

Chapter One

Mechanics Can Cook

Precious Ramotswe, creator and owner of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, Botswana's only detective agency for the problems of ladies, and of others, had never studied business management. She knew that it was common for people who ran their own businesses to take courses on topics such as stocktaking and cash flow, but she did not feel this was necessary in her case. Mind you, the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency had never made a profit, although in recent years it had not made a loss either, for Mma Ramotswe had managed to juggle income and expenditure in such a way as to end up breaking even – provided that you practised what a book-keeper friend of hers called, with some admiration, *Optimistic Accounting*.

It was not that she was averse to taking advice. A few days ago she had come across a business magazine that had been left

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behind in the garage by one of her husband's customers, and had read it from cover to cover, over a pot of redbush tea and a large doughnut. This magazine had been full of helpful articles with titles such as: 'Making the most of your human resources' and 'How to maximise growth in difficult economic circumstances'. There was also a column called *Dr Profit's Business Clinic*, to which readers could write with their business problems and receive free advice from Dr Profit himself, a man who was pictured wearing a large square pair of glasses and a broad smile – the look of somebody, she thought, who was probably always in healthy profit.

In the issue perused by Mma Ramotswe, one concerned reader raised a problem connected with an awkward employee – 'Can one fire an employee who smells bad?' Mma Ramotswe read this question with some interest – although it had no bearing on her own business (Mma Makutsi was always well turned-out and took, she believed, two baths a day) – before turning the page and seeing an article on the maximising of growth. 'A business that isn't expanding will actually be contracting,' wrote the author. 'That rule has been shown to be true time after time. How many businessmen are there who sit and contemplate the ruins of a once-profitable business simply because they forgot to expand?'

Mma Ramotswe frowned. The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency was exactly the same size as it had been when she had founded it. It had one owner and one employee, one vehicle, a filing cabinet, a kettle, two teapots and three mugs. There was also one typewriter, which was operated by Mma Makutsi, and one box of stationery. These assets had been there more or less from the beginning, although the second teapot was certainly a later addition. Did that count as growth? Could you say that your business had expanded if it had gone from owning one teapot to two?

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Somehow she thought that Dr Profit would answer both those questions with a shake of his head. Of course, she herself had expanded in girth since the agency was founded, but she did not think that such a form of growth was what the author of the article had in mind.

She thought of Mr J. L. B. Matekoni's business, Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, with which she shared premises, and wondered how it would fare against this rather unsettling test. Again, it was difficult to see any significant expansion. Mr J. L. B. Matekoni still had his two apprentices, although one of them, Fanwell, was now a qualified mechanic. That might count as growth of a sort, she supposed, but it was probably cancelled out by reports that Charlie, the other young man employed in the garage, had, by all accounts, become rather worse at his job. Certainly there did not seem to be any more customers than there had been in the past; indeed, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni had complained only a few weeks previously that there seemed to be fewer and fewer cars being brought in for service.

'People have to go to those big garages these days,' he said. 'They have to do that because their cars are full of computers, and ordinary mechanics don't have all the right wires and things for these clever cars. What can you do if you look at the engine and see that it is full of electric wiring and computer chips? Where's the carburettor? Where's the distributor? Where's the starter motor?'

He had looked at Mma Ramotswe reproachfully, as if she had somehow mislaid these various parts.

She sighed. 'Everything is too complicated these days, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. Everything is made to be thrown away rather than fixed. It is all very wasteful.'

She warmed to her theme. 'When I think of what we made do with in the past, it makes me very sad. If you found a hole in a

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sock, you darned it. We were taught how to do that at school. And if your collar frayed, then you had it turned. If the handle came off a cup, you glued it back on.'

'Yes,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. 'You never threw things away. Nowadays, if something goes wrong, you throw it out of the window, just like that.'

'And people too,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'If you suddenly decide you don't like somebody, you throw them out of the window too. That's what wives do to their husbands these days.'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni looked concerned. 'Out of the window, Mma?'

'Not really out of the window,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'I just use that as an expression, Rra. And it's not just wives who throw their husbands out of the window when they get bored with them; it's men too. In fact, there are more wives thrown out of the window than men, I think.'

'Either way, it's not very good,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. 'Nobody should be thrown out of the window, Mma.'

