

ANNABELLE SAMI ILLUSTRATED BY DANIELA SOSA

Agent Zaiba INVESTIGATES



THE POISON PLOT

LITTLE TIGER

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For my nanny, who taught me how to bake and gave me her
wicked sense of humour. Love you x

– AS

To my girl squad and our endless chats

– DS

With special thanks to Speckled Pen 

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I THE BEST DAY OF THE YEAR

Zaiba stood in front of the huge oak tree in the middle of the village green, gazing up at a poster:



The last, and most important, item on the poster, in extra big, hand-painted lettering read:

TREASURE TRAIL

This was the fifth poster Zaiba had seen today. There had been others on the post box, in the sweet-shop window, tacked to the park gate and even taped to the side of a dustbin lorry. The whole village was going mad for her school's annual summer fete. This was the thirtieth year of the fete and everyone was excited! It had been running even since Zaiba's dad had gone to school – and that was a *long* time ago.

All around the green, tents and stalls were being erected, ready for the crowds to descend. Bunting and posters were strung from every fence and lamppost, filling the school playground with bright colours. Not only was this Zaiba's favourite day of the whole year, today was going to be extra special because she'd been given a huge responsibility... She was in charge of the treasure trail competition! And in true Zaiba fashion,

she'd adapted it into a Detective Trail.

"I don't see why I have to go to school on a *Saturday*," Ali grumbled. Clearly this wasn't her younger brother's favourite day of the year.

"But Ali, I thought you were excited about Soak the Teacher?" Zaiba ruffled his long fringe. Ali had been growing out his hair like the members of his favourite boy band, much to their mum's disappointment.

Ali's eyes lit up. "Oh, yeah... My form tutor said he'd be in the stocks at half past four." He rubbed his hands together gleefully.

"Mr Thompson is always up for a laugh," their dad said, striding ahead. "Not sure how he'll feel about a sopping-wet sponge to the face though."

"I'm more excited about Zaiba's detective trail," Jessica said. "This is a big moment for her!"

Jessica was Zaiba's stepmum, and as far as Zaiba was concerned she was the best one in the world. Ali ran on in front of Zaiba and Jessica, holding up his shiny blue camera. Zaiba quickly struck a pose. She had come dressed for detecting in her denim shorts, a sparkling-

white T-shirt and running shoes. Fashion didn't really factor in a detective's outfit but Zaiba thought she looked pretty good nonetheless.

"Say cheese!" said Ali, snapping a shot and then inspecting the result. "Hmm, I'll have to turn down the exposure ... Mum's top is too bright!" Ali was in charge of taking photos for the school newspaper – a role he



took very seriously. Their dad, Hassan, was so impressed with Ali that he'd even bought him a brand-new digital camera.

"Make sure you get some good photos of my detective trail," Zaiba instructed.

Zaiba wanted to make the treasure trail extra special this year. There were twists and turns, riddles and mysteries to crack – plus a list of likely suspects. She had spent every evening over the past two weeks planning it out. After school, she'd walked the entire circuit of the village green along with Poppy, her best friend. They had carefully mapped out the grounds, looking for special hiding places. Then the two of them had worked out a

set of clues in the form of riddles that would point to the locations. Zaiba wanted everyone at school to know how fun and rewarding being a detective could be.

“Why wouldn’t anyone want to be a detective?” she’d said to Poppy as they’d stuck ideas on to their mood board.

“I know!” Poppy had agreed, taping on a picture of a magnifying glass. “Think of the accessories!” Poppy loved fashion almost as much as she loved solving crimes.

If Zaiba could get this right, she was certain that her detective trail would make this summer fete special. Of course it wasn’t the same as solving a real-life crime but she’d had no luck finding one of those since the case of the missing diamond collar a couple of months ago. It had been so thrilling to track down the runaway dog and its stolen collar! But since then...

Zaiba couldn’t help sighing as she stuck on another picture. She’d searched *really* hard for a crime to solve. She’d even called her Aunt Fouzia – the best detective in the whole of Pakistan. Aunt Fouzia had given her

some tips about looking for clues. “Look for suspicious behaviour,” she’d suggested. “Anyone behaving out of character.” Zaiba had done her best. She’d watched the paperboy in case he tried to break into the house – no luck. She’d flipped through most books in the library van to search for sinister handwritten messages – nothing. She’d even volunteered to help at the local five kilometre race to see if anyone tried to cheat, but every runner had won a medal fair and square.

