

# Chapter One - Grasshopper



Whitney finished packing her new school bag, slung it over her shoulder and started walking toward her new adventure – her first day in high school. The entire holiday she had been looking forward to this, but now that the day had finally arrived, Whitney could feel the butterflies in her stomach. She told herself to relax and be brave. At least Lindiwe would be there.

Lindiwe was Whitney's best friend from primary school. They had always walked home from school together, laughed and cried together, shared secrets and classroom gossip, all the things that best friends do. Although they saw each other every day, they also kept in touch on Facebook in the school's computer room. In fact, they would often sit together at adjacent terminals and send each other chat messages, just for fun.

Whitney looked around for Lindiwe as she got closer to Thembaletu High School. *I have to find her before entering the front gate*, Whitney thought. In Grade 7, Whitney felt so senior, so grownup. But now that she was in high school, she would be among the babies of the school. She had heard that the new Grade 8-children would have to be initiated, and she was not quite sure what initiation entailed. She had to find Lindiwe!

As Whitney arrived at the high school, she was surrounded by droves of older children, most of them laughing and joking, but some younger ones looking as nervous and insecure as she felt. She kept her head down and entered the gate, trying not to draw attention to herself.

"Hey, *wena!*" one of the older boys shouted at her. "*Yiz' apha ntombi!* – come here, girl! What is your name?"

Whitney ignored him and walked faster.

"Hey, I'm talking to you! Yes, you with the skinny legs! Your legs look like a grasshopper's!" The boy's friends doubled over in laughter.

"Hey, Grasshopper! Come and hop for us so we can see how it's done!" another boy chirped in. More laughter.

Whitney tried to run away, but her foot slipped and she went sprawling on the pavement, right in front of the group of boys that were teasing her. The boys roared with laughter.

“*Hayi!* – No! Stop teasing her! She’s my friend!” Whitney heard Lindiwe’s voice behind her, and she struggled to her feet, barely able to keep the tears from flowing.

“Come on, let’s go,” said Lindiwe. She picked up Whitney’s bag, took her arm and led her away, around the corner. The boys shouted something after them, but they ignored it.

The first two weeks in high school were the worst. Initiation was strictly speaking not allowed, but the matrics were still permitted to have some fun with the new arrivals and made a point of embarrassing and humiliating them whenever they could. All the Grade 8’s had to wear a cardboard sign around their necks for the first week, with their real names and their nicknames written on it. The nicknames were given by the matrics – and someone who had witnessed Whitney’s first few minutes in high school wasted no time in giving her the nickname “Grasshopper”. The name stuck and Whitney hated it.

After two weeks, the initiation was over and Whitney started enjoying school a lot more. She had made up her mind to enjoy high school, to have as much fun as possible and forget all about the problems of the previous year – her dad’s death from AIDS, and the short, harrowing relationship she’d had with Lucky, a high school boy who was now in Grade 10. She tried to leave the past behind her and put all the bad memories out of her mind.

It was hard to put Lucky out of her mind, though. Lucky was her first love – the first and only boy she’d ever kissed, but also the first boy that had hurt and betrayed her so much.

Every once in a while, Whitney would see Lucky at school between classes. She tried her best to avoid eye contact, but she could feel him staring at her. He never spoke a word to her, though, and she made no attempt to speak to him. She wondered whether he had any regrets, whether he still felt something for her, whether he’d ever felt anything for her ...

“You really need to stop thinking about him, Whitney,” Lindiwe said to

her one day after they had walked past him in the corridor, on the way to their usual spot where they spent first break.

"I'm not thinking about him."

"Yes you are! I can see it in your face."

"Let's change the topic, please."

"He's history. Just forget about him! You can't keep living in the past," Lindiwe continued.

"I'm not living in the past! Can't we just change the topic?"

"We're in high school now, we should forget about all our problems and start having some fun!" Lindiwe said enthusiastically.

"Yeah, that sounds good. But what kind of fun?" Whitney asked, relieved to steer the conversation away from Lucky.

"Just fun, like, whatever. I don't know! We're not kids anymore, you know? In high school we are expected to be more like grownups, think for ourselves, do what we want, go to parties and so on."

"Parties? What kind of parties?"

"All kinds of parties. Zola says there is at least one party every weekend. You just need to be friends with the right people." Zola was Lindiwe's older sister and in Grade 10 this year.

"Why are you so into partying all of a sudden, Lindiwe? I don't know you like that."

"Why not? You know what things are like at home. My dad is never home, and when he is there, he is drunk and shouts at us. I just want to get away from all that and do something fun for a change. Don't you?" Lindiwe asked.

"Well, yes, I guess. But ... I don't know that many people yet. Besides, Mrs Pillay said ..." Whitney's voice trailed off as she thought about her favourite teacher from primary school.

Mrs Pillay was almost like a mother to Whitney. She was the one who had helped her through primary school and prevented her Grade 7-year from turning into a disastrous nightmare. Whitney loved Mrs Pillay. Even now that she was in high school, she was determined to still go and visit Mrs Pillay at her house sometimes, just for a chat, or some mango juice. The mango juice always came with plenty of love,

encouragement and advice. Mrs Pillay did not offer advice in a preachy sort of way – just in her own easy, conversational way. She was such a caring person. She never judged anyone or forced her opinion onto you, but she always showed genuine concern and offered little snippets of wisdom. “It’s up to you what you do with it,” she always said.

“Who cares what Mrs Pillay said? I bet she warned you about all kinds of things you have to stay away from in high school. I know what she’s like!” Lindiwe’s voice brought Whitney’s thoughts back to the present.

“Lindiwe! Stop dissing Mrs Pillay all the time! You know she was my favourite teacher and always will be.”

“Bet you she said you shouldn’t go to parties,” Lindiwe continued.

“No she didn’t! She just said ... uhm ... oh, never mind.”

“You see? I knew she said something like that! What did she say? Just tell me!”

“You don’t want to hear it, so I won’t tell you.”

“I do want to hear it! Was it about parties? Or boyfriends?” Lindiwe probed.

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Then what did she say?”

“She just said I must be careful, that’s all.”

“Careful of what? Drugs or parties or something?”

“No, she said I must be careful of the friends I make,” Whitney answered.

“Is that all?” Lindiwe asked.

“Pretty much. But she did say I would enjoy high school. And she told me to have fun.”

“Well, then, there you go, *ntombi!* Even Mrs Pillay says we should have fun! And fun we shall have! Better than sitting around at home, like little kids,” Lindiwe stated and took a big bite from her sandwich.