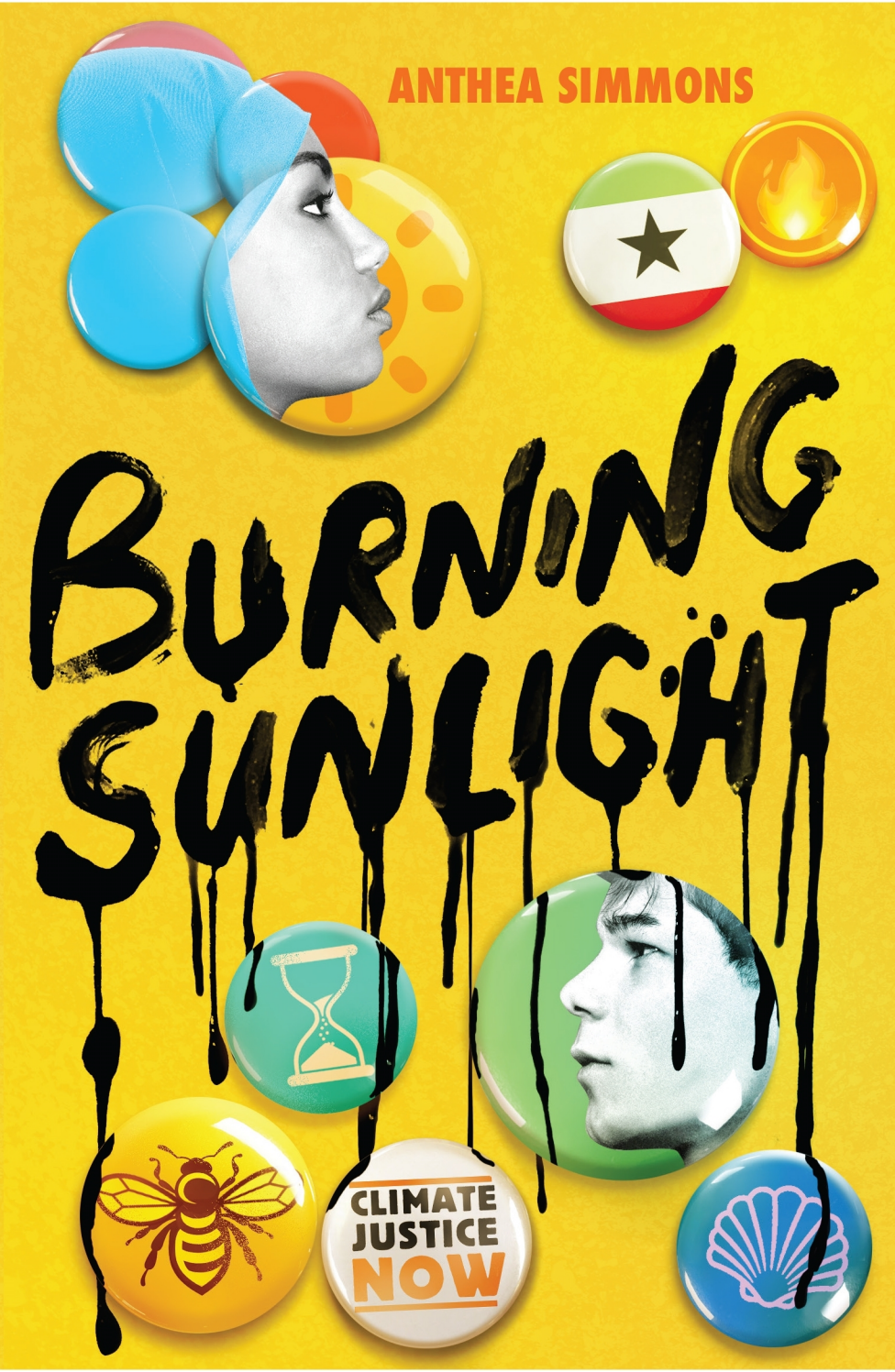
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To Alex, who read as I wrote, critiqued brilliantly and rescued many iterations of the manuscripts lost through my tech ineptitude, saving me from total meltdown!

And to Henry, as ever. Precious beyond words.

LUCAS

I lay on the smooth marble floor of the Natural History Museum, staring up through the bones of the giant 3D model of the ichthyosaur. It was as extinct as humankind would be if we didn't do something soon. I was playing dead, but my heart was beating as fast as a hummingbird's wings.

Around me, a sea of bodies covered in sheets, with only their whitened faces visible. Eyes closed. Barely breathing.