“A crime will arrive when you least expect it,” Hassan had reassured her, brushing a hand over Zaiba’s hair. In the meantime, she would have to be patient. And for now, the detective trail would help satisfy her detective instincts.

The night before she’d had a video chat with her aunt Fouzia, who was in Pakistan, to discuss the preparations. Her auntie was one of Zaiba’s idols, a no-nonsense lady who ran the Snow Leopard Detective Agency in Karachi – one of the top detective agencies in the world! Zaiba had learned so much from her already, and they had gone over every detail of her trail in depth, making sure there

would be no mistakes.

“And you’ve walked the trail through yourself at least three times...” Aunt Fouzia had said over the crackly connection. “We have to uphold our reputation as world-class detectives!”

After Zaiba had solved the mystery of the pedigree pup’s missing diamond collar, Aunt Fouzia had asked her niece to set up a branch of the agency in the UK – something Zaiba wasn’t taking lightly. She didn’t want to let her aunt down!

“I promise, Auntie – you can trust us! Poppy and Ali were my test competitors and we’ve fixed any problems.”

Aunt Fouzia had looked reassured. She knew she could trust Ali and Poppy.

“Perfect! Then I’m sure it will be a success. I wish I could be there to see it.” Aunt Fouzia had smiled and Zaiba had felt a pang of sadness. It could be difficult when your family lived far away, but she knew that Aunt Fouzia was needed in Pakistan. “Now I must go, Beti. I’m meeting with the Chief Defence Minister today at

the National Bank. I can't tell you why, but they need my expert opinion on a very serious matter..."

Zaiba had gasped and immediately wanted to know *everything*. "Does it have something to do with the Bollywood star whose bank vault was broken into? I read that they stole all of her gold!"

"Let's just say..." Aunt Fouzia had moved closer to the camera, the silk of her sari whispering. "Hers wasn't the only one." Then she had tapped the side of her nose as she always did when something top secret couldn't be mentioned.

Now, as Zaiba walked across the village green, she realized she was smiling from ear to ear. Having such an important auntie certainly had its perks!

It was only mid-morning but the sun was already beating down as parents and children made their way to the school to help set things up. The Victorian building was located at the far end of the village green, tall and hulking against the skyline. The grass was covered in tent poles and canvas, and Zaiba could make out a host of people trying to fit them together.

Running along the other side of the green was the pride and joy of the village – the public gardens, famed for their stunning displays of flowers and the pretty water feature in the centre. It also contained a beautiful rose garden that the school helped to upkeep as part of a community project.

“Come on,” Jessica said, squeezing Zaiba’s hand. “Let’s take the path through the petunias.” Zaiba’s stepmum was a huge fan of flowers – Hassan never forgot to buy her a bunch every Saturday and he’d learned to grow sweet peas in the back garden to make her happy.

Jessica’s smile broadened as they picked their way along the winding path, her top blowing in the breeze. Beneath her arm she carried a big, wooden box as she was in charge of the fete’s face-painting stand. Jessica was an art teacher at a local college and loved any

excuse to get creative! She had brought along plenty of supplies: multi-coloured paints, a variety of sponges and a brand-new set of glitter.



When the postman had delivered the glitter, Zaiba had held the sparkling tubes up to the light and read the label: **Biodegradable Glitter!**

“Who says you can’t care for the planet and have glittery fun!” Jessica had said, packing up her bags.

