

# THE PROMISE



WRITTEN BY GLENDA SALMON  
ILLUSTRATED BY JINNY HEATH

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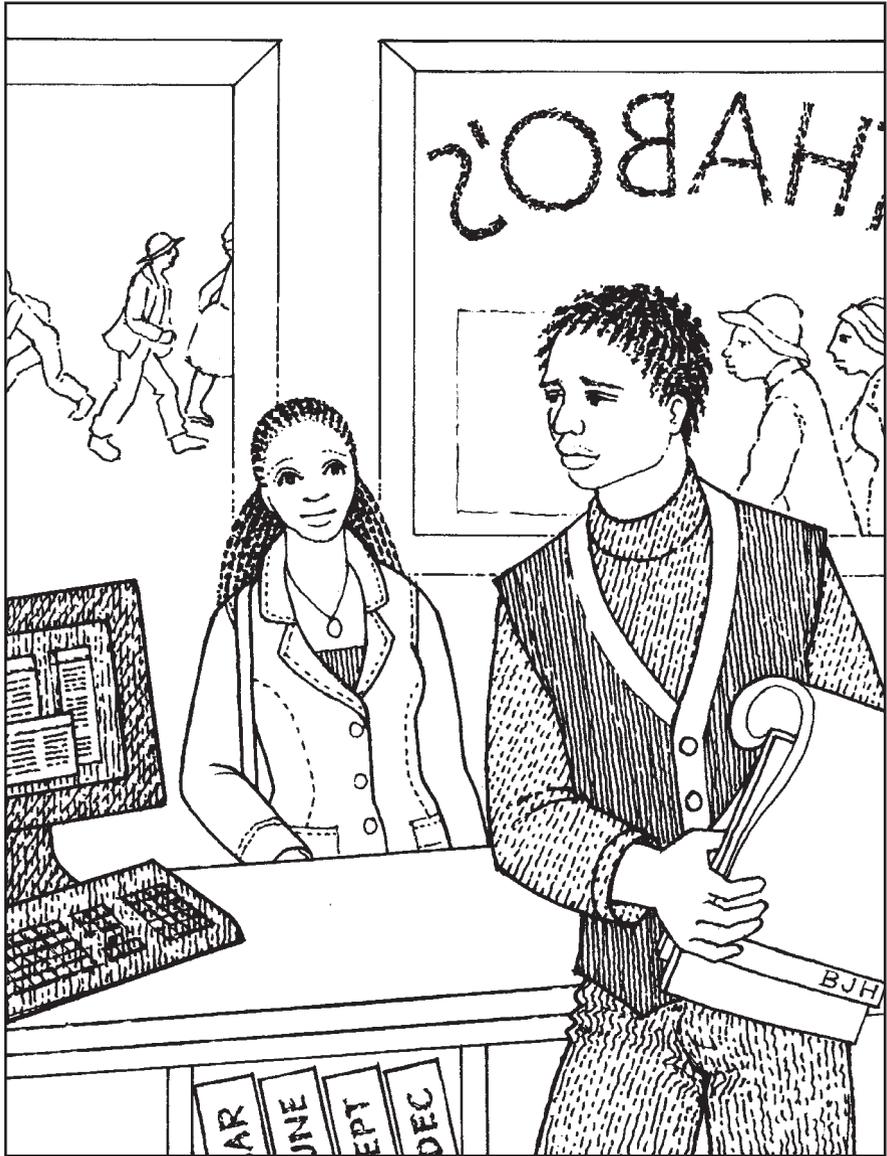


Zinzi tidied her denim jacket once more and smoothed down her skirt. Then she took a deep breath, turned and walked towards Themba's Corner Store. Today was the first day.

Themba Gumede looked up from the till where he was counting out the money. His eyes travelled up the slim legs and settled on a nervous, smiling face.

"Hello," she said softly, "I'm Zinzi. I'm starting work today. Remember me?"

"Oh, yes." Now Themba was smiling too. "Come round to the back of the counter. My shop is so busy these days that I really need an assistant."



Two hours later Zinzi and Themba were working side by side, unpacking cans of fruit.

Customers were slow this morning, so Themba was showing Zinzi how to display the stock.

"If the cans are piled up like this," he showed her, "the customers will notice them more."

Themba smiled to himself. He was lucky! His new assistant was not only pretty, she was quick to learn too.



That evening as Zinzi washed her mother and helped her get ready for bed, she told her all about her day at work.

"Ma, it's a busy store. I can learn a lot. Themba is kind and he likes to help me."

She rubbed soothing lotion onto her mother's aching legs. She felt sad that Mama was too old to go with her to see the store and to meet Themba.

Mama said. "Just remember, my girl, your first job is to look after me."

