

ANNABELLE SAMI

ILLUSTRATED BY DANIELA SOSA

Agent Zaiba INVESTIGATES



THE MISSING DIAMONDS



stripes

For my big sister Chloe, my best friend and motivation,
and for all the girls on a mission

– AS

For mystery seekers

– DS

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I MEHNDI MADNESS

“Detective’s log number thirty five. The time is...” Zaiba glanced at her watch. “5:00 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. Hmm. 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.

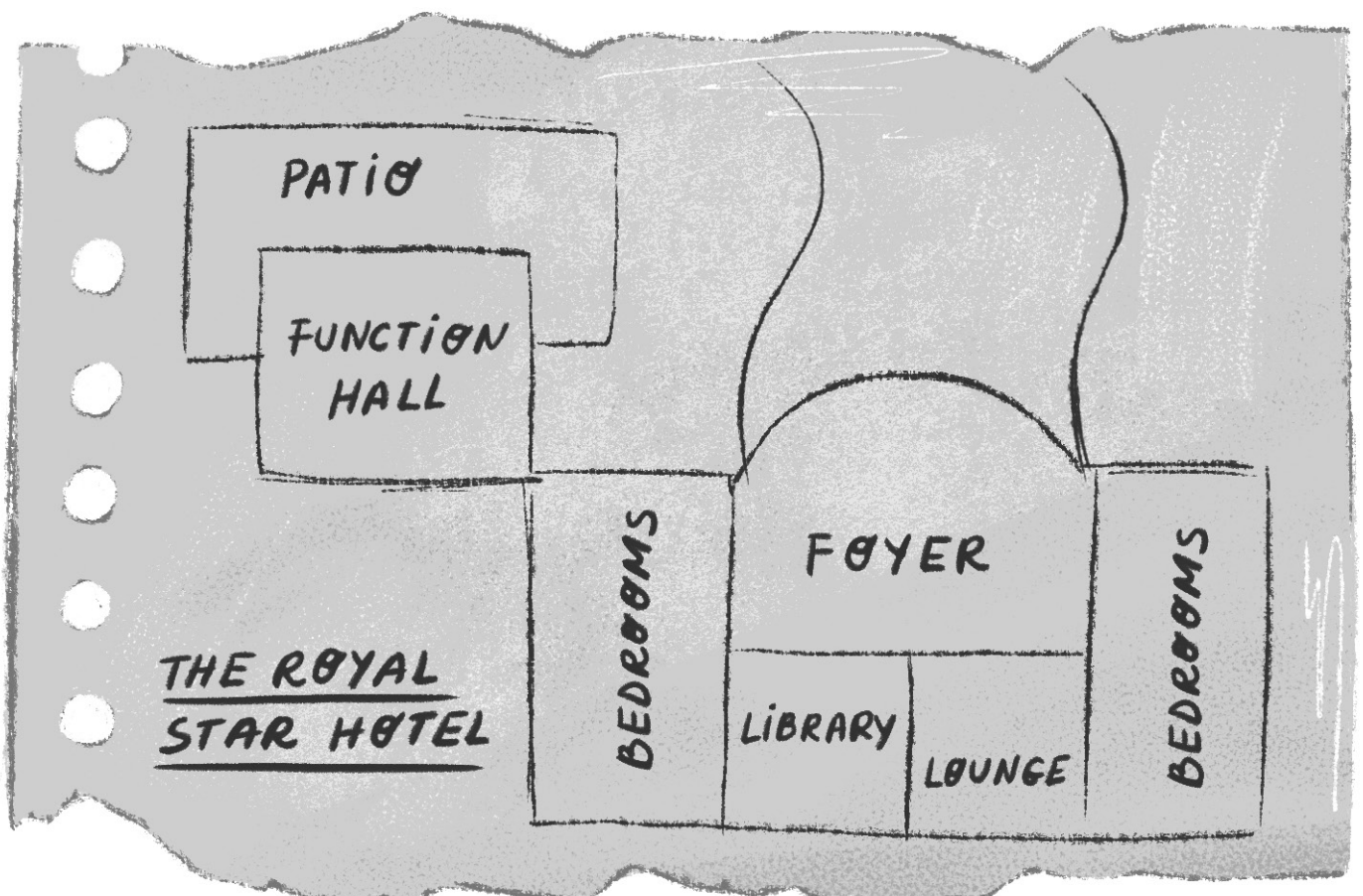
Zaiba relaxed a little and gave a sigh of pleasure – it was all so pretty! A Pakistani wedding was nothing without a Mehndi party beforehand, where the bride has parts of her body decorated in elaborate patterns with a red dye called henna. There would be choreographed

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. Zaiba saw her cousin stifle a yawn as she continued to sit patiently while her hands were decorated with the henna. Meanwhile her fiancé, Tanvir, had been cornered next to the punchbowl by some eager aunties who wanted to know *everything* about the upcoming wedding. It seemed at the moment that this party was fun for everyone *but* the young couple.

