school has its own uniform and colors."

I held my breath and waited, but no one laughed or snickered at my accent. Mr. Tidewell had them under strict control, and as the next round of questions was raised, I continued to answer them all as best I could.

“What about sports?” a big, blonde boy shouted from the back of the classroom. “Did you play any sports in your school?”

A wide grin split across my face as I thought about my favorite sport.

“Back home I was captain of the school’s cricket team,” I revealed proudly and waited for the praise and admiration that usually followed such a statement. However, all I got was a bunch of puzzled stares.

“CRICKET?” “What’s that?” The word hopped about the room.

“Isn’t that a bug?” the girl beside me asked, her face scrunched in disgust. “Why would anyone want to be the captain of a team of crickets?”

What’s cricket! I thought, absolutely **stupefied** that not one of them knew about the most perfect game in the world. I looked at the nameless strangers in my class and felt a strong need to tell them all about the game I loved so much. But I did not get the chance to share my knowledge. The bell rang, signaling the end of class and the start of lunch, and I immediately lost everyone’s attention . . . just when I was starting to enjoy it.

## Chapter 4

The class erupted into complete **mayhem** as everyone tried to exit at the same time through the single door at the front of the room, anxious to meet up with their friends and already discussing topics other than cricket. Within minutes, the chaos was over and I was left standing in the quiet classroom with Mr. Tidewell. "Thank you for sharing with us, Desmond," he said gratefully before hurrying out the door to eat with the others in the teachers' lounge. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and left the class alone, just as I had entered it earlier that morning.

The noise inside the cafeteria was deafening. There must have been at least a hundred students inside the enclosed room. I made my way through the lunch line, picking up a banana and orange juice, and settling for a cheeseburger. My favorite lunch in Jamaica was always a patty, and my mouth watered as I thought of the crisp, flaky pastry filled with savory ground beef.



The cheeseburger was a poor substitute for what had been my typical lunch for the past three years. At least the banana and orange juice were old favorites.

As I walked through the lunchroom, I recognized faces from my class, but they were too busy chatting with their friends to acknowledge me. And no one invited me to sit with them. They may have spoken to me in class, but it was an entirely different situation out here.

I sat at an empty table in the back of the room and tried to convince myself that it was better to eat alone, that everyone wasn't ignoring me. I took a huge bite out of my cheeseburger and chewed noisily. It's not too bad, I thought, and washed it down with some juice before returning to my **vigil** of staring out at the never-ending snow.

Someone called my name and I looked around to see that same girl with the encouraging smile.

"Hi, I'm Lori, and this is Matt," she said, pointing to the boy who had asked me about sports.

"Cricket sounds pretty cool. Do you think you could teach me?" asked Matt.

We both looked out the window at the continually falling snow. "Well, maybe in the spring," Matt grinned.

"You mean it's actually going to stop snowing sometime?" I asked hopefully, and we all shared a laugh.

I forgot all about my mediocre lunch as Matt asked endless questions about cricket, and I was glad to share my vast knowledge of the game.

"Why did your family leave Jamaica?" interrupted Lori, abruptly trying to change the subject. "I'm bored with all this talk about cricket."

Although I would much rather talk about cricket, I found myself responding to her question. Before I knew it, I had told them about my dad's job, how he got transferred to the office branch here in Chicago, and about my friends that I'd left behind.

"That must have been tough," Matt sympathized.

"It must be hard coming to a new school and a new country at the same time," Lori commented. "But what do you think of Chicago?"

"It's way too cold." I said immediately.  
"I've never seen snow before, and I had no idea it could be so cold."

They laughed at me.

"Hey, I'm used to tropical temperatures where it rarely drops below 70 degrees," I protested. "I've never worn so many clothes at the same time," I continued, "and I can't tell you how weird it feels having this thing wrapped around my neck." I tugged at the turtleneck collar that had been choking me all morning.

"You'll eventually get used to it," Matt promised, but I didn't believe him.

"Winter is great for making snow angels and ice skating," Lori said, naming some of her favorite winter hobbies.

"And ice hockey," Matt added.

I had no idea what snow angels were, but ice hockey sounded like a lot of fun. Maybe Matt was right and I would start to enjoy this weather. Things change, after all. I had started lunch by myself, and now here I was heading back to class with two new friends.



## Chapter 5

A couple of boys made snide comments when I entered the room, but Lori snapped back at them immediately. I sat down and looked around at faces that were becoming familiar. A few of my classmates came over and introduced themselves. Some shared quick stories about when their families immigrated to America and how they had adjusted to the changes. I found it very encouraging to know that others had shared similar experiences and that they had adapted well to the new school system.