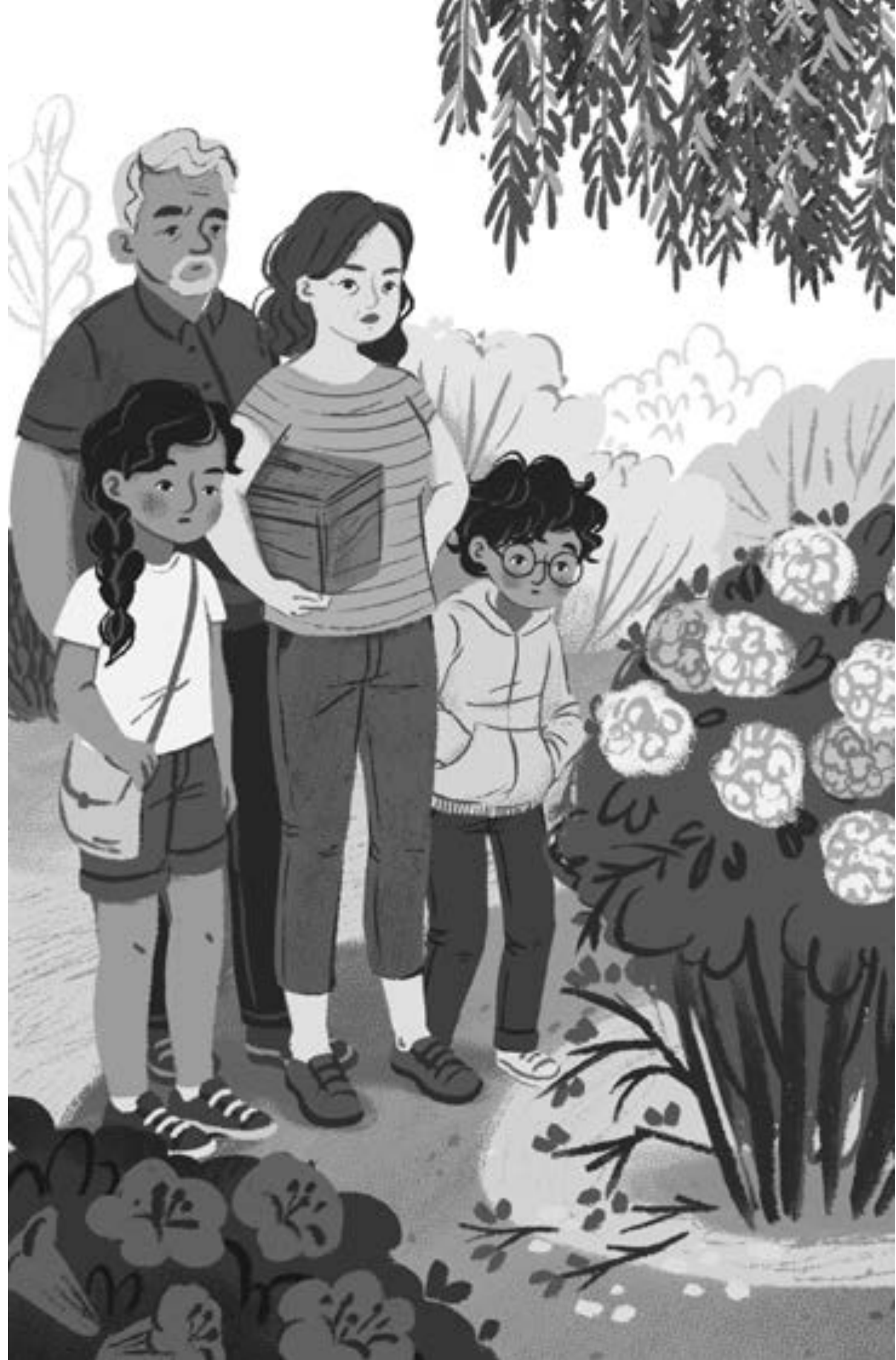
Now the fresh breeze was making the colourful bunting on the tents flutter and the flowers bob their heads up and down, but when Zaiba looked at her stepmum she was frowning.

“Oh dear,” Jessica sighed. “A lot of these rhododendrons have their heads missing. People shouldn’t pick the flowers, they’re for everyone to enjoy!”

“Rhodo-whats?” Zaiba’s dad asked, catching up with them.

“Look!” Jessica pointed to a corner of the garden. Beneath the branches of a weeping willow were clusters of bright pink flowers. But Jessica was right – some of the green stalks were missing their blooms!

“Who would do that?” Zaiba asked. It didn’t seem right to cut down flowers that belonged to everyone in the village.



“The florist?” Ali asked.

“Mrs Bailey would never do that!” Jessica said. “She only buys her flowers from the finest flower markets! Isn’t that right, Hassan?”

Zaiba saw a flash of guilt pass over her father’s face. She knew that sometimes he forgot to stop at Mrs Bailey’s shop – *The Tilted Tulip* – and had to buy Jessica’s flowers from the petrol station on his way home from work. Zaiba had spotted the sticker one time but had promised to keep her dad’s secret.

“Yes, that’s right—” he began.