Zaiba felt a stab of sadness. Sam was her favourite cousin and Zaiba wanted this evening to be everything she'd hoped it would be. She glanced around the room, taking a mental note of as many details as possible. As the linen curtains swelled in the breeze, she noticed that the patio doors opened *out* on to the garden, rather than

in to the room. That could be useful information if they were involved in a high-stakes chase! There was a main entrance leading out on to the drive too. She eased a little gold pencil that the receptionist had given her out of her bag and added extra details to the hotel map she'd drawn that morning. The receptionist – “Liza with a ‘z’!” – had taken Zaiba and some of the other children round the hotel while their parents were busy unpacking. She'd pointed out the twenty-six bedrooms, the library with its leather-bound books and the extensive hotel grounds and separate buildings.



Zaiba opened the phone's voice recorder again and put it to her lips. "Observations: number of guests one, two, three, four, five . . . uhhhh, at least fifty people. Sofas and soft seating at ninety degrees to my right. Most people are on the dance floor. Bad – no *really* bad – music from the DJ booth close to the north-east window. No suspicious activity so far—"

"Apart from the girl hiding under the dining table!"

The tablecloth whipped up and a hand reached for Zaiba, pulling her swiftly out from her observation point.

"Aunt Fouzia!" Zaiba groaned, annoyed that she'd been discovered. Sam's mum was a tiny lady who somehow possessed the strength of a bodybuilder. Zaiba liked to imagine this strength came from all the extra-strong cups of chai Aunt Fouzia got through in a day – her record was ten! Zaiba quickly stashed away her phone, pencil and *Eden Lockett's Detective Handbook* in a little yellow purse she wore across her body. The hotel map was tucked carefully between the back pages of her book. A detective never knew when they might need a map!



“What are you doing sneaking about under there?” her aunt chided gently. “It’s time for your family dance. And by the look on Samirah’s face, she needs the entertainment. That henna artist is taking far too long!” Sam was Aunt Fouzia’s eldest daughter and she was a doctor – “the youngest on her ward!” as Aunt Fouzia liked to remind people.

Zaiba had always looked up to Sam. She was clever and sophisticated and Zaiba often thought she could have been a spy if she’d wanted to be, like in the movies. She looked especially impressive today, if a little bit bored. As Zaiba glanced over at Samirah and Tanvir (or SamTan as Zaiba had decided their couple name was), she noticed the golden tikka hanging over Sam’s forehead. It sparkled with rubies and sapphires, making Sam look like royalty.

“If I ever wear one of those, make sure I remember to hire a personal security team,” Zaiba noted.

“Today the security is us,” Aunt Fouzia teased. “Now come on, let’s kick off this song and dance competition! Wait – where’s Poppy?”

Poppy had been Zaiba's best friend for longer than she could remember. Since she was practically family she had been invited along to the party too. That morning Poppy's parents had dropped her off just in time for the tour of the hotel. Zaiba had lent Poppy one of her green silk dupattas to wear with her favourite party dress and Poppy had insisted on the matching green khussa. Parties involved two of Poppy's favourite things – dressing up and free food. Throw in a glamorous hotel and she was in heaven. This hotel in particular was right up her street. Liza had told them on their tour that it was built by some fancy-pants Lord ages ago. Zaiba thought he must have been a show-off since he had his home built like a mini castle, complete with three turrets that towered into the sky.

“Poppy! Over here!” Zaiba called, spotting her best friend over by a plate of brightly coloured burfi.

Poppy shoved the last sweet crumbs into her mouth and ran up to join Zaiba and a small group of children next to the dance floor.

Poppy linked her arm through Zaiba's as they

waited for three grannies to finish their routine to a famous Bollywood love song. “Did you complete your observations?” she asked Zaiba. “I was doing mine ... over by the chocolate fountain...”

