JASBINDER BILAN

CALLING the WHALES

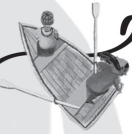


"Heartwarming"
HANNAH GOLD

"Powerful"
GILL LEWIS

Illustrated by
SKYLAR WHITE

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For Satchen and Gem,
my little conservationists

CHAPTER 1



It's night-time. Satchen and I are standing at the foot of the Craig – an ancient volcanic hill. It towers above us, stretching away towards the stars. We shouldn't be here so late, but then rules are made to be broken – right?

"Race you to the top!" I yell. I playfully push Satchen, my best friend.

"Hey! That's not fair, Tulsi," Satchen complains to me. "You're already way ahead."

"Catch up then," I say. "Put some power into it!"



I scramble off into the darkness and begin scaling the giant hill of grassy rock. We've both climbed the Craig so often, from the minute we could walk.

The moon is full and sends its light sparkling around us.

"I'm going to be a sky runner like Mira Rai," I shout, "scaling the steepest mountains, running up the highest peaks in the world. I'll climb Ben Nevis at night, maybe even Mount Everest!"

"Ahh, slow down," says Satchen.

I get to the top of the hill first. Satchen's heavy breaths behind me mix with the ghostly sounds of the seabirds. I reach for his hand and pull him up beside me. "We did it!" I yell. "We got to the end of Primary Seven – summer holidays and high school here we come!"

From the top of the hill I can see everything. There's the glow of fire coming from the steelworks on the other side of the estuary. Our little town, East Shawle, with its harbour and the fishing boats bobbing against the wall. The sea is the colour of lead, moving like a monster with white frothy hair. And beyond that is the island with the tiny lighthouse perched high on one side. The island is our special place – where

Satchen and I can be wild and free. I breathe in the salty air until it reaches right inside my lungs. I stare into the sky with its trillions of stars.

I take a few steps backwards and twist round. Now I'm facing the whale monument next to us on the hill. The huge whale's jawbone is lit up and casts a spooky shadow across the glistening grass. I've seen it so many times before but tonight the moon makes it look more dramatic than ever.

"Can you believe this used to be an *actual* whale's jawbone?" I say, touching the bone. "Before they replaced it with this replica."

"I know," says Satchen. "The fact they'd ever use a real bone makes me so sad. I never want any whales to be killed ever again."

"Agreed. Do you think the ghost of the whale still haunts the Craig?" I ask.

"Maybe," says Satchen, leaning against the whale's jawbone.

"If I were the whale," I continue, "I think I'd stay around to protect the waters. I mean, there are so many dangers for whales these days."

The sea far below us suddenly churns. Its ripples glint against the moonlight and the smell of fresh salt blows towards us on a flurry of cold wind. The moon shines even more brightly, lighting up the whole of the bay.

"Imagine what it was like in the old days," I say, "before we had the chance to spoil the seas with all the rubbish that gets washed up. There was nothing in the water apart from sea creatures and plants."

"That's why we have to keep going with our work," says Satchen. I can hear the determination in his voice. "We can't wait around for the adults to take action. It's up to



us. As my dad says, we can do anything if we put our minds to it."

"It always feels like there's so much to be done," I say. "It does feel good when we do a beach clean or sponsored run or walk. But can we really make a difference?"

"We raised £500 last year, Tulsi," says Satchen. "That's a lot. Hopefully we'll be able to raise even more once we're in high school as it's a much bigger school."

"What's that?" I ask, pointing way across the water to where the ripples on the sea are shimmering in the darkness.

"I don't see anything," replies Satchen. "It's just the wind, I think … or the ghost of the old whale." He elbows me lightly in the ribs.

"Stop it," I tell him. "There could be ghost whales. You never know."

"We'd better get back before we're missed," says Satchen. "Mum sometimes checks up on me in the middle of the night – after the last time she found my bed empty." Satchen kicks at the ground. "She seems to worry about everything now."

"Sorry," I say, touching his arm. "How's Isla?" Isla is Satchen's baby sister. She was born a few weeks ago but is back in hospital.

"Not much better," Satchen says. He looks back across the sea. "But not worse." He pauses. "Mum says Isla is like a baby chick come too soon. Her bones are still soft and she needs some time to make herself strong. The last time she was home I spent all night with Mum, sitting beside Isla's cot. She's got a grip on her." He smiles. "She wouldn't let my pinkie go."

"That means she's a survivor – she wants to stay," I say.

"She liked my wee lullabies."

"She can't complain about your singing yet," I tease.

"Oi," says Satchen, pretending to be offended.

"My granny's got a book at home," I tell him. "It's full of Hindu gods and goddesses. Honestly, you wouldn't believe it. They're amazing. Full of all sorts of powers. Granny lights her candles and prays to the gods and goddesses for good things to happen. I'll get her to say some prayers for Isla." Then I get another idea. "Let's say a prayer to the whale … in case it *is* watching over us."

Satchen gives me a look that says, *What wild thoughts you have, Tulsi*. But I don't care.

"Dear whale," I begin, "if your spirit is still here, please protect Isla, Satchen's baby sister, and make her strong. And help us to protect our planet by bringing us extra luck with our fundraising."

Satchen's eyebrows crinkle together as if he's not sure any of this will work.



"It might help," I say. "It's worth a try."

We stand together for a moment and Satchen says, "Thanks for bringing me up here. We haven't done it in ages but it always makes me feel better."

"On the Craig I feel like we're part of something bigger," I say, looking up at the stars.

Across the sea the moon shines on the waves and I see the ripples rising again. "Look, Satchen," I say. "Can't you see? Don't you think the water looks strange tonight?"

He squints towards the island. "The water's churned up. It's hard to see but I think it's just the full moon making the tides change."

"Let's go down to the beach," I say, "and take a proper look."

"What if Mum checks in on me?" asks Satchen. "It's not fair to make her worry again."

"Sorry, you're right. Let's get back."

We leave the whale's jawbone behind and hurry down the Craig. Moonlight casts spiky shadows ahead of us and owls hoot in the woods below.

Once we're at the bottom, I squeeze Satchen's arm. "Try not to worry – Isla will be OK."

He forces a smile and I watch him for a moment as he heads towards his home. It's one of the old fishermen's cottages close to the harbour.

I'm about to run home too but I can't get the rippling image of the sea out of my head. It's as if something is pulling me towards the beach, wanting me to go there, so I do.

The beach is lit up by the moon. It floods the sea with magical light as the waves shush softly onto the sand. Everything's calm, everything's normal. But I can't shake the feeling that something's happening out there in the waters around our island. The thought sends shivers into my chest as I turn and head for home.