



Chapter One

NALEDI'S PLAN

NALEDI AND TIRO were worried. Their baby sister Dineo was ill, very ill. For three days now, Nono their granny had been trying to cool her fever with damp cloths placed on her little head and body. Mmangwane[1], their aunty, made her take sips of water, but still their sister lay hot and restless, crying softly at times.

"Can't we take Dineo to the hospital?" Naledi begged, but Nono said Dineo was much too sick to be carried that far. The only hospital was many kilometres away, and Naledi also knew they had no money to pay a doctor to visit them. No one in the village had that much money.

[1] "little mother" in Tswana

"If only Mma[1] was here," Naledi wished over and over as she and Tiro walked down to the village tap with their empty buckets. She clutched tightly at the coins in her hand.

Each morning the children had to pass the place of graves on their way to buy the day's water and only last week another baby in the village had died. It was always scary seeing the little graves, but especially this fresh one now.

As they came nearer, Naledi fixed her eyes on the ground ahead, trying not to look, trying not to think. But it was no use. She just couldn't stop herself thinking of her own little sister being lowered into a hole in the ground.

Finally Naledi could stand it no longer. When they had returned with the water, she called Tiro to the back of the house and spoke bluntly.

"We must get Mma, or Dineo is going to die!"

"But how?" Tiro was bewildered. Their mother worked and lived in Johannesburg, more than 300 kilometres away.

"We can get to the big road and walk," Naledi replied calmly.

[1] "mother" in Tswana

It was the school holidays now, but in term-time it took the children more than an hour to walk to school each day, so they were used to walking. Naledi wasn't going to let herself think how much longer it would take to get to Johannesburg.

However, Tiro was not so sure.

"But Nono doesn't want us to worry Mma and I know she won't let us go!"

"That's just it," Naledi retorted quickly. "Nono and Mmangwane keep saying Dineo will be better soon. You heard them talking last night. They say they don't want to send Mma a telegram and frighten her. But what if they wait and it's too late?"

Tiro thought for a moment.

"Can't we send Mma a telegram?"

"How can we if we haven't the money? And if we borrow some, Nono will hear about it and be very cross with us."

It was clear that Naledi had made up her mind – and Tiro knew his sister. She was four years older than him, already thirteen, and once she had decided something, that was that.

So Tiro gave up reasoning.

The children went to find Naledi's friend Poleng, and explained. Poleng was very surprised but agreed to help. She would tell Nono once the children had gone and she also promised to help their granny, bringing the water and doing the other jobs.

"How will you eat on the way?" Poleng asked.

Tiro looked worried, but Naledi was confident. "Oh, we'll find something."

Poleng told them to wait and ran into her house, returning soon with a couple of sweet potatoes and a bottle of water. The children thanked her. She was indeed a good friend.

Before they could go, Naledi had to get the last letter Mma had sent, so they would know where to look for her in the big city. Slipping into the house, Naledi took the letter quietly from the tin without Nono or Mmangwane noticing. Both were busy with Dineo as Naledi slipped out again.