There was an eerie silence. It made me think of the stillness and quiet on the moors before a storm blew in. Only we were the storm, this time.

I felt fear and elation as we waited, waited, waited. Surely people could hear my heart, which thumped wildly underneath the bag of paint taped to my chest?

Zaynab lay next to me, her bony elbow sticking into my side, her crutch propped against my leg.

'You won't chicken out, will you?' she hissed under her breath. 'Promise! Promise me you are in!'

I turned my head towards her. She had asked me this a million times. Nothing had changed. She fixed me with her fierce stare and my heart stopped for a moment.

'Well?'

I nodded.

'I'm in. I promise.'

She moved her elbow just enough to stop my ribs hurting. We closed our eyes and got back to the die-in.

In a few minutes, we'd die again and wake the world up.

Oh yes.

ZAYNAB

I did not want to go to the UK, even if it was where Mama was born and I lived until I was four. I did not want to leave Mama. I didn't want to go somewhere I would no longer see her everywhere I looked, or hear her voice, or even almost feel her touch, and I did not understand why Father would want to, either.

Except, I was forgetting. For him, his work came first, before everything – even Mama with cancer. Even Mama gone and me on my own, missing her so badly that I could barely see the point of going on.

And now his work was tearing me out of the place where Mama and I had laid our roots, except that Mama remained deep in Somaliland soil, buried beneath one of the yeheb bushes which she had helped so many people to plant in the fight against the endless droughts.

'The change will be good for us. It will help us to forget,' Father said, as we were driven to the airport.

I said nothing in return. It seemed to me that he had already forgotten. Mama would have hated this trip. She would have hated that we were flying, hated that we were abandoning people who needed our help and turning our backs on the work she had done with the rest of the team at the charity to keep women safe in camps, to plant trees, to help them find a way to make a living when they had lost everything to the desert as it spread, destroying their farms.

'And it'll be an adventure. Something for you to tell your friends about!' he added. He had completely failed to notice that I had stopped hanging out with my friends since Mama died, that they bored me with their silly talk, that I was truly alone.

We spent the first night in the UK in a hotel near Heathrow. We'd been travelling for thirteen hours including the stop in Dubai. We were tired and it was cold. Not that it didn't get cold in Borama. It did. This was a different cold. I began to shiver and felt as if the shivering would never stop. I stood in the hotel room with its dim light and huge bed and white, shiny bathroom and stared at the tray of sandwiches which had no flavour, and I knew I was shivering with hatred and sadness. People said I was lucky to have this opportunity. I did not feel lucky. I was being torn away from my home and from Mama and everything that reminded me of her. I dug around in my suitcase and brought out a scarf that had been

hers. It still smelled of her perfume and I buried my face in the fabric and breathed deeply, then I set it aside and fished out my phone. I had downloaded an app to allow me to find Mecca. The qibla appeared on my screen, flickered and swung, settling in the direction of the door. I unrolled my mat and began my evening prayers. The focus cleared my mind of anger, but the inner calm did not last long.

I could hear my father in the next-door room, taking a shower. I began counting the minutes. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.

I felt anger growing inside me, spreading like a poison.

Ten. Eleven.

Finally, the noise of the shower stopped.

There is a saying in my religion: *The believer is not the one who eats his fill when the neighbour beside him is hungry*. It should also have said *'or wastes water when others go thirsty'*.

I waited for a moment or two and then I hammered on the wall and shouted: 'You hypocrite! You total hypocrite!'

Nothing.

Five minutes later, a knock at my door.

I ignored it, got into the bed with all my clothes on and fell asleep, with Mama's scarf held close.

ZAYNAB

My father was looking out the window of the train, pointing at things, trying to get me to pay attention, describing what he was seeing in a loud voice. I could hear him above the music in my headphones.

'Look at the rich soil in those ploughed fields. What fat sheep and cattle! See how lush that grass is, even now, after summer. They have none of our problems.'

He was trying to sell this place to me. Yeah. It was all green. Yeah. The cows and sheep were fat instead of scrawny. Did I really need to be told that this country was lucky?

A bit of me wanted to look out of the window, too, but then he'd have won. I closed my eyes and turned up the volume and soon I was asleep.

I dreamed I was back home. The grey hills and mountains in the distance. The turquoise and red roofs. The brightly-coloured domes of the nomads' aqals. The gob trees' twisted trunks and birds' nests of thorny branches.

And then my mother was there, too, braiding my hair, telling me about the latest family she had helped, the little girl she had fed, the woman she had taught to read. Only now she really was not with me. In my sleep, I could feel the tears coming. I could feel that I was half in the past, half in the present and I felt like I really wanted to stay in the past with Mama.