They had lapsed into silence as they contemplated, in their individual ways, this decline in civility. Mma Ramotswe was not given to taking a gloomy view of things, but she felt nonetheless that there were respects in which she would find it very difficult to explain to her father, the late Obed Ramotswe, what had happened in the years since his death. It was true that Botswana had made great progress and remained a country to be proud of, but still, there were changes that it was hard to see in a positive light. She imagined walking with him through their home village, Mochudi, and showing him the improvements: the numerous public water taps, the improved sewage system, the new businesses that had sprung up. But what would she say when they were passed by a group of schoolchildren and not one of them greeted him, as it was polite, and customary, for children to do

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when they passed an old man? How would she explain to him that nowadays many children did not greet strangers? She saw him wearing his old hat – the hat that he had worn for year upon year and was so familiar to her, and so beloved. She wondered what he would say when he saw men walking about either with no hat on their heads – even under the midday sun – or with unusual new hats, or even caps with those curious visors in the front, but deliberately worn back-to-front. Where, he would ask, have all these new hats come from, and why did none of these hats seem to have *experience*, that indefinable quality that hats acquire after they have been worn day after day, in all weather, for year after year?

And yet, in spite of all these rather unsettling developments, there were some things that did not change. Mr J. L. B. Matekoni had not changed in the slightest – and never would, she thought. Charlie did not change either; one might have thought that he would become more mature as the years went past, but this was not the case. At the age of sixteen, when he had first started his apprenticeship, he had spent his lunch hours sitting on an upturned oil drum, ogling girls as they walked past to catch one of the minibuses plying their trade along the Tlokweng Road. Now, at the age of twenty-whatever-it-was, he still sat on an oil drum – she believed it was exactly the same oil drum – and watched young women walk past.

Of course, she thought that Charlie might try to justify this if she were to reproach him, and to argue that there was nothing wrong in spending his time in this way. She could just imagine the conversation . . .

‘So, Mma? What’s wrong with taking a rest over the lunch hour? I work hard all morning and then I sit and recover my energy. What’s wrong with that?’

‘Nothing,’ she would say. ‘There is nothing wrong with taking

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a break. But what's the point of watching girls for hour after hour?'

He would defend himself: 'But, Mma, I didn't ask them to walk along the Tlokweng Road. I didn't ask them to wear those dresses and walk like that. They are the ones you should be criticising, Mma, not me.'

It would be hopeless, and even if she turned her attention to the drum, and suggested that he sit somewhere else for a change, she would get nowhere.

'But, Mma, why change your drum if you find one that's comfortable? Why not stick to the one you like?'

No, in a world of flux and rearrangement, both Charlie and Mr J. L. B. Matekoni were as fixed in their positions as the stars in the night sky. And the same might have been said of Mma Makutsi . . . But now there was an air of uncertainty surrounding Mma Makutsi and her plans, and Mma Ramotswe was unsure how to resolve it. The problem was that Mma Makutsi was pregnant, but seemed to be quite unwilling to talk about the implications of this for the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. Naturally Mma Ramotswe was pleased that her assistant was expecting a baby, but how much greater would this pleasure have been if she had plans in place for the inevitable maternity leave. But no such plans had been mentioned – not one.

Of course, Mma Ramotswe and Mr J. L. B. Matekoni had discussed the issue many times themselves, as they did that evening some months previously when he had first raised it with her. They were sitting on their veranda in that companionable manner that may come upon a married couple at the end of a day's work, when they are together again and watching the sun sink behind the acacia trees and the untidy telephone wires of their neighbour's garden. They had been talking about nothing in particular,

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with few matters that were likely to disturb the peace of this quiet half-hour before supper.

‘I wonder when our neighbour is going to tidy up those wires,’ mused Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. ‘You’d think that he’d get in touch with the telephone people and get them to come round and sort things out. I shouldn’t be surprised to find out that half those wires are dead – just ancient wires from the past.’

Mma Ramotswe glanced over the fence at the untidy cluster of wires attached to the wooden telephone pole. She felt that Mr J. L. B. Matekoni was probably right; the country was full of wires that might have done something important in the past but had long since stopped being used. She imagined somehow listening in to one of these wires and hearing the echoes of some forgotten exchange between people that had taken place many years before but still echoed through those old abandoned wires. One might hear a conversation that took place in 1962, perhaps, when Botswana was still the Bechuanaland Protectorate, and when cattle were the main industry and there were no diamonds. It might be a conversation between somebody in Lobatse driving up to see somebody in Gaborone and not requiring any directions because there were only a couple of roads. ‘You take the right-hand road. You know the right-hand road?’

