



CHAPTER  
FIVE

**T**HAT NIGHT, as Precious lay on her sleeping mat, waiting for her father to come in and tell her a story – as he always did – she thought about what had happened at school. She did not like the thought of there being a thief at school – thieves spoiled everything: they made people suspicious of one another, which was not a good thing at all. People should be able to trust other people, without worrying about whether they would steal their possessions.

But even if she did not like the thought of there being a thief, neither did she like the thought that an innocent person might be suspected. She did not know the boy whom

Sepo had pointed out – she had seen him, of course, and she knew his name, Poloko (PO-LOW-KO), but she did not know very

# PO ♦ LOW ♦ KO

much about him. And she certainly did not know that he was a thief.

This is Poloko.



You'll see that he was a rather round boy. If you saw walking along the street, you might think that perhaps that was a boy who ate a little bit too much. And if you got to know him a bit better, then you might be sure that this was so and that those bulges in his pockets were indeed sweets – a large number of them. But just because somebody has lots of sweets does *not* mean

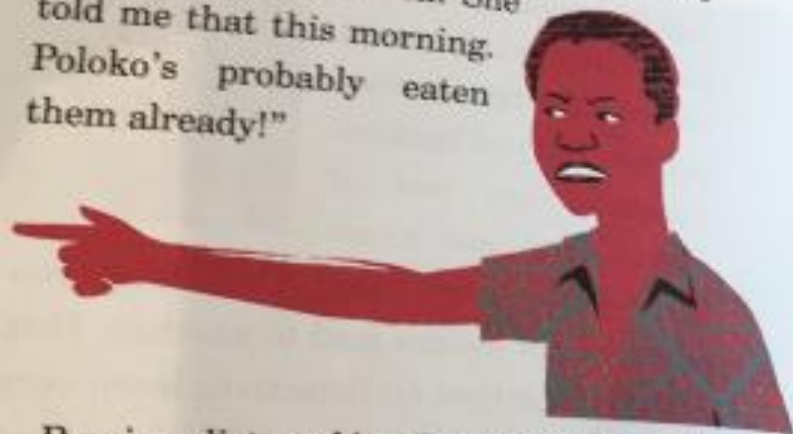


that he has stolen them. One thing, you see, does not always lead to another. That is something that all detectives learn very early in their career, and Precious had already learned it. And she was only seven.

The next day at school, when they were copying out letters from the board, Sepo, who was sitting on the bench next to Precious, whispered, "Have you told anybody about the thief?"

Precious shook her head. "We don't know who it is. How can I tell the teacher about something I don't know?"

Sepo looked cross. "But I know who it is," he said. "And Big Mma Molipi told me that somebody has stolen three iced buns from her kitchen! She told me that this morning. Poloko's probably eaten them already!"



Precious listened in silence. She thought it a very unfair thing to say and she was about to tell Sepo that when the teacher gave them a severe look. So Precious just said, "Shh!" instead and left it at that. But later, when the children were let out to play while the teachers drank their tea,

Sepo and Tapiwa came up to her and said they wanted to speak to her.

"Are you going to help us deal with the thief?" Tapiwa said.

Precious tried to look surprised. She knew what they meant, but she did not want to help them without any proof. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said. "How can we deal with the thief if we don't know who it is?"

"But we do know," said Sepo. "It's Poloko, that's who it is."

Precious stared at Sepo. "You don't know that," she said. "So I'm not going to help you until you have some proof."

Sepo smiled. "All right," he said. "If you want some proof, we'll get it for you. We're going to look at his hands."

Precious wondered what he meant by that, but before she had the time to ask him, Sepo and Tapiwa ran off to the other side of the playground where they had



seen Poloko sitting on a rock. Precious ran behind them – not because she wanted to help them, but because she wanted to see what was happening.

“Hold out your hands,” Tapiwa said to Poloko. “Come on. Hold them out.”

Poloko was surprised, but held out his hands. Tapiwa bent down to examine them. After a few moments, she pointed out something to Sepo, and he also bent down to look. Then Tapiwa reached out to feel Poloko’s hands.



“Hah!” she shouted. “It’s just as we thought. Your hands are sticky!”

Poloko tried to say something, but his words were drowned by the shouts of Tapiwa and Sepo. “Thief! Thief!” they cried out. “Thief! Thief!” It was a shrill cry, and it froze Precious’s blood just to hear it. She wondered what it would be like to hear somebody shout that out about you – especially if you were not a thief and never had been.

Precious stood quite still.



The others were now making such a noise that one of the teachers had been alerted and was coming to see what was wrong.

“What’s all this noise?” the teacher asked. “Can’t you children play quietly?”

“We’ve found the thief,” Tapiwa shouted.

“Look, Mma, look! His hands are covered in stickiness. If you want to know where those iced buns are, they’re right there – in Poloko’s stomach!”