When Father woke me, a cry came out of me so loud that the other passengers all stared at me in horror and shock. My father felt he had to apologise to them. They looked away, embarrassed.

'You were dreaming,' he said, trying to take my hand. I pulled it away and he sat back in his seat and pointed out of the window, again.

'I was dreaming of Mama,' I said, searching his face for signs that he understood, but he just looked excited, like a child.

'I had to wake you to see this. Look!'

On one side, there was nothing but grey sea, heaving backwards and forwards like water in a bucket. The clouds seemed to skim the surface. It looked cold and unwelcoming. Through the other window, dark, ugly red rock rose up high. It must have been crumbling because there was wire netting all over it to trap any falling stones.

The train seemed to be travelling on a tightrope between the land and the sea.

'Just like home, eh?'

No. Not at all. It was nothing like the warm, orangey red of our soil. This was a dirty, dark red, like dried blood.

He didn't wait for my answer but went on, talking like he was a guidebook or something. 'This railway line has been washed away many times,' he told me, proudly. 'We are lucky there have been no severe storms this year. The railway is at risk from climate change and when the sea levels rise or the storms damage the rails and the line fails, it hits this region hard. Trade and tourism both suffer.'

'How sad for them,' I said, looking out to the sea, which had merged with the sky in one great, grey lump.

He frowned. 'I am just saying that we are all, in our different ways, in the same boat . . . or on the same train!'

He laughed at his own pathetic joke. Perhaps he was beginning to realise that he had made a mistake, coming back to this cold country with its privileged problems. It was a bit late for that.

'And that rock is nothing like ours,' I added and closed my eyes again. Even with them closed, I could almost see him, looking at me, searching my face for some love, some respect. Bit late for that, too.

Ten minutes later, he was reaching for my hand again.

'Come. We have arrived. This is our station.'

We heaved our bags out of the train and onto the

platform. It was raining and beginning to get dark. I still felt as if I had left part of myself in my dream and that I was now in a sort of nightmare. People were staring at us. I pulled my hijab further over my head to hide as much of my face as possible and stumbled after Father, through the ticket barrier and out onto the street. It all looked so cold. So grey. So dead.

We stood together for a while, feeling the rain soak into our clothes. I began to shiver again. Father pulled me close but I held myself away from him, stiffly, and after a moment he let go.

Someone tut-tutted and said, irritably, 'Should have stood over there, under the canopy.'

The woman who had spoken stood in front of us. Big. Wearing a massive woolly jumper covered in some disgusting crusty stains and what looked like clumps of animal fur. She smelled of cigarettes and something that reminded me of wet camel. I felt a pang of homesickness again.

'You the professor?' she asked, in the same aggressive tone.

'I am!' Father switched on his most powerful smile, teeth gleaming, eyes wide. She stared at him for a moment and then at me, before grabbing my suitcase and heading off for a car left with the engine running and the boot open. Father followed her, dragging his case, which she hoisted in as if it were as light as a feather.

The car had *Bea's Cabs* down the side and stickers of bees all over it. Was it a joke or couldn't she spell?

'Well, get in!' she said, impatiently.

The car smelled worse than she did, mainly because of various plastic trees hanging from drawing pins in the roof, which stank of something sweet and fake.

'Just you two, then?' she said, swinging the car out in front of a bus and then making a U-turn before putting her foot down.

'Just we two.'

'Where's your wife to, then? Left her behind, have you?'

'Yes. We have left her behind.' My father turned his head to look out of the car window but not before I had time to raise my eyebrows in a silent question.

'Probably for the best. Bloody awful weather here, pardon my French. What are you a professor of, then?'

'Economics, but I am here as part of a project on climate change and environmental sustainability.' My father said it in such a way that any normal person would have realised that he did not want to talk and so would shut up but not this Bea/Bee woman.

She laughed and laughed, hitting the steering wheel with the flat of her hand and rocking backwards and forwards in her seat. 'You've had a change of climate right enough!'

She thought she was funny.

We sat in silence. Nothing to look at as darkness fell. The road twisted and turned up and down hills. I felt sick. The smell. The twisting. The homesickness.

She caught my eye in her mirror.

'Don't you dare be sick in my cab, young lady! Five minutes tops. Shut your mouth and hold it in.'

She was accelerating hard as she spoke, and as we rounded a sharp corner at a crazy speed, I suddenly saw a figure in the road – a boy, his face white in the cab headlights.

He looked just like a ghost. Or just about to be made one.

I think I screamed.

