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*To my niece – the real OG Maaryah – and the daughter
I never had. Love you always, Khamoni x*

Odd Girl Out
is a
DAVID FICKLING BOOK

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Chapter One

The plane makes its descent towards London Heathrow, splatters of rain decorating the windowpane. Everything is green, brown and grey, a world apart from the yellow desert I've left behind. I sneak a glance at my mum next to me. Her eyes are closed, but judging by the vein bulging on her forehead, she feels just as anxious as I do. I resist the urge to slip my hand into hers, like I used to do until I was far too old to be clutching onto my mum like she was my comfort blanket.

It feels weird to be coming here in September instead of June. The sky is greyer than it was the last time I was here, echoing my feelings. I've visited the UK with my mum every summer since I was born, escaping the blistering Dubai heat to spend three glorious months with my extended family in London. My dad could never get enough leave from work, so he'd join us for the last couple of weeks, and we'd go to theme parks, West End shows, football matches. I used to moan so much when he'd drag me to the Emirates stadium. As much as he tried to instil a love of football in me, I wasn't

interested in a bunch of sweaty men kicking a ball around a field.

Now, I'd do anything to go to a match with him. My heart constricts, as it always does when I think of my dad and my brand-new, broken life.

'Mum, we're here,' I whisper loudly after we've made a bumpy landing and the plane has ground to a halt. People have started getting up and are shrugging on their jackets, but her eyes remain firmly shut.


'Mum!' I implore, more urgently, as I have a vision of us being the last people on the plane, and the cabin crew having to carry Mum out on a stretcher. Her eyes open slowly, like it's a struggle to keep her eyelids apart, like it's a struggle to exist. My body slackens in relief.

'Sorry, jaan,' she says, her voice strained from too many hours of crying. 'Come on, let's go.'

London Heathrow is drab and dreary compared to the glitz and glam of Dubai International Airport, even more so than usual. Usually, I'm excited to be here. Usually, I've already switched to my UK eSIM, and as we queue at passport control, I start posting on Snapchat and text all my friends. Usually, I've got a big list of things I want to do while I'm here, starting with shopping on Oxford Street and analysing all the latest fashion trends.



Now, the unknown stretches out before me. I see the cracks I had previously glossed over: the worn carpets, the smelly toilets, the passport control people eyeing us suspiciously as they scan our British passports.

'*Boro Affa!* Maaryah! Over here!' Uncle Kamil, one of Mum's four brothers, calls out to us as we walk through



arrivals with our trolleys. My face breaks into my first smile in ages and I hurry over to him and bury myself in his arms. My mum's the eldest of seven, with four younger brothers and two younger sisters. Most of them live in North London with their families. 'Boro Affa' means 'eldest sister' in Sylheti, the dialect spoken in the region of Bangladesh we're from.

'All right, Kam?' Mum says, giving him a quick hug. He grabs my trolley containing whatever material pieces of my life I had been able to salvage within the luggage allowance – my favourite cold-weather-friendly clothes, a couple of books, framed photos – and Mum falls into step with him. I trail behind them, trying not to eavesdrop on their conversation. My uncle speaks so loudly that it's hard not to. I hear him say 'bastard' and 'that piece of shit', and I guess he's referring to my dad. My stomach churns and I try to swallow the lump that has permanently lodged itself into my throat.



'Maary-jaan! Come here my darling!' Nani cries as she throws open the front door of their Victorian terrace, grabbing me and pulling me right into her bosom. I hug my grandmother back, and before I can stop myself, I burst into tears. That sets her off, and the two of us stand in the doorway crying until she gently pulls away and reaches for my mum. Then Mum starts sniffing, and Nani whispers stuff in her ear. I take that as my cue to leave.

Hearing the commotion, my uncles and aunts gather in the hallway, followed by all my little cousins who are running, sliding and jumping down the stairs, before launching themselves at me, the only granddaughter on this side of the family. I trip over a scooter that's been discarded in

the hallway amongst the countless shoes, coats and brown Amazon boxes.

