



JASBINDER BILAN

XANTHE & THE RUBY CROWN

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*To all the staff and pupils
at Mellers School, Nottingham,
past, present and future.*

Also by Jasbinder Bilan

Asha & the Spirit Bird

Tamarind & the Star of Ishta

Aarti & the Blue Gods



PROLOGUE

I'm Leo the jungle cat and this is my kingdom. Ears twitching, whiskers shimmering, I go wherever I please. Stalking tiger-like under the wide leaves in the tower-block roof garden. Sidling through the long corridors, sniffing scents of morning toast and big pots of coconut rice. I have many homes. On each floor the owners barely see me as I scoot past, quick as a mirage, stepping between their houseplants, leaving secret paw prints on their sheets.

And then down, down I prowls to the very roots of this building. Exploring every corner, I slide through half-open doors and sniff out the secrets wherever they're hiding.

Then there's something different. The sound of wheels on tarmac overhead. And a feeling, twitching through my tail.

Listen – who is that arriving?

Like a flash I'm up the stairs, up and up until I'm back on the roof, scaling the precarious high wall. I peer down.

She's here at last.

I blink and then I'm gone, vanished like the sparkle of a dream.



I run from the car and find the green space wedged between the tower blocks. I plonk myself down on the still-damp grass and search for Nani's flame tree right at the very top of the building in her beautiful roof garden. Even though it's only a tiny dot from here, I can see the tips of its incredible red leaves shimmering in the morning sunlight.

I lower my gaze slightly. The tower block soars into the milky blue sky and, when I squint against the sun, Nani's square windows and balcony appear on the top floor. Out of habit I count the floors and finish at fifteen. Somewhere inside, Nani will be fussing about, putting on the kettle, laying out the plates and finding my favourite biscuits – chocolate wafers.

I press my eyelids closed, enjoy the magic of the dancing light and let the sounds drift over me: kids'

cries from the nearby play park, the faint siren of a screeching ambulance, the whirr of traffic on the busy roads.

When I was little, Nani taught me to study things carefully. She said that behind everything there is usually a hidden story and it's up to us to discover it.

So when I listen more closely, let the city noises fade and *really* listen, like Nani trained me – that's when I hear it all, the call of the wild: the steady burst of birdsong, the scratch-scratch of insects busy under the fallen leaves and the bubbling stream that I know must be underneath me somewhere, buried deep below.

'Xanthe.' Mum's voice pings into my daydreams. I sit up, blinking against the summer sun.

She beckons me over and I walk slowly towards her, flicking a glance back to Nani's window, look for her twitching the curtain, checking to see if we're here yet, but it's too far up to tell. My stomach fills with butterflies.

'Come on, love.' Mum jangles the keys. 'Nani's going to be so excited to see you again.'

I kick at the slab of concrete tile. 'Last time we spoke on the phone, she kept getting muddled up. She kept calling me Rajan.' My eyes sting at the memory. 'Why is this happening . . . ? Nani isn't even seventy.'

Mum takes hold of my hands. ‘Memory loss isn’t just about age, Xanthe.’ Her eyes flit to the tower block. ‘Just relax and be yourself, it’ll all work out.’

There’s a tightness to Mum’s voice, and even though she’s telling *me* to relax, a deep frown has appeared between her eyebrows.

I bump my suitcase over the tiled floor of the entrance and we head towards the lifts. I remember when Mum used to pick me up to press the button, and it reminds me of being little and all the happy memories this place holds for me.

The metal doors creak-clang open and we step inside. I stare at the worn floor and crinkle my nose at the strange mix of smells in the cramped space. The lift shudders up the shaft until we’re at floor fifteen, the top of the building, the top of the world.

Mum knocks first but quickly opens Nani’s front door with the keys. She gives my hand a squeeze and throws the keys into her bag. ‘Remember, just be yourself.’

When the door opens, I run in and wrap my arms round Nani’s waist.

‘Xanthe,’ she says, pulling me close. ‘You’re here at last. I’ve been up for ages just waiting. I have your favourite biscuits.’

I breathe in Nani’s smell – soap, cinnamon and

the perfume she always wears, Chanel No. 5, a little dab behind each ear.

Then Mum's voice reaches us from the kitchen. 'What on earth . . . ?'

I follow her voice. Mum's standing by the sink, which is piled high with dirty pots and pans. Half-finished packets of food litter the worktops, and when she opens the fridge to begin putting food away, a stench of rotting vegetables leaps out.

Two saucers of creamy milk are lined up on the counter.