"I'll never leave you, Mama," Zinzi promised her.

But her thoughts had already shifted to the tall man with shining eyes and a wide smile.



The days passed quickly.

Themba learned that he could depend on Zinzi to help the customers and give the correct change.

Zinzi's heart beat fast when his large, strong hands lifted the heavy boxes and placed them just where she could reach them.

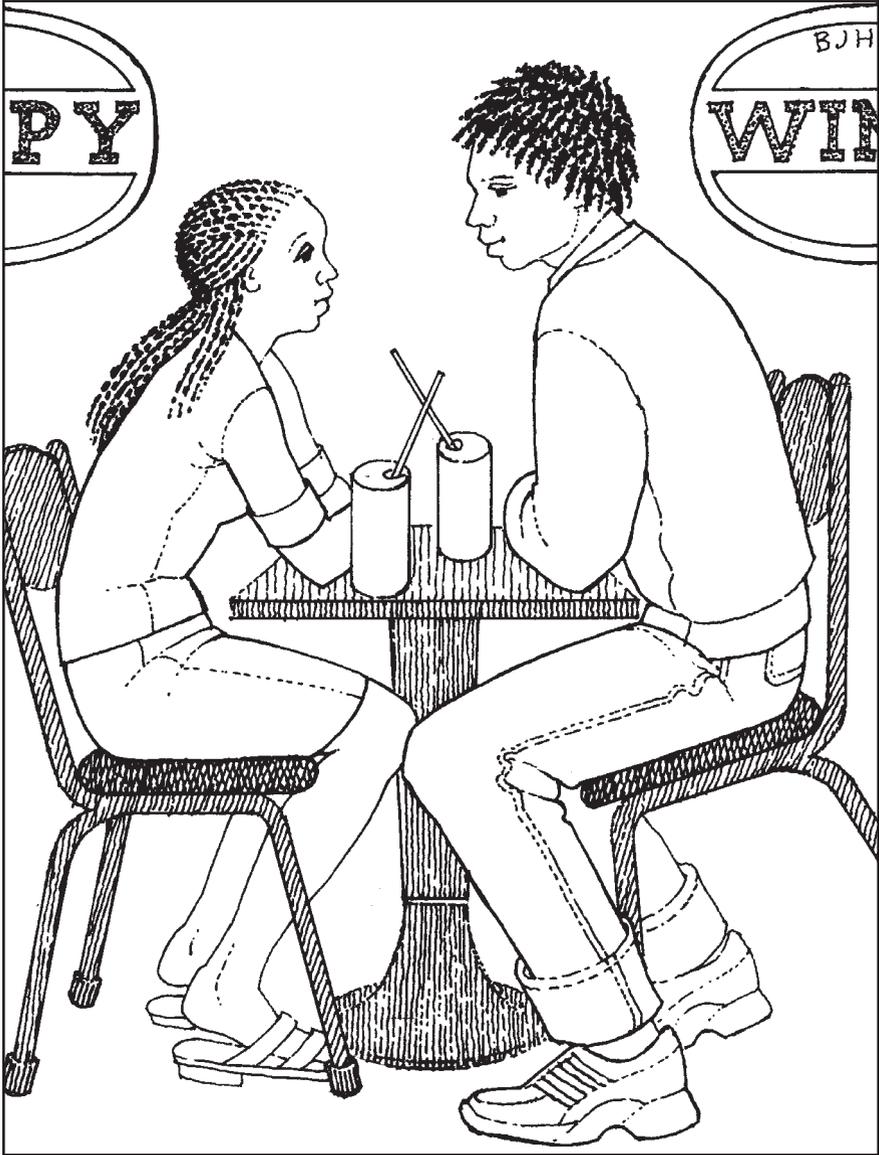
She waited for that moment when he would lean close to her, smiling.



One evening as they locked up the store together, Themba cleared his throat. "Zinzi," he said, "why don't we go for a Coke tomorrow after work?"

So that's what they did. And once a week, every week, they went for a coke after work. And they talked and talked.