Zaiba laughed. “I *was* doing them before Aunt Fouzia found me.” She turned to her aunt. “How *did* you find me, by the way?”

“A great agent never reveals their secrets.” Aunt Fouzia tapped the side of her nose. Zaiba’s aunt was even more famous than Eden Lockett, in Karachi at least. She ran the **Snow Leopard Detective Agency** – the best agency in Pakistan. She’d encouraged Zaiba to read her first Eden Lockett mystery after Zaiba had asked one too many questions about Aunt Fouzia’s job. Now Zaiba *and* Poppy were mega fans. Zaiba had Eden Lockett bed covers, Eden Lockett stationery... Aunt Fouzia had even found her an Eden Lockett phone case! Zaiba would call her aunt in Pakistan and they would talk for hours about their hero’s latest adventure. Sometimes Zaiba thought that Aunt Fouzia loved the books even more than she did.

“She saw you because your feet were poking out!”
Zaiba’s younger half-brother Ali chimed in, wriggling between Zaiba and Poppy. “How long will we all have to dance until Sam’s Mehndi is finished?”

“I heard you’re top of your class in maths, Ali. How long do *you* think it will take?” Aunt Fouzia tested him.

Ali tapped a finger against his chin as he counted. “Hmmm, each hand would take around twenty minutes, then double that for the feet, plus drying time...”

“So, have you had any thrilling cases to solve recently, Auntie?” Zaiba asked, squeezing her aunt’s hand while her brother’s eyes darted around the room, making rapid calculations.

“You know I can’t discuss any of my cases.” Aunt Fouzia pursed her lips. “But let’s just say, the prime minister owes me a big favour...”

“*The prime minister!*” the girls gasped. Aunt Fouzia was definitely the real deal. What could the crisis have been this time? Ten Bengal tigers let loose in parliament?

“... then the song and dance contest would have

to go on for one hour and fifty minutes!” said Ali triumphantly.

“Brilliant, Ali.” Aunt Fouzia patted his cheek. “You’d better get dancing!”

The music for the grannies’ dance finished and the whole room erupted into applause.

“Zaiba, Ali, there you are,” came a warm voice from behind them. It was Zaiba’s stepmum Jessica, who she called Mum, and she was ready to dance. “It’s the moment we’ve been practising for!”

“I think I’ll just watch this one, Mum.” Zaiba wasn’t much of a dancer, and besides, she couldn’t keep up her safety observations and dance at the same time.

“What?” her mum cried. “But we’ve been working on it all week!” Zaiba’s mum hadn’t realized that the song and dance contest was supposed to be just a bit of fun. In fact she’d been taking it quite seriously, making the whole family stay up until late memorizing the choreography.

“I’ll still perform, Mrs— Oh!” Poppy quickly shut up after Zaiba squeezed her hand.

But there wasn't time for Jessica to try and persuade them as the music had started and Zaiba's dad, Hassan, whisked Ali and Jessica on to the dance floor.

"Let's see those feet dancing," he grinned, shaking his hips to the beat.



2 WHO HAS A SECRET?

Zaiba glanced over at Sam, who was doing her best to stifle her laughter. Hassan's dad dancing had certainly cheered her up and her shoulders were shaking with laughter.

"Stop moving!" the henna artist scolded her. "Do you want a flower pattern or a squashed snail?" An important part of the Mehndi design was the inclusion of the husband's initials. Zaiba had heard stories that the longer the henna stain lasted on the bride's hands, the longer their love would last. But after hearing Zaiba's couple name suggestion, Sam had asked for *SamTan* to be written instead.

Zaiba's gaze returned to the dance floor. There was something about this that wasn't ... quite ... right.

"Dad doesn't normally dance," she muttered.

"You're lucky," Poppy said. "My dad dances in the kitchen all the time. It's so embarrassing!"

Zaiba tapped a finger against her chin, thinking. Why was her dad suddenly so interested in shaking his stuff on the dance floor in front of all these people? He'd sat watching cricket when they'd been practising at home. Dancing just wasn't him!

"Anyway, *I* wanted to dance..." Poppy pouted sulkily, drawing Zaiba's attention back to her best friend.

"Don't worry, Pops." Zaiba smiled. "I have a feeling Aunt Fouzia has found us something better to do." She looked up at her aunt whose eyes were scanning the room.

Aunt Fouzia cleared her throat and put on a deep voice. "I do indeed. Your next assignment, Agent Zaiba, with the assistance of Agent Poppy, is to work out..." She took Zaiba by the shoulders and steered her round to look at the rest of the room. "Who here has a secret. Let's see if you can read the body language of the guests."