'What are these for?' Mum asks as Nani comes in.

'Those are for the cat.'

Mum and I exchange a quick glance. Nani doesn't have a cat.

'What's the matter, dear?' Nani asks.

'Nothing, Mum.' But Mum's face is saying the total opposite. 'W-why don't you and Xanthe go to the sitting room? I'll sort this.' Mum begins rustling paper bags, and I take Nani's soft hand and lead her away.

Me and Nani both love history and I adore her sitting room, with all the fascinating things to look at. Like the poster from the Tutankhamun exhibition that hangs on one of the walls. Ancient Egypt is one of my favourite historical subjects and I wish I

could have gone to that exhibition.

There are special display shelves all along one side where Nani keeps the things she discovered in her work as an archaeologist. They're only small things, nothing worth much, but to Nani these are as valuable as any of the artefacts that made it into the museums.

I love the pieces of pottery all arranged according to colour, the rocks with their imprints of tiny fossilized feet and the hefty piece of Baltic amber with an ancient butterfly caught as it rested on the branch of some long-forgotten tree.

'Come and sit here, my little historian,' says Nani, and we cuddle up close on the comfy sofa, crammed with cushions. 'What are you looking so thoughtful about?'

'Without history we'd never know who we really are, would we?'

'That's right, Xanthe.' She lets out a long breath and her face suddenly looks really tired.

'Are you OK, Nani?'

'Things just keep getting on top of me. I don't mind telling you – but don't worry your mum, she's got enough on her plate.'

'It's OK, Nani. We're here now.' I can feel my heart beating really fast, but I keep my voice calm.

‘There are days when I think I’ll forget my own head.’

I move closer. ‘Maybe I can help you.’ *There must be some way I can stop the memories from fading.*

After a while, Mum calls us into the kitchen. ‘Tea?’ she suggests, too cheerily. The room smells lovely and fresh now that Mum has sorted it all out.

Nani starts opening one of the cupboards. ‘It *is* the chocolate wafers you like, isn’t it?’ she asks me.

‘Yes, Nani, you always get them from the supermarket.’ I give her a kiss and jump on one of the stools around the breakfast bar. ‘Thank you.’

There’s a whole plateful, loads of them crammed together, and suddenly I feel ravenous. I grab two and stuff them into my mouth.

Mum pours milk into a tall glass and adds spoonfuls of Nesquik. She fills Nani’s mug with tea and pushes it towards her. ‘Are you OK on the stool, Mum?’ she asks, the frown appearing between her eyebrows again.

‘Of course I am,’ tuts Nani. She gives me a little wink like she usually does. ‘I don’t need babysitting, you know. You didn’t need to come all this way.’

‘I know that, Mum. We just thought it would be nice to spend the summer holidays here – didn’t we, Xan?’

‘Yeah,’ I reply quickly. I’m not sure exactly what Mum’s got planned but I can see Nani needs our help. I take another bite of wafer.

‘But how will Daniel cope without you for the whole summer?’

‘He’ll be OK. It’s a shame his architect’s offices are the other side of town – but he can come over at the weekend.’

‘And what about Rajan?’

‘You know he’s off travelling before going to uni – don’t worry, Mum, we just want to spend time together, enjoy the summer.’

Nani looks at me, then. ‘And you, Xanthe? You won’t get bored?’

‘No way – and I can’t wait to see Romeo again.’ Romeo lives next door and we’ve been friends for ever – even though we only see each other in the holidays. I really am looking forward to hanging out.

Nani relaxes slightly – looks like she’s bought into Mum’s half-truth.

I take a deep breath but the knot that’s been sitting in my belly since we got here only tightens. It’s so unlike Nani to let things get messy – but she hardly seemed to notice.

‘Will you help me water the plants in the roof garden later?’ asks Nani, tugging the edge of her sleeve.

‘Of course. We could have dinner up there,’ suggests Mum.

‘And put the fairy lights on,’ I add.

Mum’s watching Nani like a hawk.

‘How’s your favourite tree?’ I ask Nani, slurping the last of my drink. ‘I saw it from the car park.’

She doesn’t answer; a distant look clouds her eyes, like her mind has gone wandering off away from the flat to another place. ‘If only you could have seen the flame trees in Uganda, Xanthe – they were like a fire, a beautiful burning fire.’

My eyes pop in surprise and Mum and I exchange a glance. Nani was born in Uganda but she hardly ever mentions it. ‘I would love to see them, Nani,’ I say. ‘Perhaps we can go there someday, together?’

But Nani falls quiet and her thoughts seem far away.