‘How are you coping? Are you OK?’ Aunty Ayesha asks me when I’ve been greeted by everyone and finally managed to go up to her room to change out of my usual travelling outfit of joggers and a hoodie and into my PJs.

Aunty Ayesha and Uncle Ish are the only unmarried ones and still live at home with my grandparents. Uncle Kamil lives here too, with his wife, Aunty Yasmin, and two little sons; Ilyas the tornado and baby Zayd. Also in the house today are Uncle Ridwaan who lives in Palmers Green with his wife, Aunty Basheerah, and their three kids, who are the least sociable of my cousins. I can hear them crying somewhere in the house. Then we’ve got my other aunt, who I call Khalamoni, her husband, Uncle Abdulla, and their two boys, Kareem and Yousef. The only ones who aren’t here today are Uncle Kaif, his pregnant wife, Aunty Amira, and their son Eesa, because they live in Singapore.

There’s always a LOT going on in big, fat Bengali family on my mum’s side, and I used to love the noise, the mess, the pandemonium. I used to love how every summer I managed to slot right in like a missing jigsaw piece. I used to find the confusion comforting. But now, the chaos is overwhelming, and all I want to do is curl up into a ball and hide away in my old bedroom, in my old house, in my old life.

‘Sort of,’ I reply, as once again, my eyes begin to prickle with tears. Crying, like hugging, is something I never did much of, pre-divorce. I guess I was lucky I didn’t have much to cry about back then. Now, anything seems to set me off, and it’s proper embarrassing.

‘I’m so sorry this has happened,’ Aunty Ayesha says, drawing me in for another cuddle.

‘Tell me about it,’ I reply, grateful for the opportunity to talk about it with her. ‘I keep thinking that they’ll patch things up. I mean, they’ve been together for seventeen years! How can they fall out of love like that? None of it makes sense to me. There must be other reasons, right? People with kids don’t just break up like that because they’ve “grown apart”.’

Aunty Ayesha looks away. ‘I don’t know,’ she says quietly. ‘Crappy things happen sometimes, even if it doesn’t make sense.’

‘For real.’

We fall silent as we both sit there on her bed, like we’ve done many times before. With only six years between us, we’ve always been more friends than aunt and niece. Today feels different, though. I don’t feel like watching Korean dramas with her or making funny Tiktoks. I want her to tell me that everything’s going to be OK, but she doesn’t. As she stares out of the bedroom window, I realize she looks as lost as I feel.

Dinner is part sombre, part raucous. The adults are trying not to say anything to upset Mum and me, and the kids are running riot. Ilyas climbs onto the kitchen island and jumps off onto the tiled floor yelling, ‘I can fly!’ There’s so much noise that it’s difficult to have a conversation, and I’m thankful for it. Talking to Aunty Ayesha is one thing, but I’m not ready to listen to how much the rest of the Choudhury clan hate my dad’s guts.

All around me, everyone is tucking into their food like they haven't eaten for days. I'm not surprised; Nani's food is banging and this is a family of foodies. The funny thing is, Mum and I are probably the only ones who *actually* haven't eaten properly in ages, but we're the ones who are pushing food around our plates.

I know I should eat. My mum is a crap cook, so who knows when I'll have a decent meal next. In Dubai, we had house help who did all that, and Mum never had to bother. But it's hard to enjoy food when your whole existence has been cut into two. And post-divorce isn't just about your parents having broken up; it's moving across the world and starting up a whole new life in a new country, new school, new friends, new house. It's saying goodbye to everything and everyone you once knew and feeling petrified that you won't be able to fit in to your new life. It's not knowing when you'll see your dad next, but feeling too afraid to mention him for fear of upsetting your mum and her whole extended family.

'Is that all you're having? Here, take some lamb,' Nani scolds, grabbing my plate and adding a ladleful of tender lamb curry onto a bed of buttery pilau rice. She's also made kebabs, tandoori chicken, dhal and a king prawn bhuna; all my mum's favourites.

