

Chapter One - Hope

The white minibus full of tourists drove slowly through the township, and some people waved at it as it went by. Thembeke's Township Tours was well-known in the neighbourhood, and the bus was easily recognised by the TTT logo on the sides of the vehicle.

"On our left, you can see the colourful RDP houses, which were all built after we became a democracy in nineteen ninety-four. They are not very big, but they are better than the shacks we used to live in. You can still see many people living in shacks if you look to your right a bit further on. We are about to pass an area where you can clearly see the difference between an informal settlement on one side, and government housing on the other side."

The minibus drove slowly and the tourists looked on in quiet amazement as they drove through Thembaletu township. On the left, neat rows of government housing dotted the landscape, each house painted a different colour. Laundry hung outside on home-made washing lines. Children could be seen playing in the streets. Most of the houses had a small yard and behind some of them, a shack had been built to accommodate a tenant or additional family member. Some yards had a small vegetable patch, others were just bare soil.

On the other side of the road, the picture was very different. Home-built shacks crowded the space between dusty roads, with a few rickety fences defining the boundaries of properties. Most shacks were a combination of wood, builder's plastic and corrugated roof sheets. A few big stones on the roof revealed the shortage of roof nails, and were intended to keep the rusted sheets from blowing off in strong winds. Most of the shelters were tiny and did not look very weatherproof. A few stray dogs and chickens could be seen foraging in some of the yards of the informal settlement.

"O my word, would you look at that? But why are some people still living in shacks?" an American lady drawled.

“Because, ma’am, some people have no other option. There are not yet enough houses to accommodate everyone. Over two million houses have been built already, but we still need more,” Thembeke replied from the front of the minibus.

“De pavyty hier is tarrible,” a Dutch tourist said in a strong accent. “How do people survive?”

“We find ways. Some people receive social grants. Others build shacks and rent them out. Those who have jobs support up to ten or twelve people with their income. Some start a small business, like a spaza shop or a hairdresser. Some sell fruit or meat or something else from the sidewalk, as informal traders. Where there is a will, there is always a way.”

“Or some clever people start a tourism company,” an elderly Brit said with a chuckle, and added, “You seem to be doing rather splendidly, Thembeke. How did you start your township tours?”

Thembeke loved this question. It was one that her clients asked regularly and she felt a certain pride in answering it. She explained to the group of tourists how she had heard about township tours being offered in Soweto, and realised that this was something nobody was yet offering in her area. She decided to start offering township tours, and looked around for someone with a suitable vehicle to partner with. Eventually she convinced a local minibus-taxi owner that his vehicle could earn more money taking tourists through Thembaletu township than ferrying commuters around.

“And is yours the only company offering township tours here in this area?” the Brit’s wife asked later.

“Yes, and I intend to keep it that way,” Thembeke replied as the minibus approached the end of their guided tour. “There are not enough tourists to support two companies doing the same thing.”

“How will you keep it that way? What would you do if someone else started a similar operation, in competition with you?”

“Nobody will try and compete with me. Everyone knows me around here. If anyone starts competing with me, I will get the community against them and we will close them down.” The British woman did not like the nasty tone in Thembeke’s reply, but she said nothing.



“Whitney?” a voice was saying. She heard it vaguely but it did not register.

“Whitney Sithelo, are you listening?” Mr Mawonga said firmly. Whitney’s mind snapped back to the present.

“Yes ... yes, sir. *Uxolo* – sorry, sir,” she stammered. There were a few giggles around the class. Whitney tried to clear her mind and focus on what the teacher was saying. She usually enjoyed Mr Mawonga’s class, but today she had other things on her mind.

“Then can you please repeat what I just said? What does PC stand for?”

“Uhm ... something ... computer?”

“Personal computer, Whitney. Please stop the daydreaming and pay attention. You may not think so now, but what you learn at school may help you one day,” Mr Mawonga said with a hint of sarcasm.

“Yes, sir,” Whitney replied sheepishly and looked down at her desk.

Mr Mawonga kept looking at her and said, “I know it’s hard to concentrate in this class because this is not an exam subject. But it’s still important. If any of you are planning to take Information Technology as a subject next year, this extra class we are doing to teach you about computers will help you a lot. And even if you don’t plan on taking Information Technology as a subject, you will probably need to know how to use a computer for your work one day.”

Mr Mawonga was their Technology teacher but he also taught an extra class on computers, which was not part of the formal curriculum. Thembaletu High School started offering these extra lessons on computers after a local company donated ten new computers for the school’s computer room.

Whitney looked up and was relieved to see that the teacher was no longer looking at her. The whole morning she had had trouble concentrating in class. Whitney enjoyed Grade 9 and usually she was very attentive, but this morning her mind was on her problems at home. She had no interest in her school work today.