Silence, empty silence, and then a faint, tinny voice ringing down the line. ‘I know that road, Rra. That is the road my grandfather lives on.’

The voice of the dead – you could hear them still, if you listened hard enough. Late people still talking, like children after lights-out: the faint, distant voices of our ancestors.

And then, as if he had already forgotten about the telephone wires, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni suddenly said, ‘Mma Makutsi?’

It was a question rather than a pronouncement, and Mma

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Ramotswe waited a moment or two before answering, in case the point of the question might be expanded upon. But it was not.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Mma Makutsi: what of her, Rra?’

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni shrugged. ‘Nothing, Mma.’ But it was not nothing. ‘I just happened to be wondering whether there was anything . . . different about her?’ He paused. ‘Now that she’s married, you see.’

She looked at him, and he turned away, embarrassed. ‘No, I don’t mean . . .’

‘Of course not. But it is true, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni: marriage changes people. For some people it can be quite a surprise.’

‘Yes, I know that, but there is something about Mma Makutsi I would like to raise, Mma – if you don’t mind.’

Mma Ramotswe looked at him expectantly. ‘Please do, Rra. We have all the time in the world.’

He frowned. ‘But we don’t have all the time in the world, Mma Ramotswe . . .’

She gently encouraged him. ‘No, of course we don’t, but we certainly have enough time for you to say something.’

He looked out over the garden, out towards the mopipi tree of which Mma Ramotswe was so proud. Not everyone had a mopipi tree in the garden and she had been solicitous of its welfare, giving it more water than a tree might otherwise expect.

‘A question,’ he said. ‘When did Mma Makutsi get married? Was it seven months ago? Eight?’

Mma Ramotswe did a quick calculation. ‘It was just after the first rains, wasn’t it? Which makes it about ten or eleven months ago.’

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni looked thoughtful. ‘Then that is the answer,’ he said.

‘The answer to what? To when she got married?’

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He shook his head. 'Pregnant, Mma. Mma Makutsi must be pregnant.'

It was the simple conviction with which he spoke that struck Mma Ramotswe. It was as if Mr J. L. B. Matekoni had said something as obvious and uncomplicated as: 'This car needs new brakes' or 'Your problem is in the fuel supply'.

She was surprised that he had noticed. She had very recently seen the signs, but men often did not spot these things. 'I think she probably is,' she said. 'But I've decided that it is better to leave it up to her to tell me. I'm sure she will.'

'She may think you can't tell,' he said. 'Those dresses she wears are like tents. Anything could be happening under there. She could even have several people living under those dresses for all we know.'

Mma Ramotswe laughed. 'But it's odd that she hasn't mentioned it yet. Why would she not have told me before this?'

He shrugged. 'Sometimes people don't want other people to know because they are worried that everything might not go well. Then everybody ends up disappointed.'

Mma Ramotswe had another theory. 'I think she's worried about asking for time off to have the baby. She's very conscientious, you know. I think she may have been putting it off because of that.'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni listened, but he wondered whether Mma Makutsi might not for some other reason be trying to hide her situation. He remembered a case of concealed pregnancy that had occurred in the family of one of his clients. 'There is a man with an old Land Cruiser,' he said. He often identified people by their cars and Mma Ramotswe was quite used to this. 'This man with the Land Cruiser – a very reliable car, you know, Mma, although it's now almost twenty-five years old – anyway, this man told me one day that his daughter had had a baby. And you know what, Mma Ramotswe?'

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She waited for him to continue.

‘You know what, Mma? This daughter – the daughter of the man—’

‘Yes, Rra, the daughter of the man with the Land Cruiser . . .’

‘Yes, that man: this daughter of his said one day that she wanted to go into town to see a friend and so she asked her father whether he could take her in his Land Cruiser.’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, she got into the Land Cruiser and they set off. They lived on a farm out Tlokweg way – about half an hour from town. Anyway, there they were in the Land Cruiser and suddenly she started to cry out. Her father thought it was because the road was very bumpy; their track had been washed away in places by the rains and there were big holes in it – big ones, Mma. That Land Cruiser’s suspension . . .’ He shook his head, whether in admiration of the suspension’s capacity for endurance or sympathy for its ordeal, Mma Ramotswe was uncertain.

She knew what was coming. ‘She was about to have a baby?’

She noticed his disappointment that she had guessed, and so she quickly said, ‘Of course, it must have been a big surprise for him, Rra. I normally wouldn’t have thought of that.’