LUCAS

Saturdays were good days for me. Everyone was out. Dad was with his mate, Stu, fishing. Mum was working in the supermarket in Yewburton, the little town where I went to school, three miles down the road from our hamlet. Lara, my seventeen-year-old sister, was in her room on her phone or out with her mates from college – shopping, usually. By lunchtime, I'd have done the washing-up and hung out the laundry.

Dad said I should get a Saturday job. He said that's what he did and that's how he got a bike and a proper football and all that sort of thing. It would've been good to earn some money, but there were no Saturday jobs for twelve-year-olds. So, there you go, end of that idea.

Dad took me fishing once, but I hated it. He and Stu just smoked rollies (which I had to make for them) and talked about stories in the papers and how everything was a disgrace or a shambles. I didn't join in. I couldn't. They laughed at

things that I did not think were funny at all. Plus I felt very sorry for the fish, struggling to get away and then gasping for air while Dad and Stu took photos of each other holding them. They did put them back in the water, but I think there was one that didn't make it. Dad let go of it too quickly, Stu said. It just rolled over and sank.

I didn't think I was ever really going to get on with my dad.

As I remembered that horrible morning, a thought just hit me. I wasn't ever, EVER going to get on with my dad. We had nothing in common.

That was part of the reason I liked Saturdays. No Dad.

Some people cannot be on their own. There were people in my class who would've gone nuts if they hadn't got anyone to talk to, and who jabbered all the time and usually just rubbish. I was not like them. I preferred being on my own. I liked silence.

Mostly, I went up on the moors. I didn't care whether it was raining (which it usually was) or sunny. Best of all was when I could see a storm coming in from the sea, miles away, heading for the moors like a massive army of black and grey fighters. I'd sit on one of the huge rocks that lie around as if they've been tossed by giants and wait for the clouds to arrive and throw down rain that hit me as hard as a million javelins or arrows and got through my clothes so that I was soaked to

the skin. I'd get really cold but I also felt kind of wild, like I was part of the land and we were being attacked together and I might even dissolve into the moss and the lichen, and soak in like blood. Maybe that meant I was a bit weird. I don't know. I just felt like I belonged there.

I tried to sketch the moor, but it was hard to capture just how alien it is – like another planet. The stars were so clear and seemed so close that you could believe you were in a whole different dimension. I wanted to capture the colour changes when clouds passed over or the sun broke through, and also the cattle, Belted Galloways, who were scattered across the brown and yellow and green like dominos, with their white bands round their tummies standing out against their thick, black coats. I loved these 'Belties' who roam about, grazing wherever they want and sometimes stand in the road, in front of a tourist's car usually, refusing to move.

When I was on my own, thinking or dreaming of a painting I might make one day, I just wandered about all over the place, a bit like a Beltie on the moors, not planning my route, getting soaked, feeling stubborn for no reason. And that's how I felt that day, sitting on a rock, just watching the weather rolling and swirling and changing all around and trying to ignore the fact that night was creeping across the

sky and it would soon be impossibly dark on the lane back home. And I'd forgotten my torch.

When I started off down the hill, I let myself get into a sort of rhythm, letting the hill and gravity pull me forwards and down. I couldn't see much. The trees that line the lane shut out the last of the sun and the blackness started to be almost thick enough to touch. All I could hear was the rain and the slap of my feet on the Tarmac. I felt hypnotised, almost, so when Bea's cab came screaming round the corner, I very nearly just stayed in the road for her to run me over. Instead, some instinct made me jump in the hedge while Bea's brakes squealed madly as she swerved to miss me.

I must have given her a scare because she was super angry when she wound down the window. She had passengers in the back. I couldn't really make them out but it looked like a man and a kid, maybe about my age.

Bea had a good old rant about wearing dark clothes and not having a torch and what the hell did I think I was doing ambling along in the middle of the road. Going to tell my dad. Blah, blah, blah.

I said I was sorry and she wound up the window and roared off, leaving a stinking diesel cloud behind her.

I could have been killed, but I wasn't. That's life.

ZAYNAB

'Bloody idiot! Could have killed him! Bloody little idiot. Always in a dream, that boy. He's a flipping weirdo, if you ask me.'

I could feel my father tense at all the cursing pouring out of the driver. He squeezed my hand, but I ignored him. We were being driven by a madwoman who had just nearly killed a boy and Father didn't seem bothered by *that* at all!

She looked round at us as if we were supposed to share her outrage, sighed loudly when she got no response and put her foot down. We went through a gateway and over something metal which made the car rattle like crazy and sounded as if we had burst all the tyres.

