Zaiba peeped out of the annexe’s front doorway on to the grand driveway of the hotel. An intricately carved stone fountain sprayed water into the air, the droplets sparkling in the sun. On their tour of the hotel, Liza the receptionist had explained that the function hall used to be a barn and that’s why it was separate to the main building. This was probably for the best since Uncle Zaid had just started up the karaoke machine...

“I can see why it’s called the Royal Star – the queen could live here!” Zaiba gazed in awe at the three turrets. The building was split into three main sections – each leading up to a turret straight out of a fairy tale.
The middle section was the largest, where the hotel lobby was. This had one tall turret that looked out over the gardens, which surrounded the hotel in glossy, manicured lawns.

“That’s definitely where I’d want to live if I was a princess,” Poppy laughed, pointing at the spindly tower.

Two muscular men in black suits had positioned themselves by the main entrance’s revolving door and were engaged in a walkie-talkie conversation with an unseen person. They looked like bodyguards from a film!

“OK, agents, easy does it,” commanded Zaiba as they pushed their way through the revolving door, past the men and into the lobby. Zaiba put her hand up to signal a pause.

“I don’t see any celebrity,” Poppy huffed. Hotel staff were hurrying about and a handful of guests were checking out. A maid was dusting the heavy oak reception desk as two men in uniforms kicked out a long roll of red carpet across the tiled floor. Everything was polished to a high shine.

“They can’t have arrived yet. But I definitely want to be
here when they do! Let’s stay inside, out of sight. We can go to the window and take a closer look.”

Zaiba crept over to it, beckoning the others to follow her.

“This is the fanciest place I’ve ever been,” Poppy whispered. “I can see my face in that doorknob!”

The main hotel looked like one of those old black and white films that Zaiba’s mum liked to watch at the weekend. The walls were a dark maroon colour and the tiled floor was chequered black and white. Hanging on the walls were imposing oil paintings of old wrinkly men. It all seemed very familiar…

She gasped. “It’s just like the place described in *The Hidden Staircase*,” Zaiba whispered to Poppy. Aunt Fouzia had told Zaiba that Eden Lockett had stayed at this actual hotel and it had inspired her to write her sixth novel. Zaiba had no idea how someone wrote six whole novels – and that wasn’t even counting the others she’d written after the books had become an international success! But Eden Lockett had, all about her crime-fighting adventures.
“Here we go with Eden Lockett!” Ali said, rolling his eyes. Zaiba’s brother liked to pretend he was too cool for detective missions but she knew he liked helping. No, loved helping!

“A genius!”
“The ultimate …”
“… super spy!”
The girls high-fived in honour of their favourite hero.

“But how does Aunt Fouzia know that Eden Lockett stayed here? Does she know who Eden is?” Poppy pondered out loud. It was known among fans that Eden Lockett was just a pen name for a mystery author.

“She wouldn’t tell me,” Zaiba recalled unhappily. “She just tapped her nose like she always does.” Zaiba was certain that getting answers from a world-class agent like Aunt Fouzia would not be easy.

Suddenly there was a noise from beyond the windows. “Look, over there,” Zaiba whispered, pointing. An enormous shiny car was pulling up in the hotel’s drive.
“It’s a limousine! Come on, let’s get a closer look. Agents assemble!”

They rushed to the window seat and clambered up among the cushions – Zaiba in the middle, Poppy on her right-hand side and Ali perched on the edge. Zaiba slipped her phone out of her purse and began a voice recording.

“Time: 16:00 hours. Clue one – the hotel porter is rushing to open the door for the guest. He did not do this for us.”

“That’s because we’re only kids,” Ali pointed out.

“Shh, Ali!” Zaiba did her best to ignore her brother. “Clue two: the canine. Looks pedigree. I think it’s a—”

“Italian greyhound!” Poppy said in a rush. They were her favourite breed. A tiny little grey dog flopped out of the limousine on to the gravel, stretching its back legs. It was wearing a little quilted jacket and a sparkling collar with a charm at its throat.

“A dog like that is seriously expensive,” Poppy said, her eyes wide.

“How expensive?” Zaiba asked.
Poppy shrugged. “An Italian greyhound can cost——”

“Anywhere between five hundred and two thousand pounds,” Ali interrupted. For the millionth time, Zaiba wondered how her little brother kept all these facts and figures in his head. He shuffled forwards on the window seat, his nose pressed against the glass. “But they could just be rich, rather than a celebrity.”

“And clue number three...” Zaiba turned back to her phone and gestured at the endless stream of people arriving. There was someone carrying the celebrity’s handbag, another person clutching a mobile phone to her ear and a man in a black suit who shifted a zipped protective clothes cover on his shoulder, the bag bulging with outfits. “She’s travelling with an entourage. That’s definitely a celebrity move.”