She thought again of the terrible news she'd heard this morning from her mother – that she had lost her job. Ever since her father had passed away from AIDS in her Grade 7-year, Whitney's mother had been the family's breadwinner. For the first nine months, she had claimed UIF-benefits from her father's contributions to the Unemployment Insurance Fund. Then the UIF-benefits ran out and she started looking for a job. After searching for two months, she'd finally found a job as an admin lady at a local food manufacturing company, and while the salary was not much, it was just enough to support the two of them.

But like many other companies, the food company was badly affected by the recession, and a year after Mrs Sithelo started, the company was forced to retrench a large number of staff in order to cut costs. They had a policy that the last people to join the company would also be the first to be let go if the company had to retrench staff. Since Whitney's mother was one of the more recent appointments, she was one of the first to be retrenched. She had pleaded with her boss to let her keep her job, explaining that she was a single mother, but the supervisor had replied that there was nothing she could do – it was a decision made higher up, by the board of directors.

Who would look after them now? Whitney wondered. How would they survive? How would they buy food and clothing? She knew she was not supposed to worry about such things, but she could not shake the anxiety and nagging questions in her mind. After all, she knew of many teenagers who were in a similar situation, whose parents were either absent or unemployed, and had to rely on the school's meal service.

With the help of a local non-government organisation, her school provided one meal each day for those learners whose families were unable to provide enough food at home. It worked on a voucher system. Pupils or their parents could apply for vouchers, which would be granted once the school was satisfied that there was genuine need in the family. The students with vouchers were then given a free meal each day – usually something like soup and bread, or porridge.

Whitney hoped that she would not have to apply for meal vouchers. There were some teenagers who looked down on those who made use of the meal service and made fun of them, but Whitney felt sorry for them.

She knew that for some of those kids it was their only meal for the day. She glanced across the classroom at Simphiwe, a quiet, intelligent boy whom she knew was reliant on the feeding scheme. Other boys sometimes teased him about it, and this made him even more shy and withdrawn. He said very little in class, but he always did well academically and seemed more interested in school work than in being popular. Whitney wondered why teenagers who worked hard and did well at school were often not very popular.

With a shrug, she pushed her worries aside and tried to concentrate on what Mr Mawonga was saying.

“Therefore, using the internet, you can learn how to build your own website quite easily. And if you take Information Technology as a subject from Grade 10, you will learn more about the internet and about programming.”

A boy at the back of the class put his hand up. His parents had named him Computer, and true to his name, he took a serious interest in computers.

“Yes, Computer?”

“Sir, why can’t someone just build a website using Facebook? You can create your own company page on Facebook, for free.”

“You are right, Computer. You can easily build a basic page using Facebook or Blogspot or any of the other free websites that allow you to create a personalised web page. But that is only a single page, not a full website.”

“Then what about Wordpress, sir? A friend of mine has his own blog and he uses Wordpress. That’s also free.”

“I’m impressed that you know about Wordpress, Computer. You can indeed build a full website using Wordpress. But we won’t get to cover that in this class. We’re trying to focus on the basics of how to use computers. The point I was trying to make is that it is easy to learn new skills if you know how to use the internet. You can easily teach yourself how to use a new program or even how to design your own website, if you know where to look for that information. I want to encourage you to use the computer room as often as you can. But don’t waste your time on playing games. Rather try and learn something new about computers each day.”

Whitney started making notes while the teacher was talking. It forced her mind to stay focused on the class. And besides, how else would she ever remember about Wordpress and all these other big words Mr Mawonga was using?



During first break, Whitney found Lindiwe and they walked to their usual spot. Since primary school, Lindiwe had been Whitney's best friend and they spent most of their time together. They had shared so many adventures together that Whitney considered her as a sister.

"What's wrong with you today?" Lindiwe asked. She had the ability to notice right away when Whitney's mood was different or when something was bothering her.

"Nothing. Why do you ask?"

"Don't say it's nothing. I know when something is wrong. You look worried about something."

"I don't want to talk about it," Whitney replied.

"Is it about a boy? I saw you looking at Simphiwe in class today ..."

"*Hayi* – no! You got it all wrong!"

"Do you like him?"

"Of course not! I just feel a bit sorry for him sometimes."

"Sorry for him? What for?"

"I see Sifiso and the other boys ... you know ... making fun of him sometimes. I don't think Simphiwe likes it. And he's never hurt anyone. Why do they have to be so hard on him?"

"It's because he uses meal vouchers," Lindiwe said simply.

"I know, that's what I mean. Isn't that silly? I mean, he can't help that, can he? What if we ever ... like ... oh, never mind." Whitney looked away and tried to swallow away a lump that had formed in her throat.

Lindiwe did not see it, but she noticed a trace of sadness in Whitney's voice. "What's wrong, *ntombi*? What is worrying you?"

Suddenly Whitney could not hold it back any longer and burst into tears.

“It’s my mother ... she ... she’s lost her job,” Whitney sobbed. “I am so worried for her ... for us. How are we going to survive?”

“What? When did this happen? When did you find out about this?”