'Sorry, Nani, I'm not that hungry these days,' I answer without thinking, and immediately regret it when I see the look she exchanges with my grandad. Mum doesn't clock any of it; not my eating habits, nor the fact that my jumper looks oversized because I've become that skinny, not even the way everyone is staring at her like they don't recognize

her. She barely notices anything any more. Her plate is piled with food, but most of it remains untouched.

‘Sabina, zoldi khao,’ Nana, my grandad, says in Bengali, telling my mum to eat up. I don’t think she even hears him.

Later, as they’re cleaning up, I overhear Auntie Ayesha, Khalamoni and Auntie Yasmin talking to each other in hushed voices about how awful we look.

‘Look at Boro Affa’s dark circles,’ Auntie Yasmin whispers. ‘She looks like she hasn’t slept in months.’

‘She hasn’t,’ Khalamoni replies darkly.

‘They’ve both lost so much weight as well,’ Auntie Ayesha adds from her position at the kitchen sink as she washes whatever didn’t fit in the dishwasher. ‘They look so terrible. All gaunt and lifeless.’

‘Do you blame them?’ Khalamoni says. ‘Look what they’ve been through, what he did to them.’

‘I know,’ Auntie Ayesha sighs. ‘I can’t believe he had us all fooled like that.’

‘Sociopath,’ Khalamoni adds, because she always has to have the last word.

Auntie Ayesha turns to grab a dirty bowl and spots me lurking in the doorway with baby Zayd’s milk bottle in my hand.

‘Oh, let me take that from you,’ she says brightly, like she hasn’t been talking about me and my parents behind my back. I hand it over wordlessly and go up to her room. All I want to do is climb into her bed and hide under the covers, but I pray my Salaatul Isha first – the night prayers.

As always, the slow, methodical movements and the rhythmic Qur’anic verses in Arabic calm my nerves, and when I’m finished and ready to go to bed, my head feels clearer.

Turning off the light, I get in and as I lie there in the darkness, smothered under the heavy blanket, the conversation I overheard in the kitchen plays over and over in my head. What did Khalamoni mean by ‘what he did to them’? ‘He’ is obviously my dad. But what did he do? They broke up. As much as I hate it, and despite it being quite uncommon in our culture, it still happens. He didn’t ‘do’ anything specific, right? It doesn’t make him a ‘sociopath’. And then there was Auntie Ayesha’s comment about him fooling everyone. It didn’t sound like a general comment about how he fooled them into thinking he’d be a part of this family forever.

But if there was more to the story, and Auntie Ayesha knew about it, surely she’d tell me? She’s one of my best friends. Withholding information about *my* family and *my* life would be a complete betrayal, and I can’t imagine her ever betraying me.

I take out my phone and look up the proper meaning of ‘sociopath’: *a person with a personality disorder manifesting itself in extreme antisocial attitudes and behaviour*. That does NOT sound anything like my dad. Everyone loves him. *Loved* him. Until the breakup, my grandparents thought that he was the best son-in-law in the world, despite them originally being against my mum marrying him.

I hear Auntie Ayesha crawl into bed at some point later that night, and I wonder if I should confront her. But the urgency has been replaced by exhaustion and disappointment, so I turn my back to her and pretend I’m asleep.

Chapter Two

Breakfast is a lot quieter and more civilized than dinner with half the family back in their own houses. Aunty Yasmin and baby Zayd are still sleeping, so there's only Ilyas around creating mayhem. Today, he's pretending to be a racing car, and zooming about on an old skateboard Nana found in the cellar.

'Who gives a skateboard to a hyperactive three-year-old?' Nani grumbles when Ilyas crashes into her as she stands at the range frying handmade parathas. She turns her attention to Aunty Ayesha, who looks bleary-eyed and confused, rolling pin in one hand and iPhone in the other. 'And why does your dough look like the map of Europe? Who's going to marry you if you can't even roll a proper circle?'

When Nani's back is turned, Aunty Ayesha rolls her eyes and gives me a knowing look, and I manage a sympathetic smile back.