“How do you know it’s a woman?” Poppy asked.

Zaiba gestured to the limousine’s door. A pair of elegant feet in shiny red shoes appeared.

“Correlis!” Poppy burst out. Zaiba had no idea what this meant, but Poppy’s passion for fashion suggested she was talking about the high heels.
“Look, I bet that woman’s her assistant.” Zaiba pointed at a young woman with blond hair slicked back into a neat bun. “Can you see her in-ear headset and the way she’s bossing the others around? She must be the one giving instructions to the men at the door.”

The celebrity’s entourage swarmed around the limousine. One of the muscular men stepped forwards from his position in the doorway with a large umbrella to shield the celebrity from view. A clever tactic! Zaiba got her phone ready to take some pictures for evidence, steadying her elbows on the window frame.

Now all they needed was for that umbrella to move just a bit lower...

“Curiosity killed the cat,” purred a voice. Zaiba whirled round to see a man standing behind them. He wore a waistcoat with a pocket watch on a chain and rocked back and forth on his heels. It was the hotel manager, Mr Ainsley. They’d bumped into him earlier, when Liza had been explaining how the hotel chandeliers each had three hundred and thirteen crystals.

“Three hundred and fourteen crystals,” a bald man in an
immaculate suit had interrupted. “I would never have three hundred and thirteen crystals in a chandelier – everyone knows that the number thirteen is bad luck.”

“Sorry, sir,” Liza had said meekly. “I was just showing our new guests around.”

“Ah, part of the Mehndi party,” Mr Ainsley had replied with a stiff bow. Zaiba had never had a person bow to her before. “We are honoured.” He’d turned away towards the library, but as he passed Liza he’d leaned close to give her a last instruction. “Remember, the VIP suite above the function room is still having the sunken jacuzzi put in. No one’s to go there. Those plumbers will be the death of me. They’ve already lost one gold tap.” And then he’d marched off, shutting the library door behind him.

Now, Mr Ainsley didn’t look very “honoured” any more to see them. “Little girls should no—” he began to say.

“And boy!” Ali protested.

“And boy,” Mr Ainsley corrected himself. “Should not be snooping on our distinguished guests.” His moustache twitched. “Come on, come away from the window.” He helped them down and ushered them across the hotel
lobby, back towards the annexe and the Mehndi party. There was a side door leading straight off the lobby into a corridor that attached to the annexe. Why hadn't Zaiba noticed this before? She'd have to add that detail to her map later. The side door stood ajar and Zaiba could see a pair of glittering eyes watching them. *Mariam again!* She must have told Mr Ainsley that they were snooping.

“I think they’re about to do a conga line, you wouldn’t want to miss that.” Mr Ainsley interrupted Zaiba’s thoughts.

The hotel manager walked towards his office, adjusting his crisp black blazer. His hands fiddled with the buttons and Zaiba noticed diamond cufflinks twinkling at the wrists. The office door had a brass nameplate reading *Hotel Manager*. As Mr Ainsley flung it open, Zaiba saw a little shelf with neat rows of tiny crystalline figures and awards the hotel had won. Wow, she thought. *He really likes glittery things.*

On the shelf below was another collection. A shamrock, a horseshoe, some dice and a little pottery ladybird.
“That’s a random collection! What are they for?” whispered Ali.

But Zaiba knew immediately. She thought back to the twelfth Eden Lockett novel, *The Case of the Charm*. “They’re lucky charms,” she whispered back. “Mr Ainsley clearly is superstitious.”

“Or really desperate for the hotel to succeed,” Ali suggested. “Doesn’t he know that’s all nonsense?”

“Maybe he’s both,” Poppy added. “Superstitious and desperate for the hotel to succeed.”

Just as he was about to shut his office door, Liza called over to him. “Mr Ainsley, it's the kitchen. Apparently the sandwiches have been cut into squares instead of triangles.”

Mr Ainsley sighed and went over to the reception desk. “Oh, that won’t do! I’ve told them a thousand times that sandwiches at the Royal Star only ever have three sides.” He shook his head despairingly. “We already have an issue with the VIP suite. I don’t need any more headaches today!” As he passed, rubbing his brow, he gave Zaiba and the others one last warning look.
“Remember. You’re welcome to explore the hotel, but leave our guests their privacy.” Then he glided away.

“It’s like he’s on wheels or something,” Poppy muttered.

The revolving door wheezed round. The celebrity and her entourage were making their way into the lobby. Zaiba gestured to a tall pot plant in the corner. “Quick! Over here!”

The three of them ran to hide. Zaiba held a finger to her lips before they carefully peered out. What would they see? A manicured hand waving? A shake of a famous head of curls? But there were too many people blocking the view! The only thing Zaiba could make out was the snout of the Italian greyhound as it sniffed around people’s feet on the red carpet.