'Cattle grid,' she explained, trying to catch our eyes in her mirror, and then I screamed again. A cluster of shapes ahead in the road, eyes flashing in the headlights.

'Bloody cattle!' she muttered. 'Always in the bloody road. You'd think they own the place.' She wound down

her window and started shouting at them. 'Get on, you lummocks!'

They didn't move, apart from a bit of shuffling, their breath hanging in looping white clouds.

'Aww, you buggers!' She got out of the car and went to chase them away. They tossed their heads and stood their ground until she got right up to them and then they spun round and galloped off up the road and disappeared.

It made me forget about feeling sick, which was lucky as Bea went back to driving like a maniac the moment the cattle were gone, but I was glad when she swung the car off the road and switched off the engine.

'Yer tis,' she said as she climbed out. 'Your holiday home. Mind the mud. There's a lot of it about.'

She laughed, but not in a kind way.

It was hard to see where the mud was, but I found it almost immediately. One shoe disappeared with a wet squelch and I had to balance on one leg while I groped about to find it. Nice.

'What's you getting up to here, then, Professor?' She said it as if she did not believe Father was a professor at all. 'You trying to get some of our rain over to your neck of the woods?'

She laughed again and didn't seem to be interested in an answer. I dug my nails into my hand and hoped I'd never, ever have to see her again.

Then her tone changed. 'Ah. Here's Mrs Wonnacott.' She opened her door and leaned out. 'Got 'em, Mrs W. All yours!'

Mrs Wonnacott was quite young and very thin, almost scarily thin. In the torchlight, her face looked more like a skull. She was wearing a knitted hat, so I could not see her hair. I felt a stab of pain. She reminded me of Mama.

We followed her down a path and into a low, dark house that smelled of cooking and something else I could not identify.

There was stuff everywhere. Cardboard boxes, heaps of magazines, books, leaflets.

There was nowhere to put our suitcases, so we just stood inside the door and waited for her to do something.

'Welcome to Hope Cottage. I'm afraid it's rather a mess!'

She sounded as if she were only just realising that everything was all over the place and did not care that much.

I stared at her. She kept her hat on, even though it was quite warm in her house. I could see a fire burning in the next room. Her cheekbones stuck out of her face so that you could see their whiteness behind her pale skin and she had no eyebrows. She looked terrible and I realised that I had been right. She was just like my mama. In the worst possible way.

I turned to Father and stared at him in disbelief. He seemed not to have noticed that this woman was as sick as Mama had been.

The woman caught my eye and without thinking, a question came out of my mouth.

'Are you going to die?'

Father let out a gasp. 'Zaynab!'

She ignored him and smiled broadly at me.

'I sincerely hope not! I've been told that I'm nearly cured.'

My mother had said the very same thing.

I closed my eyes and then I vomited.

ZAYNAB

How had my father wiped Mama from his memory as if she'd never existed? He didn't talk about her. I never saw him cry. He went back to work just days after she had gone. He gave away her clothes and most of her books the same week she died.

It suddenly dawned on me that we had only ever really spoken to each other when she was there. She was like a bridge between us. Now that bridge was gone. Instead, I had stuff in my head all the time, like an endless conversation being shouted into nothingness.

Mostly, I just wanted to shout at him that it was rubbish, all rubbish. These words came crashing into my head and I could not let them out. I was not sure I even wanted to actually say them. I was just forced to carry them around, like flies in a jar, buzzing and making me feel nauseous.

Mrs Wonnacott told me not to worry about a bit of sick as her cat, Toffee, threw up mice and fur regularly. She took

me up to my room, which was in the roof of the cottage with a tiny window. The walls were painted yellow and the bed – a mattress on the floor – was covered in a brightly coloured bedspread with tiny mirrors sewn onto it.

'I got that in Kerala,' she said. 'Before I stopped flying.'

'Because of being ill?' I asked.

'No. Because of the planet. Flying is a terrible thing for the planet, so I've stopped travelling.'

She went on, looking awkward, 'But of course, you of all people know all of this, and you and your father could only really get here by plane. Anyway, I expect you are exhausted. The bathroom is on the floor below if you need it, and then you can come and have a bit of supper, if you feel well enough.'

She turned to go.

'Where's your husband?' I don't know why I asked that. It just came out . . . again.

'My husband? Oh, he's long gone. Collateral damage, you might call it.' She hesitated and I thought she might tell me about him and why and where he had gone, but she just looked at the floor for a moment, flicking the fringe of the rug with her toe.

'Is he dead?' I asked.

'No! No.' She shrugged. 'He's fine. I think.'

'My mama is dead,' I replied.

