

Agent Zaiba Investigates: The Missing Diamonds

by Annabelle Sami

"Detective's log number thirty five. The time is..." Zaiba glanced at her watch. "15:00 hours. Location: The Royal Star Hotel, Farnworth, the United Kingdom. Observation and hiding point secured. This is Agent Zaiba."

Zaiba shuffled further back beneath an empty dining table, clutching her favourite book of all time, *Eden Lockett's Detective Handbook*. Eden Lockett might be made up, but her books were based on real crimes and she could teach a budding detective anything they needed to know about sleuthing. In her mysteries, she'd battled robbers and escaped tigers, a ghost in a mansion and villains in a circus. Zaiba flicked through the pages. There! Advice about blending in with your surroundings: *Avoid bright colours. Now is not the time to make a fashion statement.*

Zaiba glanced down at her outfit. She was wearing a shiny blue shalwar kameez with a silver dupatta tossed over one shoulder. Hmmm. The perfect outfit for a pre-wedding Mehndi party sure, but when trying to hide from her arch nemesis? Not so good.

Although perhaps arch nemesis was a *bit* too harsh. Zaiba's cousin, Mariam, was on the other side of the room sandwiched between her parents. At least she had been on Zaiba's last sweep of the room. Things had been tense between them ever since Mariam decided to be born on the exact same day as Zaiba. Well, one year later. But couldn't she have waited a day or two at least? The latest incident in the growing feud had been at their annual joint birthday party last week. Mariam had accused Zaiba of hitting the unicorn piñata too hard. Seriously – how could anyone hit a piñata *too* hard? Zaiba could practically feel Mariam's icy stare piercing through the tablecloth, sending a shiver down her spine.

She turned the page in *Eden Lockett's Detective Handbook* to read one of many notes scribbled in the margin. She traced a finger round the familiar loops and curls. This and the mystery stories had been her mum's and she'd made lots of comments across her beloved book collection. Now they belonged to Zaiba, who had spent hours searching for each unique scribbling. It was her special way of getting to know her mum, who she called Ammi.

This message was a particular favourite of hers:

Better put on my brave pants today!

Zaiba smiled to herself. Her ammi had been funny. At least, she thought she had been funny. She'd passed away when Zaiba was too young to remember. Whenever Zaiba tried to ask her dad about what happened, he would repeat the same phrase, "Leave the past in the past." She always had the feeling that there was something her dad wasn't telling her. Something left to uncover...

Zaiba refocused her mind and peered out from beneath the tablecloth. Beyond the dining table the party was getting busier. Even though the event had officially started quite a while ago, three o'clock was still considered early for a party that would go on into the early hours of the morning. The guests that had just arrived, wearing jewel-coloured saris and sharply tailored suits, chatted in groups, catching up on all the latest news. The women's bangles cascaded down their wrists as they danced with their partners beside the patio doors that opened on to the garden. But there was no sign of Mariam, thank goodness.

Mariam had better not ruin this party too, Zaiba thought. Zaiba knew that Samirah, another of her cousins, had spent months planning her Mehndi



party. She'd wanted it to be the perfect party in the run-up to the perfect wedding, where Samirah – or Sam, as most people called her – would be the perfect bride. Sam liked perfect.

Zaiba relaxed a little and gave a sigh of pleasure – it was all so pretty! A Pakistani wedding was nothing without a Mehndi party beforehand, where the bride has parts of her body decorated in elaborate patterns with a red dye called henna. There would be choreographed dancing, special sweets fed to the bride and, importantly, her female relatives would share their advice for a happy marriage.

This party definitely had the three main ingredients for a successful Mehndi party in abundance – food, music and dancing! At the top of the room on a little stage was Sam. As the bride-to-be, she sat on a gilded white lounge chair, wearing a sari in deep red, orange and yellow.