“Just this morning,” Whitney said, angrily wiping away her tears. She had told herself she would not cry. Her mother needed her to be strong, not to cry about it, she reminded herself. “She was retrenched yesterday, and she cannot even finish this month. One day she still has a job, the next day, you know ... she is sitting at home. It’s ... like ... so unfair!”

Lindiwe tried to comfort her friend. It *was* unfair. She thought about all the challenges her friend had faced. In Grade 7 she’d lost her father to AIDS, leaving Whitney and her mother behind on their own. And she had that terrible experience with Lucky, Lindiwe remembered. Last year they both almost got killed when the two of them had started hanging out with the wrong crowd and got involved with drugs. And now Whitney’s mother had been retrenched and lost her job, through no fault of her own! It did seem at times that life was very unfair.

“Is there anything I can do, Whitney? Maybe I can help in some way. I’m sure my mother won’t mind sending some food to you and your mom. Or whatever.”

“Thanks, Lindiwe. But I don’t think my mother will allow that. She does not like having to rely on other people. She might think that I ... you know ... asked you for food, and that will get her very upset,” Whitney replied.

“Well, what are you going to do? We must think of something.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to think right now. What can I do? I just ... I don’t want to end up like Simphiwe ...”



Whitney’s mother, Mrs Sithelo, quietly took a vacant seat in the waiting area of the local welfare office, SASSA. A sign on the wall indicated what the acronym stood for – the South African Social Security Agency. Above it, there were framed photos of the President and the honourable Minister of Social Development. She looked around at the other people in the

waiting room, and wondered if any of them had also been retrenched recently. There were a couple of women and an elderly gentleman. The old man had his hands folded in his lap and Whitney's mother noticed that they were trembling. She felt sorry for the man and wondered if his hands were shaking from old age, or because he was nervous, as she was. She knew there was no reason to be nervous or intimidated, but she could not help feeling anxious.

This was the first time in her life that Mrs Sithelo had even considered applying for some kind of social grant. She was proud of her husband who had always worked hard to support the family, until his death two years ago. She was proud of herself that she had managed to find a job after she'd been widowed, and continued to support herself and Whitney without any help or welfare, apart from the few months of UIF-money she received from the Unemployment Insurance Fund. She had felt a certain dignity and self-respect at being able to earn her own money and put bread on the table for her family, even after her husband had passed away. When she lost her job, she immediately started looking for other work. She had put off this visit to the welfare office for a couple of weeks, until her money ran out, hoping that she would find a new job quickly and not have to apply for a social grant.

Part of her anxiety was because her sense of dignity was being threatened now, she realised. *No, that's not true*, she told herself. *I still have my dignity. Being retrenched was not my fault. Having to apply for a social grant is not my fault. I have to do what I can to survive and to look after my daughter.* She reminded herself that being poor or unemployed and having to rely on welfare was not something to be ashamed of, and did not affect one's value as a human being. The thought brought back her sense of self-respect and she found herself straightening up a bit.

"Next, please."

When it was her turn, Mrs Sithelo approached the lady at the information desk.

"How can I help you?" the lady asked with a polite smile.

"*Molo* – good morning. I would like some information on how to apply for a grant please."

“What kind of grant, ma’am?”

“Uhm ... I’m not sure, what kind of grants are there? I was retrenched, and now I have no income.”

“Well, let me see, there is an older persons grant, a disability grant, a child-support grant, a foster-child grant, and ... wait, you said you were retrenched?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if you had a job, you should be able to claim from the UIF. But you can’t do that here. Do you know if your employer paid contributions to the Unemployment Insurance Fund?”

“Yes, but I did not work there long enough to build up any benefits, and previously I already claimed UIF-benefits for nine months. I don’t think I can claim again.”

“*Ndiyabona* – I see. So you would like to apply for a grant?”

“Yes, please. From the ones you mentioned, I think the child-support grant. I have one daughter, and my husband has passed away.”

“*Uxolo* – I’m sorry to hear that. The child-support grant might help you, although I must warn you it is not much. How old is your child?” the lady asked with a sincere smile.

“She turned fifteen this year. She is in Grade 9.” Whitney’s mother saw the smile disappear from the woman’s face.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. The child-support grant is only available for children under the age of fifteen.”

Mrs Sithelo’s heart sank. With effort, she kept her voice calm and said, “But I am a single mother with no income. Is there any grant that I can apply for?”

“No, ma’am. Not unless you’re over sixty years old, or disabled, or unless you have children under the age of fifteen. I’m sorry.”

“Okay, *enkosi* – thank you.” Mrs Sithelo did not allow the disappointment to show on her face as she turned away from the counter. A feeling of hopelessness came over her but she refused to let it take hold. She clung to a faint ray of hope in her heart, like a single star in a dark sky. She began to pray quietly as she walked back to the taxi rank. She did not know what else she could do. Tomorrow she would continue looking for another job,

but work was scarce. The economy was bad – many companies had closed down or retrenched staff, so there were many people who would be trying to find work. *Oh God, please help us now. Please provide for us,* she prayed.