When the parathas are ready, someone wakes Mum up who joins us, looking dishevelled in yesterday's outfit of jeans

and a crumpled shirt. There was a time when she wouldn't dream of leaving the house unless she looked like she had just stepped off the cover of *Vogue Arabia*. We all sit at the table and have them with the leftover kebabs from yesterday and freshly brewed masala tea, like we usually do on Eid. I force down a couple of mouthfuls.

'Why do you guys have to leave so early?' Auntie Ayesha complains as Mum hurriedly gulps down her tea and starts gathering all our bags. It's barely gone ten o'clock and everyone but my mum is still in their nightwear. I don't say anything, despite Auntie Ayesha staring at me as though waiting for me to back her up. The sting of my aunts chatting about us behind my back might have dulled, but I'm not ready to let it go completely. Not until I get to the bottom of things, anyway.

'We've got so much to do. We need to unpack, I need to hit the shops, Maaryah needs a uniform before Monday. I can't afford to spare the time today.'

'You should have come last week,' Nana complains, reaching for another paratha. Nani scowls at him and moves the dish away; she's always telling Nana off for eating food that is bad for his health. 'Why did you leave it so late, when term has already started?'

'Abbu, you know I had to wait for all the paperwork in Dubai to come through! Do you think I wanted Maaryah to start a week late?'

'Are you sure you don't want one of your brothers to go with you?' Nani steps in, trying to defuse the tension as my mum raises her voice. She starts clearing the dishes from the table. I get up to help her, but she shoos me away like she always does.

‘Ridwaan said he’ll pop by tomorrow,’ Mum replies tersely. ‘They did a lot when I came down last month. It’s the easy stuff now, time consuming, that’s all.’

After breakfast, I get ready quickly, tidying up my stuff as best I can, considering the fact that I used to have house help who not only tidied and cleaned my room for me, but also washed, ironed and put my clothes away.

Aunty Ayesha has the smallest room in the house, and it’s even more cramped with my suitcase splayed open and half the contents spilling out. The shelves are laden with books, ornaments and skincare products, and the vanity table is overflowing with all the latest make-up palettes.


I step back and survey the room I’ve ‘tidied’ and it barely looks any better than it had ten minutes ago. The covers are crumpled and don’t have the smooth hotel look that Dolly used to achieve every morning. The cushions are lopsided and I forgot to rearrange the vanity table where I had shoved everything to one side to fit my toiletries and make-up bag. My shoulders slump. No matter how hard I try, it feels like I can never get anything right these days.

‘Is everything all right? You’re being a bit quiet,’ Aunty Ayesha asks, entering the room as I’m changing into a hoodie and jeans.

‘Fine,’ I reply, unable to meet her gaze in case she can tell how annoyed I am. She stands there for a bit longer, watching me stuff my toiletries back into my suitcase.

‘I like your hoody,’ she tries again. ‘Did you customize it yourself?’

I nod brusquely. She *knows* I did. I sent her a picture of it as soon as I had finished it. It took me ages to treat the



silk first, then print out all the different Banksy images that I liked onto the fabric at this little printing shop I discovered in Sharjah, before cutting them up and hand-sewing the patches all across the sleeves. It was a part of a collection of hoodies I had created for a design contest back in Dubai. Now, in London and far away from my old life and old dreams, it feels like it was all a massive waste of time.

After a while, my aunt gives up trying to engage with me and instead of feeling better that she's finally leaving me alone, I feel worse.

When I go downstairs, I find Uncle Kamil and my mum loading up our 'new' car with our bags whilst Nana, Nani and Auntie Ayesha crowd around on the pavement. I stand shivering in the doorway and dubiously appraise the ancient Mercedes that my grandad has had lying around in the garage for the past ten years. It's a far cry from the gleaming Range Rover my mum drove in Dubai, and I wonder how it will manage the journey to the middle of nowhere; aka, my new ends.

'Are you sure you'll be OK driving on the left again? It's been a while,' Uncle Kamil asks Mum as he nervously hands her the key.

'I'll be fine,' she replies. She doesn't look fine. She looks like she's going to be sick. 'It's automatic right? That's the main thing.'

'Er, it's not. It's a manual.'

There's an awkward silence, with no one quite knowing how to make the situation better.