“And look!” Zaiba interrupted. “The stalks are all torn. Whoever did this didn’t even use scissors!”

Jessica shook her head angrily. “Vandalism! Besides, people should be careful handling rhododendrons.”

Hassan took her gently by the shoulders and steered her out of the flower garden before her mood could sour any further. “Come on, everyone. Let’s not spoil the day. What’s happening over there?”

A cheer floated up from the school gates and Zaiba spotted the balloon modeller arriving, carrying a red

balloon giraffe under one arm.

“You’re right, Dad!” she cried, running ahead. “There’s a school fete waiting for us!”



2

BAKING TIME!

The Shah family hurried through a white picket fence that marked the end of the public gardens. There was a small road to cross over to the school, where a banner strung across the railings read: '**Beckley School Summer Fete**'. Ali snapped a photo and Zaiba felt a fresh flurry of excitement!

As they walked over, they passed a couple of kids playing hopscotch on a grid they'd marked in chalk – right in the middle of the road! The fact that the roads around the green would be closed on the day of the school fair had made it even more exciting to plan the trail. Zaiba's detectives could run anywhere – as long

as they didn't knock over the badge stall or disturb the animals in the petting zoo!

In the playground, two ladies were helping at the registration tent, where people could sign up for all the activities going on that day. They both had walkie-talkies attached to their

belts. Zaiba guessed this was so the

fete organizers could stay in contact at

all times. She felt a stab of envy – they looked

so much more professional than mobile

phones! Maybe she could save up for one ...

or rather three, as Poppy and Ali would need

their own too.

“Come on, Ali!” Hassan jogged ahead, pulling Ali behind him. Zaiba could guess exactly where they were going – to put their names down for the parent-child baking competition! This was the biggest competition at the fete, running since the very first one.

Hassan was absolutely determined that they would win it this year. He'd been up early every morning for the past week, baking cupcakes. Their kitchen had practically



turned into a cupcake factory. At first this had been brilliant, but after eating seven cupcakes in a row Zaiba had started to feel decidedly queasy. Even Poppy, who was a massive foodie and *loved* cakes, stopped calling round after a few days. Zaiba never, *ever* thought she'd say this, but there was only so much sugar a person could take! She thought she might turn green if she had to even *think* about baked goods.

“Are you coming?” Jessica said, following after the others. “I want to make sure they don't try to sign up twice. They'd do anything to get inside that baking tent!”

Zaiba shook her head and pointed towards a fold-out table on the other side of the playground. “I want to see how many people are interested in the detective trail.”

“OK, sweetie, see you later!” Zaiba watched Jessica stroll away. She also spotted her deputy head teacher, Miss Grey, walking over to the village green and head for the baking tent to help pin up the bunting. She certainly seemed keen!

Zaiba's glance shifted over to where a small group of children were chatting. She hoped they were talking

about murder or espionage or something exciting like that! She hid a secret smile as she overheard a snatch of conversation:

“... but what will we be investigating? I hope it’s a real crime!”

Peering over their shoulders at the sign-up sheet for her detective trail she could see five names written down. A good start! Zaiba had decided that entrants had to be less than twelve years of age, since she wanted to make the contest as fair as possible.

She plonked down her bag of detective trail equipment on the tarmac and pulled out her copy of *The Flower Show Felony* by her favourite writer of all time: Eden Lockett. Eden was a detective-turned-author and all her stories were based on true cases that she had investigated! Alongside her auntie, Eden Lockett was Zaiba’s inspiration. *The Flower Show Felony* was set at a prestigious flower show. Zaiba had decided to base her detective trail on the story in the book. But instead of being set at a flower show, Zaiba had adapted the original story so it was based at the summer fete, and her

detectives didn't have to solve the crime of sabotage but ... murder!

Zaiba opened her huge bag and went through the checklist of props one more time.



She jerked her head up. "Hold on. Where's Poppy?"
She was one of Zaiba's most important props!

"Zai! Over here!"

As if on cue, Zaiba heard her best friend calling.
Turning round she saw Poppy in a bright blue dress

waving over to her from the entrance to the baking tent. Zaiba was always impressed by Poppy's outfit choices. Today she had paired her outfit with some lace-up ankle boots – practical and stylish.

Zaiba rushed over and gave her a hug. “Hey, Pops.” She glanced around. “Where's your mum?”