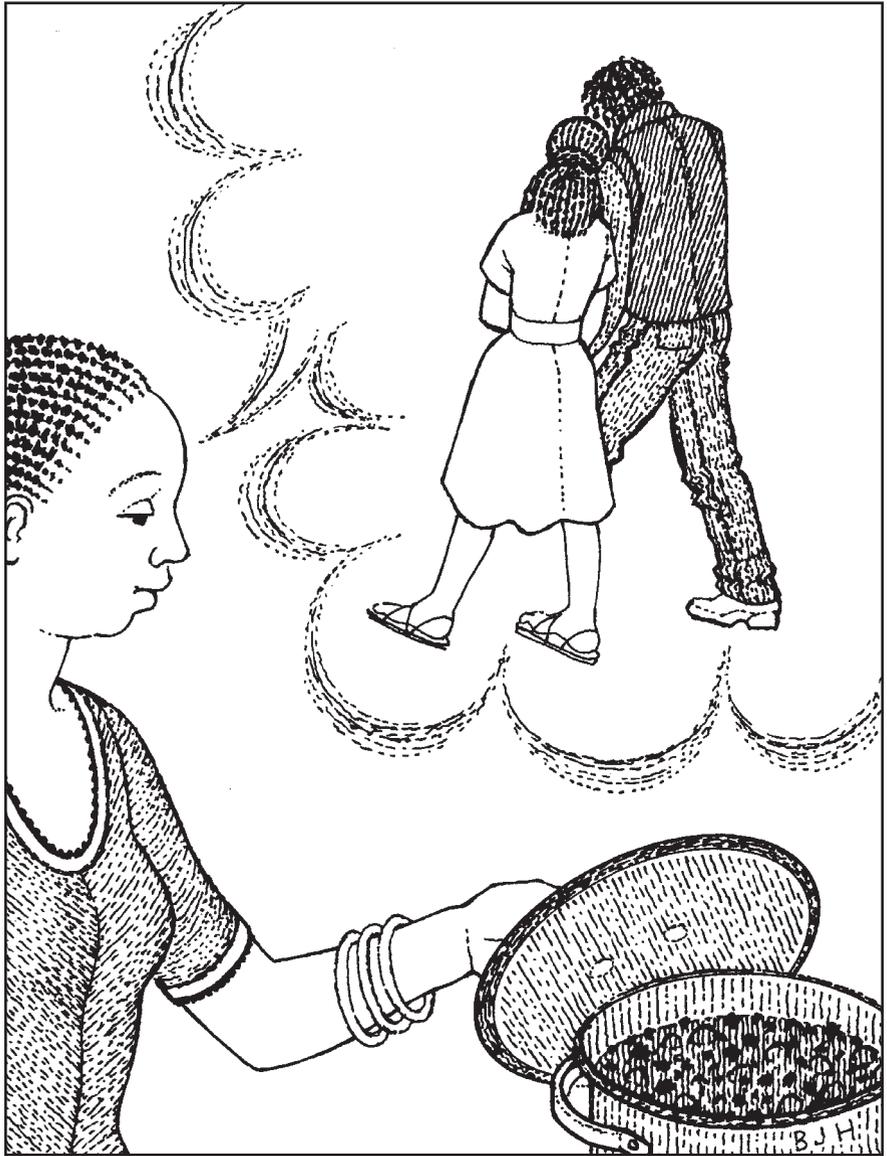
Mama thought the store was staying open late once a week. Zinzi felt guilty, but she knew that Mama wouldn't understand.



Mama told her often, "Zinzi, I am the only one who really loves you. I have always looked after you. Now it is your turn to look after me."

Zinzi didn't talk about Themba any more. She didn't tell Mama that Themba had the softest, sweetest lips in the world.

She didn't tell her that now they walked along the pavement together, holding hands, their shoulders touching.



Sometimes Themba saw the shadow in her eyes. He asked, "What is it? I can see you are sad."

Then she would shake her head and find some work on the other side of the store.

She could not tell him about her promise to Mama, "I will never leave you, Mama, like Papa and the others did."

Mama asked her often, "Zinzi, do you remember your promise to me? You will always stay with me and look after me?"

Zinzi would just smile and pat Mama's shoulder.



One Wednesday afternoon Themba drew her close to him. He looked into her dark eyes. Then he kissed her gently.

"I'm going out for a while," he told her. "When I get back ..." His eyes danced and he laughed happily, "Be ready for a big surprise!"

All afternoon as she served the customers and packed away the stock, Zinzi wondered about the surprise.



"When will Themba be back?" she thought. She looked at her watch yet again.

Deep in her heart she had a secret wish. Her heart beat faster. She held out her left hand and imagined a sparkling ring on her fourth finger.

But what about Mama? Themba was a good man. He was kind to the customers, letting them off when they were maybe a few cents short.

When she told him about Mama he would understand. He would say, "There will always be a home for Mama with us."

Five o'clock came, but there was no Themba. Zinzi locked up the shop on her own. She looked nervously up and down the street. With a heavy heart she went home to Mama.