'Make sure you come round every weekend,' Nani says eventually, pressing a bag of Tupperware into my hands, so

we have edible food for a few days. ‘Maary, you’re shivering. That hoodie isn’t enough. Go and put a coat on.’

‘I don’t have a coat,’ I admit. I haven’t needed a coat since we went skiing in France two years ago, and I outgrew that one ages ago.

‘I’ll try to come but I’ll be busy with setting up the salon and all that,’ Mum says to Nani as though I haven’t spoken, getting into the driver’s seat and adjusting the mirrors.

‘I don’t want to hear it,’ Nani says. ‘Maaryah needs her family. And she needs a coat, Sabina. What is this? I still don’t understand why you went and bought a house in the middle of nowhere, so far away from all of us! I don’t understand why she doesn’t have a coat!’

‘The house was all I could afford, OK? I needed money for the salon as well, you know this.’

‘You could have looked at other areas in North London,’ Nani huffs, wiping her eyes. ‘Edmonton is cheaper than here, but it’s still close enough for us to see you regularly.’

‘Edmonton’s a crap hole,’ Mum replies tersely. ‘And it’s still more expensive than Harlow. I don’t know why you’re giving me a hard time about it all! I’m doing what I can, all right?’


‘No need to get worked up and use foul language!’ Nani sniffs, taking out a tissue from her dressing-gown pocket.

‘Leave her alone, Rumi,’ Nana says to Nani. ‘She knows what she’s doing.’


‘Oh, so you weren’t the one nagging her in the kitchen?’ Nani turns on Nana and they begin to bicker.

From where I’m standing, I don’t think my mum has a clue.


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It took Mum three attempts to remember how to use clutch control and get the car moving along the road. My body jerks every time she changes gear and her knuckles turn white as she wrestles with the circa 2004 non-power-steering wheel. I don't want to make a tense situation even more stressful, so I recite *Ayaatul Kursi*, the Arabic protection prayer, over and over in my head and then let fate decide our future.



It takes us forever to get to Essex, with Mum crawling way below the speed limit along the cracked, pot-holed roads, and screaming profanities at drivers who are doing a much better job of driving than she is. After all, everyone else knows which side of the road they're supposed to be on, and which way to go round a roundabout. We also stop at a petrol station which plays out like a scene in a comedy, only in our version, no one's laughing. First, we pull up at a pump and wait for someone to come and fill up the car like they do in Dubai. No one does, of course. When we finally make sense of what's happening, Mum tries to get out of the car, but the door handle jams and won't open. Then, if *that* isn't enough, upon eventually exiting the car we discover that the filler cap is on the other side and the pump hose isn't long enough to go all the way round the car. By this point, a queue has formed behind us, and you can tell that they're getting pissed off with the brown hicks who don't even know how to navigate a petrol station.



When we finally stop outside a tiny little yellow-brick terrace with an even smaller driveway, I barely look up from my group chat with my friends, because there's no way this is our house.

Gyal Dem

Maaryah: Pray for me. Mums trying to drive a manual on the wrong side of the road n we've nearly died three times already

Liya: OMGGGGGGG no way I cant believe aunty sabs is so basic

Fatima: Shurup @Liya shes not basic shes obvs struggling w gettin used to London again

Sara: whats ur new house like?

Maaryah: we're nearly there I think, will send pics once we've settled in x

Mum kills the engine, hoists herself out of the car and starts fumbling around in her Louis Vuitton tote for the keys. I drag my eyes away from my phone. Oh God. This *is* our new house! Our old house in Dubai was a Spanish-style villa, with four bedrooms, five bathrooms, maid's quarters and a modest swimming pool. I doubt we could even fit a paddling pool here.