“She's setting up for the dog show. You know how serious she gets about it! But listen, there are more important things to discuss.” Poppy leaned in to whisper, “Guess who's in there, helping to set up the baking tent? Marco Romano!”

“Gabriele's dad?” Zaiba frowned. Why was that so important?

Poppy must have noticed the confusion on her face. “Yes, but – *much* more exciting! – he's married to the author of the book about unicorn cats – *Unicats*! I wonder if we could get a signed copy...”

“There's only one author I care about,” Zaiba said, patting the yellow bag she always wore over her shoulder and felt her Eden Lockett book safely inside. She got out *The Flower Show Felony* and flicked to page thirty two.

“Another of your ammi’s notes?” Poppy smiled.

All of the Eden Lockett books that Zaiba owned were first editions, inherited from her birth mum who she called Ammi. Zaiba had no memories of her birth mother, and had only recently found out that she’d been a top detective alongside Aunt Fouzia. The sisters had set up the Snow Leopard Detective Agency together! But on a secret mission when Zaiba was only a year old, her ammi had gone missing and passed away. Zaiba tried not to feel too sad about this and the notes her ammi made in the margins of the books certainly helped. They felt like the last tokens left to her from her mother and reading them was a way of getting to know her. Scribbles, notes and sometimes drawings that always seemed to come in useful at the right time.

Tracing her finger over the page, Zaiba read this particular note aloud: “*Think the unthinkable!*”

Poppy and Zaiba caught each other’s eyes and laughed.

“That one has already come true!” Poppy said.

“Who would have thought we’d be in charge of the

first ever international branch of the Snow Leopard Detective Agency?” Zaiba said another silent *thank you* to Aunt Fouzia for trusting Poppy and Ali to help Zaiba run the UK branch. At the moment their headquarter was Zaiba’s room, using her little desk to draw up their many plans, but they had big hopes for the future!

“And who would have thought you’d be setting up the treasure trail at our school fete?” Poppy added.

“Or –” a voice from behind them interrupted – “that your dad would win first prize in the baking competition?”

They turned round to see Hassan and Ali, aprons on and equipment at the ready. Hassan had changed into his chef’s whites, ordered online for this very occasion, but Ali had categorically refused to wear his. Instead he was in his favourite oversized hoodie, despite the heat, with an apron tied over the top. He’d even clipped his long fringe back for health and safety reasons. They looked ready for business.

“We haven’t won yet!” Ali nudged his dad, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, but we will.” Hassan’s eyes narrowed and Zaiba noticed, not for the first time, where her brother got his cheeky twinkle.

From inside the tent, a bossy voice floated out over the loudspeaker. “The baking competition will start in ten minutes. I repeat, ten minutes!”

Hassan and Ali shared a panicked look and in a flurry of white aprons they disappeared inside the tent. Zaiba had never seen her dad and brother move so fast. She and Poppy had to run to keep up with them.

It was baking time!

Poppy and Zaiba found some seats at the side of the tent while Hassan and Ali went ‘backstage’. The preliminary rounds were a test to see who had the skills to go through to the final. It was a rapid-fire, fifteen-minute test of skill, precision and taste – and it all rested on a cake pop.

“What’s a cake pop?” Poppy asked, eyeing up the little round balls on sticks up on the counter. “I can’t believe there’s a cake I’ve never heard of!”

“They’re round pieces of cake sponge on lollipop

sticks!” Zaiba explained. “The judges provided these ones to make sure everyone starts with the same base. But Dad makes super yummy ones at home. I had them on my birthday cake last year – you ate them so fast you probably don’t remember!” Zaiba’s birthday cake last year was decorated entirely with cake pops!

The compere for the baking event was a tall man with such a loud, booming voice that he didn’t need to use a microphone to get everyone in the tent to stop chatting.

“Welcome, guests. The first heat of the Cake Pop Preliminaries is about to begin! In this round, the bakers will be judged on their ability to decorate ten cake pops in fifteen minutes. The judges will be looking for uniformity, precision and taste. We have three heats and a total of nine teams! Only three will make it to this afternoon’s final – the winner from each heat.”

Zaiba’s tummy lurched. Her dad and Ali *had* to make it through. They’d worked so hard for it!