She gave me an intense look before continuing, 'I am so sorry to hear that. I'm guessing from your expression when you saw me that cancer took her from you?'

I nodded.

'You must miss her terribly.' She self-consciously pulled at her hat. 'It's almost as tough for the survivors as the sufferers, I know. Maybe even worse. Anyway, come on down when you are ready. I hope you'll like it here. It must be so different from your home.'

She smiled at me and I nearly found myself smiling back.

'Call me Deborah, by the way,' she said. 'I haven't felt like Mrs Wonnacott for quite a while.'

When she had gone, I threw myself down on the bed and stared at the roof. A huge cobweb hung down with a dried-up spider in it. I hoped it would not fall on me in the night.

From the bathroom I could smell supper and it smelled good. I brushed my teeth to get rid of the sour taste of vomit and sorted out my hijab which had got messed up when we nearly hit the ghost boy. I didn't feel comfortable going without a head-covering in front of this strange woman and I realised that she felt the same, though for completely different reasons.

I left the room and went down the creaky wooden stairs, following the cooking smell. My father was sitting at the

kitchen table, drinking water and talking excitedly about his project and the University, while Deborah tried to clear enough space for plates. She moved a pile of books and papers onto the floor. A large ginger cat appeared and climbed onto the tower of books, which immediately toppled over. The cat looked at me as if to say, 'I meant for that to happen,' and went to sit on one of the books. Deborah shooed it away and rebuilt the pile, leaning it against the wall.

'Toffee does like to cause havoc! Sorry about the mess. There's so much going on . . . with the campaign.'

'What campaign?' I asked.

'Friends of the Earth? You might have heard of us? We campaign on environmental issues. Everything from stopping the extra runway at Heathrow to global cuts in emissions. I am heavily involved in our local group and, to be honest, you being involved in climate science, Professor, made having you here a bit of a no-brainer. In fact, it's a privilege.'

I thought about how Mama had campaigned first to save trees and then for women and girls stuck in the emergency camps, frightened and hungry, whilst Father dreamed up 'eco' projects to let politicians and companies think they were being green.

'I was hoping to set up an Extinction Rebellion branch here, too. If you were to come and speak, that might help

kickstart it. We need a bit more genuine activism to get the climate emergency message across. We've been too polite for too long.'

'Father isn't an activist. He's paid by the government to come up with tricks to make companies stop polluting everything,' I said. 'Not quite as the Prophet, peace be upon Him, instructed. Mama was the one who actually did things. You know. Really *did* things, useful things that really helped people.'

Father laughed and I could tell he was embarrassed. 'We do Allah's work in different ways. Some less visible than others.'

'Or even invisible,' I retorted.

'Zaynab! We are guests in a stranger's house,' Father hissed.

'It's OK,' Deborah interrupted. 'You've had a lot to contend with. You must be feeling very tired and stressed.'

'You don't know how I am feeling,' I said, under my breath.

'You're right.' She gave me a glass of water and I felt bad that she'd heard me. 'As to how we battle the climate emergency, we must all do what we can. Or that's what I think, anyway.'

'Indeed,' my father said. 'We must all do what we can.'

I sat there, my brain boiling with fury at them

both – Father just blanking Mama's work; Deborah making so much of her eco warrior thing with her no flying 'sacrifice' and her 'doing what she can' rubbish and thinking we'd be impressed. What did she know of drought and hunger and the bleached bones of cattle in desert that used to be pasture? Nothing. I wanted to shout all this at her. I could feel all the words organising in my head, ready to come out, but then I looked at her pale face and her huge eyes and Mama was back in front of me. Suddenly, I just wanted to be held and have my hair stroked; my anger evaporated away.

Deborah looked straight at me and sort of nodded as if to say, 'I see your pain.'

Maybe she did.

I ate a bit of the food. I think it was meant to be a bariis iskukaris, a dish of rice, lamb and spices, but there was no lamb and although it smelled good, the spices were not strong enough and it tasted to me like a bland mush.

Father ate his with enthusiasm, which might have been real or fake. I couldn't tell. I guess she had tried to please us. It was a shame she had omitted the star ingredient.

'I'm vegan,' Deborah said, as if reading my mind.

'No caano geel, then?' I asked.

'Sorry? You've lost me there!' she said.

'Camel milk,' Father explained, flashing me a furious look.

'No!' she laughed. 'No camel milk to be had in Devon, though I think you can get it in London. It'll get to us eventually! In the meantime, I can make you some hot cows' milk with cardamom, if you would like?'

She was trying her best. I felt shamed.