Turning up the volume of my AirPods, I close my eyes and listen to Beyoncé tell some man to go to the left with all his shit packed into a box. Thanks to my parents, I've been exposed to nineties and noughties pop, hip-hop and R&B my whole life, so now I have the music taste of a middle-aged woman. I listen to new stuff as well, whatever's trending on TikTok, but it's the golden oldies that give me the most comfort. But then, I'm suddenly overcome by a memory so vivid that I see it play out in my mind's eye as though I'm watching it in the cinema in 3D. I'm eight years old and 'Single Ladies' comes on the TV. I start dancing along, and Mum joins me and we're jumping and singing as loud as we can when my

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dad stomps out of his home office into the living room and sees us. Mum and I stop bouncing around for a second and look at each other, wondering if Dad is going to tease us or ask us to keep it down. Instead, he joins in and starts flailing his arms around and wiggling his hips. We all collapse into hysterics and when Dolly walks in and sees us in a heap on the rug, we laugh even harder.

Tears slide down my face as the memory engulfs me, wrapping around my heart and squeezing it so tight that it almost feels like it will be crushed to a pulp. My *family* has been crushed to a pulp.

The passenger-side door swings open and my mum looks down at my wet face in concern.

‘Look, I know it’s not what you’re used to,’ she begins, a bit defensively. ‘But it’s the best I could do with my budget.’ Her misreading my misery almost makes me snort in derision. Did she *really* think that I would be this upset over a stupid house?

‘It’s fine,’ I sniff, wiping my eyes with my sleeves as I follow her out of the car and into the house I’m expected to call ‘home’. ‘Space and comfort is overrated,’ I say and catch her looking at me like she can’t tell whether I’m being serious or not.

The entire house – ground floor *and* first floor – could probably fit in our old living and dining room. The hall is too tiny to have a shoe rack, let alone a boot room like the old house, and there’s no space to hang coats either, but I see pegs in the downstairs loo. I take my shoes off and leave them on the cheap laminate by the front door.

‘This is the kitchen, isn’t it cute?’ Mum says brightly as she begins our tour around the house. We move on to the

combined living and dining area at the back, facing a tiny concrete garden. Real grass is one of the things I've always loved about England. My face must have fallen, because Mum ushers me away from the depressing view and pulls me upstairs where there's a dated beige bathroom, a small master bedroom with a double bed and fitted cupboards, a similar-sized second room with a single bed, and a box room with a desk and super compact sofa bed. Everything – all the walls and carpets – are a pale grey. So this is what Mum had been doing when she came to sort the house out over the summer. I can see that she has tried really hard to make it presentable for my arrival, and I try to make my face look like I'm happy, even though I'm anything but.

'What do you think?' Mum asks me hopefully, and I can't bring myself to tell her the truth. That it is horrible compared to our beautiful villa, with palm trees lining the front yard, the swimming pool in the back, the state-of-the-art kitchen with an island three times the size of our new kitchen, the marble-topped dining table that could comfortably fit twelve, my bedroom with its four-poster bed and en-suite bathroom with a rain shower and Japanese toilet.

'It's great,' I lie, my mouth dry. 'Perfect for the two of us.'

'Right?' she says, cheering up. 'Imagine cleaning a big house with no housemaid!'

I think back to earlier that morning, at my lame attempt to tidy Aunty Ayesha's room. It looks like *we* are the new housemaids. I'm going to have to learn how to do a better job.

As I unpack my suitcases, Mum goes out to buy groceries and other essentials, like mirrors. There's not a single mirror in the whole house and maybe it's a good thing. I don't need

another reminder of how ‘gaunt’ and ‘lifeless’ I look. I can’t hang up any clothes because we have no hangers, so I text my mum to buy some, and put away what I can in the chest of drawers. There’s no space for a desk in my room, not unless I swap the little vanity table for one, so I’ll have to do my homework and sewing in the study.

Without Mum around to analyse my facial expressions, I go around the house again. It’s not a complete disaster, if I’m honest. There are far worse houses out there. At least the bathroom has a proper mixer tap and a working shower. I can’t deal with using a bucket to bathe. And it’s clean. And there isn’t any weird 70s style bumpy wallpaper on the walls or ceiling. Or cobwebs hanging from the corners. The street is a small cul-de-sac, and I remember my mum saying how cul-de-sacs are safer because burglars can’t drive in and out of them fast enough. My mind struggles to comprehend this. In Dubai, we rarely locked our front door.