“Please welcome our first three teams into the tent.” The compere waved his hand towards the back of the tent where a big screen had been put up to make

a backstage area. As the audience clapped politely, Hassan, Ali and a mother and daughter team took their place behind the counters. Zaiba thought she recognized the girl from the year below.

“I thought there were three teams?” Poppy wondered.

Miss Grey, who seemed to have appointed herself as backstage helper, zoomed behind the screen to see what the matter was. A few minutes later, and after much fussing from Miss Grey, the last team came out. It was a father and daughter team. They had been held up by some problems with the buttoning of their chef whites!

“Don’t worry, Zai. Your dad will definitely get through.”

Poppy squeezed Zaiba’s hand. “Look, they’re starting!”

“Bakers, get set...” the compere looked at his watch, “and ... go!”

The three teams set about grouping together the ingredients they needed and gathering equipment. In all three teams the adults were taking the lead, telling the kids what to do next and which ingredients to use.

Hassan had instructed Ali to begin melting chocolate

in a saucepan with some butter, which he was doing with focused attention. He even had a thermometer dipped into the chocolate that he held aloft, checking the measurements at regular intervals.

They looked cool, calm and collected, especially compared to the chaos of the other teams. The competition had only been going five minutes and one of the girls was already covered in cocoa powder. Her mum on the other hand didn't seem to have touched *anything* but instead was deliberating over which whisk attachment to fix to the electric mixer. The father and daughter team had managed to drop all of their ingredients and were doubled over laughing as they tried to pick them up.

Zaiba cringed and when she looked over at Poppy, she noticed her best friend had her hands over her eyes.

“I can't watch!” Poppy winced.

Five minutes later, Hassan and Ali's cake pops were covered in a shiny chocolate ganache. The mother and daughter team had managed to coat each of their cake pops in a mixture of cocoa powder and pink icing, and

from the looks of it were getting ready to attach tiny umbrellas to each one. And the third team ... Well, it was a cake-pop catastrophe. But at least they were having fun!

By the end of the fifteen minutes, there were thirty cake pops up on the countertops, twenty of which Zaiba would happily have devoured on the spot.

The Lady Mayor had come to judge the preliminary rounds. She wore a set of gleaming ceremonial chains around her neck, accessorized with a swipe of shockingly bright red lipstick.

“I think that’s a new shade,” Poppy whispered to Zaiba excitedly. “It’s called *Red Velvet!*” She gave a dreamy sigh.

The Lady Mayor tried a cake pop from each of the competitor’s plates. Each time she sniffed the cake, held it close to her eye and then popped it in her mouth – whole. After a moment of chewing she placed the lollipop stick down and moved on to the next, not giving away anything.

After she had swallowed and dabbed her mouth with a napkin, the compere approached with the microphone.



“Lady Mayor, have you made your final decision?” he asked seriously.

The Lady Mayor nodded and held the microphone to her mouth. “The winners of this heat, and going through to the final are ... Hassan and Ali! Well done.”

The crowd burst into applause and Zaiba let out a huge sigh of relief. Hassan and Ali were through! Her dad was giving Ali a big high five but the baking tent team were ushering them along, keen to clear up ready for the next heat.

Zaiba and Poppy joined them by the entrance flaps of the tent.

“You’re through to the final!” Zaiba smiled, giving her dad a hug.

“Well done, Ali.” Poppy ruffled his long fringe, making Ali squirm.

“Through to the final.” Hassan blew his cheeks out. “I wish Jessica could have seen us, but she was too busy at the face-painting stand to come and watch!”

The compere’s booming voice interrupted their conversation. “Everyone, the second heat will be

commencing in five minutes, that's five minutes!"

Hassan put his arms round the children. "Come on, let's go break the good news to your mum while the second heat is on. I can't wait to tell her!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Annabelle Sami is a writer and performer.

She grew up next to the sea on the south coast of the UK and moved to London, where she now lives, for university. At Queen Mary University she had an amazing time studying English Literature and Drama, finally graduating with an MA in English Literature.

When she isn't writing she enjoys playing saxophone in a band with her friends, performing live art and swimming in the sea!

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR



Originally from Romania, Daniela Sosa now lives and works in Cambridge with her husband and is completing an MA in children's book illustration at the Cambridge School of Art.

Creating a magical mix of the ordinary and the unusual, Daniela enjoys highlighting subtle detail and finding beauty in everyday life. She gets inspiration from nature, books and observing the world around.