Zaiba felt her detective skills kicking in. She immediately froze as she spotted Mariam still sitting silently with her parents. Mariam had been scowling at her nastily but her face broke out in a smug smile and she gave a thumbs down as she spotted Zaiba's dad dancing. He was kicking his feet like some sort of clumsy donkey! Zaiba's heart thumped in her chest. Did Mariam have to be quite so horrible to her still? Who carried that much of a grudge over a unicorn piñata?

As her cousin started to get down off her seat, Zaiba quickly looked away and searched the rest of the room. Aha! Grandpa's hand was creeping towards the last samosa on the buffet table. But before Zaiba could say anything, her grandma slapped his hand away. Well, Grandpa's big appetite wasn't such a big secret.

"Come on," Aunt Fouzia teased, poking Zaiba in the ribs. "Keep looking!"

Poppy had already given up and was watching the dancing, marking through the moves that she'd memorized the minute Zaiba had shown them to her. Zaiba concentrated harder. Could it be the sulky boy

underneath the dining table using napkins to create a fort? *No*, that wouldn't be scandalous enough for her aunt Fouzia. She had to focus.

Focus.

"There!" Zaiba cried out, pointing at her suspect. She'd been right. Her dad *was* up to something!

"Shh!" Aunt Fouzia patted Zaiba on the head. "You've figured it out, but let's not ruin the surprise for the other guests."

Together they watched her dad sneak behind the curtains at the back of the dance floor and then pop out the other side to stand in a corner of the room. His gaze shifted from side to side. *What's he up to?* Zaiba wondered.

As Jessica, Ali and a few other cousins carried on dancing in formation, it was unlikely anyone would notice he was gone. Then a waiter with floppy hair, wearing a badly fitting uniform, appeared. He handed over a tray bearing a beautifully decorated celebration cake with multi-coloured-icing flowers piped around the edges to ... Zaiba's dad! *So that's what he was doing yesterday when he got up at 4am!* He'd told the family it

was to watch the hockey – to watch the live matches in Pakistan, a fan had to get up extremely early. Last night’s hockey had clearly been a cover story for her dad’s other passion – baking.

He made an entire cake without me noticing, Zaiba thought glumly. “I can’t believe I missed that.”

“Don’t worry.” Her aunt gave her a hug. “Keep honing your detective skills. You’ll get there!”

Suddenly a huge sigh of *ooohs* and *aaahhs* swept over the crowd. Zaiba’s dad had reappeared on the dance floor holding out the celebration cake to SamTan. Everyone applauded and Sam blew them a kiss from the stage. Hassan carefully carried the cake over to her.

“Let’s go get a closer look!” Poppy gushed, eyeing up the cake.

There was a pause as the music faded back into the DJ’s own mix of cheesy pop. During the silence, Zaiba heard some banging above the ceiling. What was that? But Aunt Fouzia and Poppy each took hold of a hand and dragged her to join the small crowd up on the stage, who were admiring the celebration cake.



“Zaiba! Wasn’t your family amazing?” Sam smiled.

“They were definitely ... astonishing,” Zaiba joked, poking her tongue out at her dad.

“Are you enjoying the party?” Tanvir joined in.

“Oh, definitely. Thank you for inviting us!”

Poppy followed suit. “Happy wedding ... marriage ... thing,” she stammered, handing Sam a present.

“Oh, Poppy, how sweet of you!” Sam was shocked. “You don’t usually give the bride a present at a Mehndi so I really wasn’t expecting anything...”

“And Pops ... that’s a *pakora*,” Zaiba whispered.

“Oops!” Poppy quickly swapped the snack for the small tissue-paper parcel she had tucked away in her purse.

“Poppy, it’s beautiful!” Sam seemed touched as she opened the present. Inside was a beaded bracelet that Poppy had made at after-school club.

“And pakoras are my favourite.” Tanvir winked, which made Poppy giggle.

“You must be over the moon.” Jessica smiled, hugging Aunt Fouzia. “The party is wonderful and *such* a beautiful

venue. A real-life castle for your princess!”