I look around Mum’s little room again, a lump forming in my throat. My parents’ old bedroom was huge, with a walk-in closet that could rival a Kardashian’s, and a hot tub in the en-suite that, to be fair, I doubt she ever used. My eyes fall on a tall, narrow IKEA-style chest of drawers, which just about fits against the wall at the end of her bed. The urge to open the drawers and take a look inside overcomes me. I’ve never snooped amongst my mum’s belongings before. We’ve always had a pretty open relationship, and I used to feel as though I could talk to her about anything.

All that went out of the window when my parents got divorced for no apparent reason. And I desperately need to find out why. Why did Khalamoni call my dad a ‘sociopath’?

Before I can talk myself out of it, I begin opening up the drawers and rummaging through them one by one. I don't know what I'm hoping to find, since we haven't even unpacked our things yet. Almost all the drawers are empty, bar one. Inside I find a jewellery box, a USB stick and a sheaf of papers. Mum must have brought this stuff with her last month.

I open the box first, and flinch when I find her engagement ring and eternity band; the gigantic diamonds sparkling in the light; a reminder of everything that has been lost. I snap the box closed and hurriedly flick through the papers. From what I can tell, they are divorce papers and property papers. There are too many pages so I don't bother reading them. I don't have an old-fashioned USB port on my Mac so I can't look at what's on there. Probably pictures of their old life together.

Feeling more than a little guilty, I leave the room, telling myself over and over that snooping through Mum's things wasn't that bad; I need to know what's going on. It's my *right* to know. But still, guilt writhes around in my belly and I push the feeling of nausea down as I continue to unpack.

Mum takes forever at the shops, and when she comes home, I see why. She's basically bought the whole supermarket. Someone had to help her load all the shopping into the car. She's even bought a TV, which has nowhere to go. We have no TV stand and there's no way my Mum knows how to drill a hole in the wall. I ask her if she bought any brackets, to which she responds tersely: 'Brackets are punctuation.' Then, with an audible sigh, she adds, 'Don't worry, your Uncle Ridwaan's coming over tomorrow to help us

hang things.’ Panting a little, we bring more and more full-to-the-brim plastic bags into the house. Apparently you have to buy them. No wonder no one here has any money. They spend it all on carrier bags.

‘What about internet?’ I ask. ‘How does that work here?’


Mum looks flummoxed for a second. ‘Use the data on your phone, or hotspot to mine. I’ll figure it out. Chill out.’

I open my mouth to ask how I’m supposed to use the internet when she’s not around for me to hotspot my phone or laptop to. My data is already running low and the thought of not being able to contact anyone makes my insides clench with anxiety. I close my mouth when I see the terse expression on her face.

We order vegetarian pizza for dinner because the nearest halal pizza shop is too far away, and decide to watch a movie on the laptop. I’m relieved because it’s better than sitting in silence. We haven’t watched a film together since before they split up, and I hope that this is the beginning of us becoming normal again.

Netflix opens up to the home screen where we have three usernames displayed – Mum, Dad, Me. With a nervous gulp, I try to log into my account before Mum notices Dad’s, but I’m too late. She freezes, a slice of pizza halfway to her mouth. Then she slowly places it back in the box and pretends to need the toilet. A moment later, I can hear her muffled sobs through the cheap plasterboard walls.

I look at the little icons that seem so irrelevant but mean so much. I still remember the day we sat there together choosing them. Mum kept hers a classic smiley face, but Dad used the Avengers logo for his and chose Peppa Pig for me,



which I always complained about, but never changed. He used to tease my posh accent when I was little and call me Peppa. Apparently I was a know-it-all like her as well. The threat of tears pricks my eyes, so I get up and head upstairs to my new room with its narrow little bed and brand-new bedding. I don't want Mum to catch me crying again. I feel cold, even under the duvet, but I can't be bothered to figure out how to use the central heating system. It's all so quiet, equally as still as it was in the villa when we were in the middle of the desert.

It's only when I'm about to fall asleep, that I realize that we forgot to go to the uniform shop and pick up my new school clothes.

