

ROBY AU'S MISSION - BISSION - BISSIO





SUFIYA AHMED ILLUSTRATED BY PARWINDER SINGH

BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION

LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc 50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK 29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © Sufiya Ahmed, 2021 Illustrations copyright © Parwinder Singh, 2021

Sufiya Ahmed and Parwinder Singh have asserted their rights under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author and Illustrator
of this work

This is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4729-9317-5; ePDF: 978-1-4729-9316-8; ePub: 978-1-4729-9315-1

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Printed and bound in in the UK by CPI Group Ltd, CRO 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters

CONTENTS

The Break Up	7
New Beginnings	17
Operation Odd Socks	25
Operation Glue	35
Creepy Crawlies	45
The Surprise Prankster	51
Pizzagate	57
Sweet Bowl of Mash	65
Smashed Screen	71
Another Mission	



THE BREAK UP

"Why can't I come with you?" I mumble, clutching my old stuffed rabbit, Bug, to my chest.

My sister Alisha's head shoots up from the bin bag she's packing.

"Ruby!" she snaps. "We've been through this. You repeating yourself isn't going to change the fact that you can't be with me. We have to go our separate ways. You'll get fostered by a good family who like little girls. You're only twelve. This is the best thing for you."

"I…"

She cuts me off. "And don't you think you're a little old for Bug now!"

My mouth falls open. How could she say that? She knows what Bug means to me. Alisha looks like she wants to add something more, but she changes her mind and looks away. Perhaps the hurt on my

face is too obvious. Her lips press together in a straight line and she busies herself with her packing again. I can tell she's upset because she's stuffing her clothes in, rather than folding them neatly. Neither of us have many belongings as the care system only pays for our essentials.

I am finding it hard to accept that she is separating from me. Now that she's eighteen, Alisha's not allowed to stay in care anymore. She's going to move in with her new friend, Julie, who rents a house with five others at an address which I've secretly memorised.

It also means she is leaving me behind. I stare down at her as she shoves the last of her clothes into her bin bag. Her silky long black hair falls forward like a curtain, half concealing her face as she presses down on the load so that she can tie a knot at the top. Strangers have always said that she's an older version of me. The only difference, these days, is the make-up caked on her face. Black kohl rims her brown eyes, and her lipstick is a plum shade. When she first wore the colour, I told her she looked like she'd eaten blackberries.

"Julie likes it," had been her reply.

I'd rolled my eyes. Of course, Julie would like it. She is a goth, after all. Oh, how I hate her influence on my sister's life. With the knot securely tied, Alisha gets to her feet. Is this it? My heart begins to beat frantically in my chest.

She is leaving.

She is really leaving me.

I lunge forward to throw my arms around her waist. I am terrified to be without her. I've never been without her.

"You promised we would always be together!" I wail.

"And we were together," she says softly, recognising my panic. Her earlier impatience is no more, and she tries to soothe me. Ever so gently, she unwraps my arms from her middle and holds my hands. "Rubes, I need to make my own way in the world. I can't take you. Please understand. It isn't allowed."

I look up at her pleadingly. "When have you ever followed the rules?"

She drops my hands. "How many times must I explain it to you? The system won't pay me to look after you. I'm not a foster carer."

"What if nobody else in the world wanted me?" I ask. "Would they let you have me then?"

"Yes, well maybe," she says vaguely, glancing at the white clock on the wall.

I say nothing as she places a kiss on my forehead. I can tell she is feeling emotional too. How can she not be?

"I'll come and see you as soon as I'm settled," she promises. "And in a year or two, you can move in with me when I have a good job and flat." Then, without giving me a chance to say anything, she picks up her bin bag and walks out of the door without turning back even once.

I stare at the white door with the big poster of fire instructions nailed to the centre. I know the list of what to do in the event of fire by heart, but I re-read it anyway. The focus helps me swallow the lump that has formed in my throat. I can't allow myself to cry. If I do, it will be the first time Alisha won't be with me to wipe my tears. And I am terrified of crying on my own.

After taking several deep breaths to control the butterflies zooming around in my tummy, I turn to the window and wait for her to appear below. Alisha

takes her time to emerge out of the big Georgian house that is the residential home for children. It is called Sunshine House. I imagine she is saying goodbye to the workers in the office. We, the Ali sisters, have been in and out of Sunshine House for years. Somehow, our time with foster families never seemed to last very long. Our last foster stay ended two weeks ago because Alisha hated it and we've been living here since.

I glance at my own bin bag, packed and knotted to take with me to my new foster home. The thought of living with strangers without Alisha fills me with dread. For comfort, I bury my face in my rabbit. The fur is matted and stained with dirt, but I don't care. Bug was the last thing Mum gave me. When he lost his right ear, I promised myself that Bug would never end up in the hot spin of Claire's horror machine ever again. Or anyone else's for that matter. I remember that day well. I was nine years old, and it is scarred into my memory.

"Please not Bug," I pleaded.

I was no match for Claire's big strong hands.

"It's dirty!" she insisted, furiously grabbing Bug from me. "Rabia!"

She was the only foster we'd ever had who insisted on calling me by my full name, even after I'd told her loads of times that I preferred to be called Ruby.

That day, poor Bug had not only lost his ear, but Mum's scent, which had lingered on it for years. Alisha tried to comfort me by saying that the scent had evaporated a long time ago.

"It's gone, Rubes, just like Mum."

I hadn't agreed. It had been the first time I'd thrown a tantrum. I had screamed, thrown objects and refused to eat for days until our social worker was summoned. That was Poonam, who affectionately introduced herself as Poo to every child. I think it was to make the bewildered, scared children relax and laugh. I'd certainly giggled when she'd lifted me as a six-year-old into her arms for the first time and said, "Hello, I'm Poo."

Poo hadn't been too pleased when she had picked us up from Claire's home to return us to Sunshine House. "I'd expected that behaviour from Alisha," she'd admonished in the car. "Not you, Ruby."

"I told Claire I didn't want Bug to go in the washing machine," I said tearfully. "She didn't listen to me and now Bug's lost his ear."

Poo's voice softened. "Did you rescue his ear from the machine?"

I nodded. "It's in my pocket."

"I'll sew it back on for you when we get back to Sunshine House," Poo offered. "And then Bug will be just like before."

"What about Mum's smell?"

Poo had no comeback for that.

"That Claire only takes in kids so she can scrub them clean," Alisha said. "She was always shouting at me for the littlest things like mud on my boots or rainwater dripping off the umbrella in the hallway."

"And I suppose you never played any pranks on her, angel that you are?" Poo said in a sarcastic voice.

Alisha met Poo's eyes in the rear-view mirror and widened them innocently. "Who, me?"

Poo tutted. She knew us better than anyone else in the world.

* * *

Alisha finally appears outside. She doesn't look up, even though she must know that I'm standing there to wave a final goodbye.

I have spent the last six years of my life looking out of windows and standing by doors waiting for my big sister after school. The difference this time, though, is that she isn't coming home to me, but rather walking away from me. It's not her fault. I can see that now. It is the system that forbids us to be together. It is the system that must be beaten.

And so, as she walks away for the final time from Sunshine House, the plan to break away from my next foster family forms in my mind: Mission Break Up.