

# Journey to Jo'burg

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## Chapter Eight POLICE

IT WAS RUSH-HOUR when they got on the train to Soweto and the children clung on tightly to Grace. There was no sitting space and it felt as if all their breath was being squeezed out of them. Grown-up bodies pressed in from above and all around them. Some people laughed, some people swore and others kept silent, as the train shook and lurched on its way.

At each station the crowd heaved towards the carriage door, people urgently pushing their way through. Naledi and Tiro tried to press backwards to stay close to Grace.

But in a sudden surge at one of the stations, they found themselves being carried forwards, hurling out on to the platform. Desperately they tried to reach back to the open door, but passengers were still coming out, although the train was already beginning to move on. Naledi was just able to see Grace wedged inside. She was trying to get out, but the train was on its way! Naledi and Tiro looked at each other in dismay. What now?

Everyone was walking towards the stairs which led to a bridge over the railway line. Soon the platform would be empty and the guard would see them. No tickets, no money, no idea of how they could find Grace. They would have to wait until she came back to get them, yet there was nowhere to hide on the platform.

20 "Let's go and look from the bridge," Naledi suggested.

Suddenly, without any warning, there was a commotion up ahead. Three figures in uniform stood at the top of the stairs.

Police!

People began turning around and coming rapidly back down. Some began running along the platform towards a high barbed-wire fence at the other end. The runners leapt at the fence and scrambled over it.

Others jumped down to the track, sprinted over the railway lines and clambered up to the opposite platform. But just as they got there, more policemen appeared on that side.

"Where can we go?" Tiro urgently tugged at his sister's hand.

"We'll have to slip past them," she whispered, pulling him towards the stairs.

Some people were feeling into pockets, others frantically searching through bags.

Pass raid!

A man was protesting loudly that he had left his pass at home. It would only take two minutes to get it. The police could come and see, or someone could call his child to bring it. He cried out his address, once, twice... Slap!

"*Houjou bek*" barked the white officer in charge. His blue eyes stared coldly as a black policeman pushed the man against the -wall.

40 One at a time people were pulled forwards to be checked. When a boy said that he wasn't yet sixteen, the policeman just yelled that he was a "liar" and a "loafer". Tiro felt his heart freeze, but the boy didn't cry. Instead his eyes seemed to have fire in them as he was handcuffed.

A voice in the crowd shouted, "Shame! Locking up children!"

As the muttering grew louder, a woman spotted Naledi and Tiro and screamed, "You'll say these kids are sixteen next!"

The white officer took a threatening step forwards. He looked murderous. Then, glancing at the children, he made a sign with his hand for them to go through.

"We can't stay on the bridge while the police are here," panted Naledi when they had got past. From the bridge they could see the road outside the railway station. Next to a large van were more police. An old woman was being pushed inside the van. Tiro looked back at the people in handcuffs on the bridge.

"Why don't we run and call the child to bring his father's pass? We heard the address so we can find it."

"Let's hurry then!" agreed Naledi.

Once past the police van, they asked a lady selling apples at the roadside to point out the way. The children weaved in and out of people as they ran along the stony road, between rows of grey block houses all looking exactly alike. No great leafy trees here, only grey smoke settling everywhere.

60 When they reached the right house, they found a boy struggling with a heavy tub. As soon as he understood their message, he dashed into the house, and a minute later came rushing out with a book in his hand.

All three raced back down the road, but just as they came in sight of the station, there was the big police van pulling off.

The boy shouted at it as it sped past them, carrying away his father, he flung the pass down, picked up a stone and let it fly at the van. The van swung round the corner, the stone just grazing the mudguard.

"I'll burn this one day!" stormed the boy, picking up his father's pass. "How can our parents put up with it?" There was fury in his voice. Then it became gentler. "Thanks anyway for trying... I must go and tell my mother now."

The children stood silently watching as he walked back home.

"Naledi! Tiro!"

Startled they looked around to find from where the voice was coming. It sounded quite far off.

Looking up towards the railway bridge, they saw Grace waving. Quickly they ran back to the station.

Grace came down with their tickets to get them through, it was a relief to be with her again.

"This time I'm really going to hold on to you," she told them, taking each firmly by the hand.

"Do you know what happened to us, Mma?" Tiro was anxious to tell Grace all.