Mr. Tidewell asked us all to settle down, and everyone scurried back to their desks to start the afternoon class. It was math—not my best subject—and from the looks on most of the faces in the room, I gathered it wasn't a popular subject with anyone else either. I glanced out the window. It had stopped snowing and the sun had come out, reflecting brightly off the snow-laden trees. Things were starting to warm up. Soon, the school day ended, and it was time to go home.



## Chapter 6

I stepped off the school bus and carefully walked the block to our house. I'd slipped and fallen the day before as I ran to get out of the cold, but somehow it didn't seem as cold today.

I slammed the door shut and began the process of removing all the layers of winter clothes. "Desmond, please don't slam the door when you come into the house," Mom yelled from the kitchen.

"Sorry, Mom," I apologized, struggling out of my tall boots.

I walked through the living room and made my way back toward the wonderful aromas coming from the kitchen. Mom had done a great job making our home in Chicago seem a lot like the one we had left behind. Our furniture from Jamaica was in all the rooms, native paintings **adorned** the walls, and colorful rugs lay on the floor. Mom had even painted the rooms in tropical colors, and when reggae music played on the stereo, I felt as though I were back in Jamaica.

"Hi, Mom," I said as I poked around the kitchen, lifting the lids off bubbling pots to sneak a taste before dinner.

I grabbed a Ting from the fridge, my favorite grapefruit soda from home, and took it up to my room. Turning on my computer, I instant-messaged both Tanya and Lee, eager to fill them in on my day and hear the latest news from back home.

They couldn't imagine how cold it was, so I told them to stick their hands in the freezer for ten minutes. Lee was interested in ice hockey, and I promised to keep him up to date on whatever I learned about the new sport.

Tanya whined that the cricket team just wasn't the same without me. It felt good to be missed, and I told her that I was thinking about starting a new cricket team up here. A couple of the kids at school seemed interested in learning the game.

We went back and forth, each asking questions. Coincidentally, they asked the same questions the kids at school had asked, wanting to know what the main differences were. Tanya was instantly jealous that I got to wear normal clothes to school every day.

Finally, I told them about Lori and Matt and how I hoped we would become best friends. Lee teased me about Lori, as I knew he would, but Tanya was more concerned that they would replace her and Lee as my new best friends. I knew no one could ever replace Tanya and Lee, but I also knew that I wouldn't be seeing them a lot anymore, so we made a promise to talk every day.





## Chapter 7

Headlights beamed through my bedroom window, alerting me that Dad was home, and I hadn't set the table for dinner. I raced into the dining room as Dad came in, grumbling about the darn snow and ice.

"Oh, George, you complained about the traffic and terrible roads when we were back in Jamaica," Mom reminded him.

"Yes, but at least it was warmer there," he laughed, and we nodded in agreement.

As I placed the old, familiar plates and silverware on the table, I thought about the

changes we each had to adjust to. Dad said his biggest difficulty was adjusting to driving in the snow. He admitted it was harder than getting used to driving on the right-hand side of the road. In Jamaica, we drive on the left-hand side of the road. Last week, he crashed into the garage door after hitting a patch of ice in our driveway. Mom's biggest adjustment was that she no longer went out to work. She had set up her office at home and corresponded with her clients in Jamaica over the Internet. And my biggest challenge was getting used to the new school system.

All of us had left behind friends and family. But when we sat down to dinner and talked about our day, we always spoke in “**patois**,” the Jamaican dialect. It felt good to hear and use familiar words and phrases. And even though our accents were much more pronounced, no one laughed or asked us to repeat ourselves. We could relax and be ourselves in our warm, colorful house, listening to songs from back home and eating the food we grew up with. It was a very comforting feeling to know that although we were thousands of miles from home, no matter what changes we faced in the future, we still had our culture to support us.

## Glossary

<b>adorned</b>	dressed in or decorated with (p. 18)
<b>detachment</b>	an emotional, physical, or mental separation (p. 5)
<b>gloss</b>	to give only brief attention to (p. 8)
<b>incessantly</b>	without stopping (p. 4)
<b>laden</b>	covered or weighed down with something (p. 16)
<b>mayhem</b>	destructive acts or chaos (p. 12)
<b>patois</b>	the dialect (regional type of speech) used in Jamaica (p. 21)
<b>quirks</b>	small personality traits or characteristics (p. 5)
<b>reprieve</b>	a short period of relief (p. 5)
<b>savory</b>	pleasantly flavored, salty (p. 12)
<b>stupefied</b>	emotionally or mentally stunned (p. 11)
<b>vigil</b>	a careful watch over someone or something (p. 13)

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