'Shukraan. Thank you. That would be nice. You are very kind.'

'It will all be OK, dearest one,' Father said, soothingly. 'Wait and see. This will be good for you and for me, Allah willing. Shall we perform Maghrib together? It is a little late, but not haram.'

I shook my head. 'No. I prefer to pray alone.'

Deborah was trying hard to look busy making my hot milk, but I knew she could sense the tension.

I asked if I could take my drink to my room but, as I shut the kitchen door behind me, I decided to lurk outside and listen to their conversation. I was sure they would talk about me and I was right.

First my father apologised and Deborah replied that it was OK, she'd been a difficult teenager once and it couldn't be easy for me, losing my mother (who I hero-worshipped, apparently) at such an important stage of my life etc. Then they fell silent.

'You and Zaynab speak incredibly good English,' she said, after a while.

'Yes. My wife, my late wife and I met here, in the UK, in Bristol, where I studied at the University. She came from Ireland, originally. She had the most glorious flame red hair . . .'

He tailed off and fell silent and I knew that he, too, had a picture of Mama in his head. Mama with her wild mane of fiery curls and her green, green eyes.

Father coughed before continuing. 'Anyway, Zaynab was born here in the UK and Fran always spoke to Zaynab in English at home.'

'When did your wife die? If you don't mind me asking . . .'

'Nearly eight months ago. It is still raw. I do not know when it will not be. And Zaynab seems so angry.'

Still raw? You behave as if it is long forgotten. And if you know I am angry, why don't you talk to me? I felt the words form in my head, like burning hot needles.

'Well, if you or Zaynab ever need anyone to talk to . . . no, really.' Father must have been shaking his head, but Deborah continued in her calm, clear voice, 'I'm on the road to recovery, but I know about the anger and what it does to people and their lives and I don't mind talking about it. If it would help. Strangers are sometimes easier to talk to, aren't they?'

There was a long silence.

'I thank you for your kind hospitality. I am very tired and I have an early start.' Father sounded very stiff and formal all of a sudden and I knew he felt he had gone too far, said too much. And he had. It was none of her business. It was mine and his.

I crept up the stairs, trying to avoid making them creak. I checked my phone to get the correct direction before saying the evening prayer. I thought Father might knock on my door to say goodnight, but he didn't and saved me the trouble of pretending to be asleep.

The dead spider swung gently in a draught, a tangle of bunched up, see-through legs. I promised myself that I would find something long enough to reach it and get it gone. In the morning.

LUCAS

I would never, ever forget the day Zaynab arrived in my school and in my life.

The head, Mrs Baldwin, came into class with her one day, three weeks into my second year at 'big school' (as my mum still insisted on calling it). Year Eight.

She was tall, taller than me anyway, and slim, almost thin, with a narrow face and sharp cheek bones and really big eyes with long black lashes, like a deer or a Jersey cow (and I really didn't mean that rudely. Jersey cows are beautiful). Her head and neck were covered by a yellow scarf which looked super bright against her skin. She had the sort of skin colour that my sister, Lara, tried to fake, except that Lara came out streaked with orange.

Mrs Baldwin had her hands on Zaynab's shoulders as she announced her name and I could tell Zaynab wanted to wriggle free. And I could tell that Mrs Baldwin said her name

wrong because Zaynab pulled a face when she said it, rolling her eyes to the ceiling.

'This is Zaynab Egal. Zaynab has moved here all the way from Somalia.'

'Somaliland. Not Somalia. They're not the same.' Zaynab said every word carefully and precisely. She sounded really posh.

Mrs Baldwin went stony-faced, before saying, coldly, 'Somaliland. Indeed.'

'Not that it matters,' Zaynab continued, walking away from Mrs Baldwin to the one free desk, three from mine to the right. 'Because I very much doubt anyone here either knows or cares where Somalia or Somaliland are. But then, I did not care where Devon was, so . . .'

She shrugged and then sat down and began to take her things out of her bag. Pens. A calculator. The usual stuff. Nothing exciting or different.

'Welcome, Zaynab!' Mrs Chadwick, our class teacher, said enthusiastically. 'I can now tick you off on the register!'

None of us said anything. It was like we were frozen. We were all watching as she took out a tablet attached to a solar power bank and then sat, staring ahead of her, her yellow scarf hiding her ears and cheeks, her jaw set hard so that she looked almost like a statue. We weren't sure how to react. I could not tell if she was shy, angry, anxious or just not

interested at all. She certainly wasn't friendly, but then neither were we.

Mrs Baldwin looked round at us as if she was seeing us all for the first time and didn't particularly like what she saw.