“Thank you, we were starting to lose hope at the end of last month. We couldn’t seem to find anywhere to host us.” Aunt Fouzia shrugged. “All the hotels in the area are having issues at the moment. No one would let us book! One hotel was flooded, one had a bug infestation. Then Mr Stevens at the White Hall cancelled last minute—”

“The Royal Star is beautiful!” Zaiba’s dad chimed in, trying to cut off Aunt Fouzia’s ramblings. “Just as beautiful as my niece!”

“Yes, but…” Sam began to say, placing a hand on Zaiba’s shoulder.

“*And* did you know she’s the youngest doctor on her ward?” Aunt Fouzia interrupted.

“Why, of course,” Jessica replied.

“How could we ever forget?” Zaiba’s dad added cheekily.

Zaiba cleared her throat. “I think Sam wanted to say something.”

The bride kissed her on the cheek. “Thank you, Zaiba. What I was going to say is that I was a little nervous

about how today would go.”

“Why?” Zaiba asked, sensing a mystery.

“Well...” Sam started, tilting her head to one side, “the hotel manager phoned me last night to say that they had another last-minute guest for an event.” She leaned into the group and they crowded round. “A celebrity!” She straightened up, smoothing down her silk sari. “I didn’t want anything to take away from my day, but the hotel manager assured me that the hotel was all set up to cater for two important guests.” She glanced at Tanvir. “Well, three important guests.”

Zaiba’s eyes widened. *A VIP guest, here?*

“Who’s the celebrity?” she asked breathlessly.

Sam shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s confidential.”

“We should go and investigate,” Zaiba said to Poppy, who nodded eagerly.

Jessica turned to the girls. “Go on then, you two. But make sure you keep checking in with one of us.”

Sam opened her arms and Zaiba gave her a big squeeze – being careful not to smudge her henna patterns that were still drying. One smudge and a whole

flower design could be obliterated!

“It’s going to be a great party,” she whispered to her cousin. But looking up at Sam, Zaiba thought she could still see a glint of worry in her eyes. Zaiba knew that the surprise mystery guest wasn’t the only reason Sam was feeling nervous.

Two days earlier Sam had confided in her younger cousin. “All those people, I’m not used to the attention being on me,” she’d admitted, busily sorting through the personalized place settings. “What if I say something silly or trip over my dress?”

Zaiba felt a shiver of concern. Sam deserved the best Mehndi party in the world. She made a secret promise to herself that she would make *certain* Sam enjoyed her night.

“Don’t worry, cuz,” Zaiba said. “I’ll make sure there’s no funny business!”

“Zai, I think Poppy’s waiting for you,” her dad called, pointing towards the door where Poppy had already stationed herself. Zaiba quickly nodded and released Sam from her tight hug. But before Zaiba had a chance

to follow her friend, her dad took her to one side and said seriously, “Zaiba, promise me you’ll behave. It’s a big deal for your cousin to have her party here.”

“Of course.” Zaiba crossed her heart.

Hassan chucked Zaiba under the chin. “Oh, and take your brother with you!” her parents sang together before disappearing back into the crowd.

“Look, Zaiba!” Ali tugged at his sister’s sleeve.

Poppy was waving urgently from the doorway that led out on to the driveway. The Mehndi party was in the function hall of the hotel, a separate annexe just off from the reception area. Was the VIP guest here *already*?

“Go, sweetheart. See what you can detect!” Aunt Fouzia gave Zaiba a gentle push.

Zaiba raced across the dance floor, dodging couples and the waiter with floppy hair, who was now handing out drinks. She nearly ran into Mariam, who appeared out of nowhere to block her way.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asked, smiling smugly.

“Sorry, Mariam. I just need to get past,” Zaiba panted,

ducking to one side. She really didn't want another argument now. Ali raced past them to the door, looking back at Mariam curiously.

"I knew your family would make fools of themselves in the dance contest," Mariam laughed nastily and wiggled her phone at Zaiba. "Now I'll *always* have video evidence. Who shall I send it to first? How about ... everyone in your year group at school?"

Zaiba sighed impatiently. "Do what you want. But don't forget, Mariam, they're *your* family too."

She continued on past her cousin – now standing in stunned silence – towards Poppy, who was still frantically waving. If anyone was going to get a first look at the celebrity, it was definitely going to be Pops!

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 now lives and works in Cambridge and is completing a master's degree in children's book illustrations at the Cambridge School of Art.

Her passion has always been children's illustration and she loves to draw kids, cats, plants, girls in cool outfits and cute little objects! Creating a magical mix of the ordinary and extraordinary Daniela loves to highlight subtle detail and find beauty in everyday life.