‘The baby was born in the Land Cruiser,’ said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. ‘In the back.’ He paused. ‘They are big vehicles, of course.’

‘That sort of thing is quite common among teenage girls,’ said Mma Ramotswe. ‘They don’t want to tell their parents and everybody just thinks they are putting on a bit of weight. Then suddenly there is another mouth to feed.’ She paused. ‘But Mma Makutsi is not a teenager. She is a responsible woman and she has a good husband to support her and any number of babies. Her case is quite different.’

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‘She is definitely pregnant,’ said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, and then added, mischievously: ‘I must say, Mma, I would have thought a great detective would have worked that out much earlier than this.’

She took this remark in good humour. ‘Actually, I did, Rra. I have suspected it for a little while but I have not wanted to embarrass her. And then . . .’ She paused before continuing. ‘I am not a great detective, Rra. I am a person who runs a detective agency – that is all.’

He reached out to touch her gently on the arm. ‘You are the greatest detective in the history of Botswana,’ he said. ‘I know that. The whole world knows that.’

She thanked him. It was now time for her to go into the kitchen and prepare their meal. You could be a great detective, but you still had to cook supper.

She looked at Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. He had never cooked anything in all the time they had been married, except on one occasion when he had tried to bake a cake and had failed miserably.

‘Would you like to cook supper one day, Rra?’ she asked.

He stared at her with incredulity. ‘What was that, Mma? I thought you asked me whether I would like to cook supper.’

‘I did,’ she said.

His jaw dropped. ‘I am a mechanic, Mma . . .’

‘Mechanics can cook. Ladies can fix cars. It’s different these days, Rra. Men can do things. Women can do things. There is no work that is reserved just for one sort of person. Not any more.’

He looked injured. ‘But what would I cook?’

‘Anything,’ she said. ‘The same things that I cook.’

His injured expression now turned to one of misery. ‘But I do not think that it would taste very good, Mma.’

She spoke gently. ‘We can talk about it some other time. I like to cook for you, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. And for the children too.’

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I am teaching Motholeli to cook now and she is getting better and better. It is not a chore.'

'And I would teach Puso how to cook,' muttered Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. 'If I knew how, that is . . .'

Mma Ramotswe smiled at this. 'Yes, it is best to learn first, then teach.'

'And I like to eat the food you cook, Mma. I shall try to help you more. Maybe I could—'

She stopped him. 'You have always been very good with the washing up,' she said. 'Many men are good at that.' She paused. 'If they remember, that is.'

As it happened, Mma Makutsi did bring up the issue of her pregnancy only a few days after this conversation. She broached the subject quite casually, during a silence in the office while they were waiting for the kettle to boil.

'I should tell you that I am pregnant,' she announced. 'I have been pregnant now for many months.'

Mma Ramotswe clapped her hands with delight. 'I thought you might be, Mma. This is very good news.'

Mma Makutsi accepted the congratulations with due solemnity. 'We are both very pleased. Phuti is excited.'

'It is natural that he is excited,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'Men like these things just as much as women – mostly.' She paused. 'Well, not always, but very often.'

What Mma Makutsi said next rather surprised her. 'I don't want to talk about it, Mma. I hope you do not mind, but I do not wish to talk about something that has not yet happened – in case it might not happen.'

'I can understand that, Mma,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'But it's good to plan . . .'

Mma Makutsi shook her head. 'I do not want to discuss it.'

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Things can go wrong if you discuss things before it is time to discuss them.'

It was clear that there was to be no further conversation about pregnancy and no mention, therefore, of the issue of maternity leave.

Later that day, when Mma Ramotswe told Mr J. L. B. Matekoni about this exchange, he shook his head. 'You won't get her to change; you know what she's like.'

'But how can I make arrangements for cover while she is away?' asked Mma Ramotswe. 'I have no idea when she wants to go off, and for how long. She hasn't even told me when the baby is due, and I can't raise it with her.'

'You will have to wait,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. 'It is very inconsiderate of her, but there we are. You cannot change people who will not be changed – and that is probably even more true when they're pregnant.'

Over the months that followed, Mma Makutsi's pregnancy became increasingly obvious, but her disinclination to discuss maternity leave remained.

'It's like having an elephant in the room and not mentioning it,' Mma Ramotswe said to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni.

'That is a very funny remark, Mma Ramotswe,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, adding: 'In the circumstances.'