'Please make Zaynab as welcome as you can,' she said in the same cold tones. 'I am sure you'll have lots of questions for her, but she's here to learn about how we do things and to make the most of her brief stay, so let's show her what Devon has to offer, shall we?'

And with that, she left the room, almost slamming the door behind her.

That was when Rich Wells blurted out, 'You a pirate?' and we all cringed with embarrassment.

Zaynab swivelled round to see who had spoken. The look she gave him could have sunk a ship.

'Nah. That's Somalia, innit. You a smuggler or a farmer? Cos everyone on Dartmoor's a smuggler or a farmer, am I right?'

She spoke in a completely different voice, copying Rich's Devon accent.

Rich laughed nervously. 'Sorry. I just saw on the TV once and . . .'

His voice tailed off.

Man, it was tense. Her face had sunk Rich's ship and her voice had dropped the temperature in the room several

degrees. She was definitely cool. Really cool. But also scary . . . and maybe more than a bit mean.

After class, I thought about showing her the way to the dining room, but she went off in a different direction and then disappeared through a door into what I thought was a storeroom. Maybe she did not want to eat with us?

I waited around for a bit and then gave up and went to lunch. After about ten minutes, she appeared, got some lunch and went to sit at the back of the dining room on her own. I thought about moving to sit with her, but then everyone would have teased me and said I wanted to get off with her, so I watched her from where I sat, hoping she wouldn't notice.

Which, of course, she did.

She fixed me with a stare like an eagle's whilst she stabbed at a pasta salad as if she wanted to kill it. I had to pretend to be looking at something beyond her, which was stupid because there was only a blank wall and when she turned her head to see if there was something interesting there, she knew for sure I had been staring at her. She laughed, soundlessly. It felt like a sneer.

I went back to my lunch. It tasted like dust. Not that I have ever eaten dust.

I'd never seen anyone like her. Even then, I felt she was special, a superhuman come to Earth to teach us something.

Something hard and painful. Maybe that was a stupid thought, but that's how I saw her.

It was history after lunch.

Before the lesson started, Mr Reeves got the big globe off the windowsill and asked Zaynab to come and show everyone where Somaliland was. She shrugged and said it was pointless. It wouldn't even be on the map. Mr Reeves looked a bit bewildered and then he asked her if she'd tell us a bit about her home when she felt ready to do so.

'I can tell you now,' she said, getting up and going to the front of the class. She waited until everyone was quiet before speaking. She was so brave. There's no way I would have stood up in front of a load of total strangers.

'I am from a country which you British used to rule. Now you do not even say we exist, so we aren't on your map.'

'Perhaps you could tell us a bit about home and your school, Zaynab?' Mr Reeves asked gently.

She said nothing, but started counting how many of us there were in the class. Twenty-eight.

'Fourteen of you, eleven girls and three boys – you can go and stand in the corner and look at the wall. You aren't at school. You're too poor and you live in a camp. You used to live on farms or move from place to place with your animals, but then the droughts came every year and all your crops and

animals died and when the rains came, they swept all the soil away. So you have nothing.'

No one moved a muscle. She shrugged her shoulders and started back towards her desk.

I stood up and went into the corner.

'Please can I not turn my back?' I asked. 'I want to hear everything.'

Two girls joined me, the twins Poppy and Daisy.

'Please go on, Zaynab,' Mr Reeves said. 'I think everyone is just a bit stunned. Come on, let's do this properly. Let's have two more boys and nine more girls standing in the corner. Zaynab is trying to teach us about the life chances for children in her country. I, for one, am really saddened to think that Lucas, Daisy, Poppy and the others would miss out on school, miss out on a future, aren't you?'

'I'd choose not to go to school!' someone said. 'That's why I'm standing up.'

'Don't you get it?' Zaynab said. 'You don't have any choices when you are poor.'

'So how come you're here? Have you got lots of money, or something?' Rich Wells asked.

Zaynab shook her head.

'Lucky, then?' someone else added.

She shook her head again.

'I do not think I am lucky to be here and not at home,

where I belong, but you? You're all lucky and you don't even know it.'

'We had some floods here, too,' Poppy said. 'We know about climate change. It happens here, as well.'

Zaynab laughed, but it was not a very nice laugh. Then she stared at us for a while before going back to her seat.

Mr Reeves thanked her: 'Thank you for sharing that, Zaynab. I think we have a lot to learn from you. I hope you will talk to us again very soon.'

She shrugged and started doodling in her notebook.

I felt sick with fear and a sort of excitement. She was one angry person and she was going to mess up our lives for sure. Maybe in a good way.