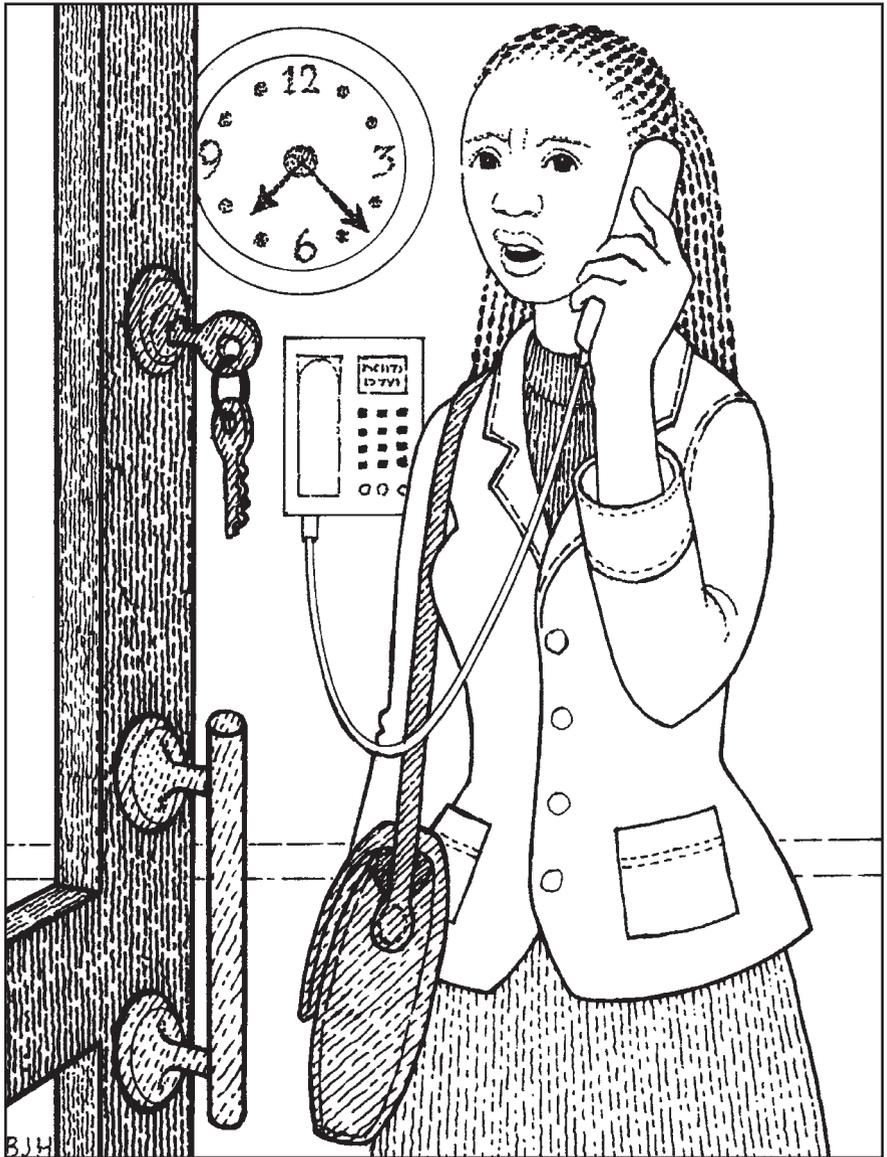
On Thursday morning Zinzi arrived at work early. She was very excited. She knew Themba would be waiting for her ... with the surprise.

She pushed against the door of the shop, thinking that Themba was inside. But the door was still locked.

Zinzi searched through her bag for her shop keys. A cold fear began to settle over her.

She heard the phone ringing inside the shop. She quickly unlocked the door, ran to the phone and lifted the handset.

Her throat felt dry and her legs were weak as she answered, "Themba's Corner Store, good morning."



"This is Themba's brother speaking from the General Hospital. I am phoning about Themba. There's been a bad accident ... I am sorry to have to tell you, he didn't have a chance. He was killed instantly."

Zinzi's body slipped slowly to the floor. She sat there dry-eyed for some time, limp like a rag doll.

After what seemed like a long time she stood up carefully. She closed the door behind her, locked it and walked back to the taxi rank.

Then she sat on a bench and waited. The day passed. She didn't notice. People stared at her. She didn't notice.

Late that afternoon, Zinzi stood up and joined the queue.



That evening Mama asked yet again, "Zinzi, do you promise you'll always stay with me?"

Zinzi looked at her for a long time. Then her face softened. The tears were just behind her eyes, but they didn't spill over.

"Yes," she answered, "I will never leave you."

The End



## Thanks

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## About the author



Glenda Salmon is a wife, mother, teacher, editor – and now a writer. Through reading her mind has been opened to so many new places and ideas.

“One of my most precious memories is of my mother lying on her bed between my brother and I and reading to us. I started reading to my own children when they were just a few months old and today all three of them love reading.”

## The Promise

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