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Opening extract from

Precious and the Zebra Necklace
A New Case for Precious Ramotswe

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THIS IS THE STORY of a girl who was a private detective. Now, you may ask, what is a private detective? Well, a private detective is a person who solves mysteries for other people. So if you or I have something we really want to find out about – maybe a secret of some sort – then we may well ask a private detective to help. That's what they do. Private detectives are very good at finding out things. They look for clues. They ask all sorts of questions. They know just who did what, and when they did it.

This is a picture of a typical private detective, but here is a picture of a rather special private detective. Can you spot the difference? Well done! (And that shows that you might be a bit of a private detective yourself!) One is a woman, and the other is … a girl.

Precious started to be a private detective when she was only nine, which is how old she was when all this happened. She was

just an ordinary girl, who went to school like everybody else, and who had to remember to do her homework and so on. But in her spare time she solved mysteries, and sorted out problems for other people. She enjoyed doing this, as she was good at it, you see, and if you are good at something, then doing it is always fun.

"I like solving mysteries," Precious said to her friends. "And the more mysterious they are, the better!"

This mystery was one of those very mysterious ones, and it all started, as many such mysteries do, in an ordinary way. This is what happened.

Precious lived in Botswana, a country in Africa, and her school was at the top of a hill. Every morning the children lined up outside the classroom before going in for the start of their lessons. To help the teachers count the pupils, everyone in the line called out a number in turn, starting with number 1 and ending with … Well,

they usually ended with number 30, but on this particular morning the last number to be called out was 31. There was a new member of the class, a girl, and her name was Nancy.

"This is your new friend Nancy," announced the teacher once the children had streamed into the classroom. "And now we must find somewhere for her to sit."

Her gaze fell on Precious and the teacher's mind was made up. Precious was a kind girl, and the teacher knew that she would be helpful to somebody who was just starting at a new school.

"Sit over there," she said to Nancy. "You'll look after her, won't you, Precious?"

Precious nodded. She liked the look of the new girl, who had a very friendly smile on her face. Here is a picture of it.

A person who has a smile like that, thought Precious, is bound to be exactly the sort of person you would want as a friend. And that is just what happened. After no more than ten minutes, Precious and Nancy were firm friends. After half an hour, it was as if they had known one another all their lives.

That afternoon, when Precious went home after school, she told her aunt about Nancy, and about how she and Nancy had got on so well. This aunt was now living with Precious and her father, as Precious's own mother was no longer alive, and they needed

somebody to run the house when Precious's father was away working with his cattle. The aunt was a cheerful woman who never seemed to be in a bad mood and was widely known as one of the best cooks in that part of Botswana.

She was also quite good at fixing cars, and at one time or another she had fixed the cars of many of their neighbours. She knew everything – not just how brakes and gearboxes worked, but also about people. That was because everybody was happy to talk to her. There are some people like that, as you know: people like to talk to them *because they listen*. This aunt was a very good listener.

Here is a picture of the aunt making a cake … and here is a picture of her fixing a car. And here is a picture of Precious telling her aunt about the new girl at school, and the aunt is about to turn round and ask, "What did you say her name was, Precious?"

And Precious replied, "She's called

Nancy. And she lives over near the water tower. She pointed the house out to me."

Her aunt nodded. "I know those people," she said. "They have just come here. I forget where they lived before this, but I think it was far away. That little girl has no mother – a bit like you."

"Her mother died?" asked Precious.

The aunt shrugged. "I don't know what happened. But those people have looked after her since she was very small. They are very kind."

That was all that she said about Nancy, and the aunt then went on to talk about a special cake that she was planning to bake. She had been given a large packet of raisins, and raisins were just right for the sort of cake she wanted to make.

Precious agreed. She liked all sorts of cake, but the aunt's cakes were far and away the best she had tasted. Here is a picture of one of them. If you scratch the picture ever so gently with the fingernail

of one of your fingers, you may just be able to get the smell of that cake. The smell is not coming from the page, of course – it's coming from inside your head. Can you smell it? I can – and it smells delicious.