Mr Ainsley rushed to greet the celebrity and then knelt to stroke the dog. His hand drifted to the charm at its collar.

“Ah!” they heard him say with interest. “Is that a lucky charm?” He straightened up to lead the celebrity away and Zaiba peered round to see the charm. It was a crescent moon with a little star hanging from its tip.
“I can’t see anything,” Ali grumbled.

“Shh!” Zaiba and Poppy said in unison. Mr Ainsley was now scolding the doorman who had scuffed the celebrity’s designer suitcase.

“Well, it is a Favelli Favello,” Poppy whispered.

“What’s that, a type of pasta? Let me see!” Ali started to push Zaiba out of the way.

“Stop shoving me,” Zaiba hissed, shoving him back. THUMP! Zaiba’s elbow hit the wooden panelling of the back wall.

“Ow,” she moaned, rubbing her arm. Then she froze. She stopped rubbing and started rapping her knuckles against the wall. “Did you hear that?” she whispered.

Poppy shrugged. “No?”

“Listen again.” Zaiba tapped along the edges of each wooden panel, concentrating hard.

Thud... Thud... Thud... THUMP!

That fourth thump had definitely sounded different.

Poppy’s eyes lit up with understanding. “Hollow,” she whispered.
Zaiba stifled an excited squeal. This was just like when Eden Lockett discovered *The Hidden Staircase*! Could the staircase really exist?

“Let’s see if this works...” Zaiba started to feel around the edges of the panel, looking for a hidden pressure point.

*Ping!*

The panel slid open.

“You’re a genius!” breathed Poppy.

“Don’t,” Ali said. “It’ll go to her head.” But he did look impressed.

Zaiba switched on her phone torch and angled it into the dark corridor that was hidden behind the sliding panel. A cloud of thick dust hung in the air and cobwebs stretched across the entrance. She squinted to make out a series of steps, winding up the building.

She’d been waiting to find one of these her whole life.

“A secret staircase,” she whispered, her eyes wide in amazement. “The very same one Eden Lockett wrote about.”
“So it wasn't just make-believe,” Poppy said in awe. They heard the sudden ping of the lift doors closing. The mystery celebrity was getting away!

“Come on,” Zaiba stepped boldly into the hidden corridor, pulling Poppy and Ali after her. When else would she get the chance to follow a secret staircase?

“This could allow us to explore the whole hotel…” Poppy's face lit up. “Secretly!”

“So we can track down our prey,” Ali said, grinning.

“She's not our prey,” Zaiba corrected. “She's our mission.”

Poppy's eyes gleamed. “Mission! I like it.”

The three of them turned to peer up the gloomy stairs. Zaiba put her weight on the first step, testing it.

“Woah! I didn't think you'd actually go through with it,” said Ali, shaking his head in admiration. “Especially with all those cobwebs…”

“We're going through with it. Come on!” Zaiba replied, excited.

Poppy smiled, switching on the torch from her phone too. She and Zaiba shone their beams on
the dark narrow stairs, which wound upwards in a corkscrew and out of sight. “We’re going to catch a celebrity!”
Do you have what it takes to join Zaiba and the Snow Leopard Detective Agency?

Turn the page to find out!
Blend into the background and observe. Listen, watch and smell your surroundings for vital clues.

Draw a map! Mark entrance and exit points – you never know when a high-speed chase might occur...

Make notes. Suspects, evidence and motives all need to be recorded.

Keep your fellow detectives safe and keep their spirits high! Snacks are good for this purpose.

The Golden Rule – Keep calm and carry on detecting!
JOIN THE SNOW LEOPARD DETECTIVE AGENCY!

Aunt Fouzia swears that an agent never shares her secrets, but we have a few just for you! Did you know...

The first Snow Leopard Detective Agency was set up in Karachi, Pakistan, by Aunt Fouzia and Zaiba's ammi in 1999. For years the sisters helped a range of clients. Now Aunt Fouzia is the lone head detective.

Aunt Fouzia has become a legend for cracking all sorts of cases, including crimes that involved a prime minister, a famous Bollywood actress and even the Karachi Stock Exchange!

Snow leopards are rare big cats which can be spotted (if you're lucky) roaming the mountains of Pakistan.
Snow leopards are feisty, great at camouflaging themselves and love exploring even the harshest of environments – just like the very best detectives!

Aunt Fouzia’s brain works best when she drinks lots of tea. Her record is ten cups of chai in one day!

Now the new unofficial UK branch of the Snow Leopard Detective Agency is up and running, with their first case solved! Will Zaiba, Poppy and Ali let any other agents into their top-secret organisation?