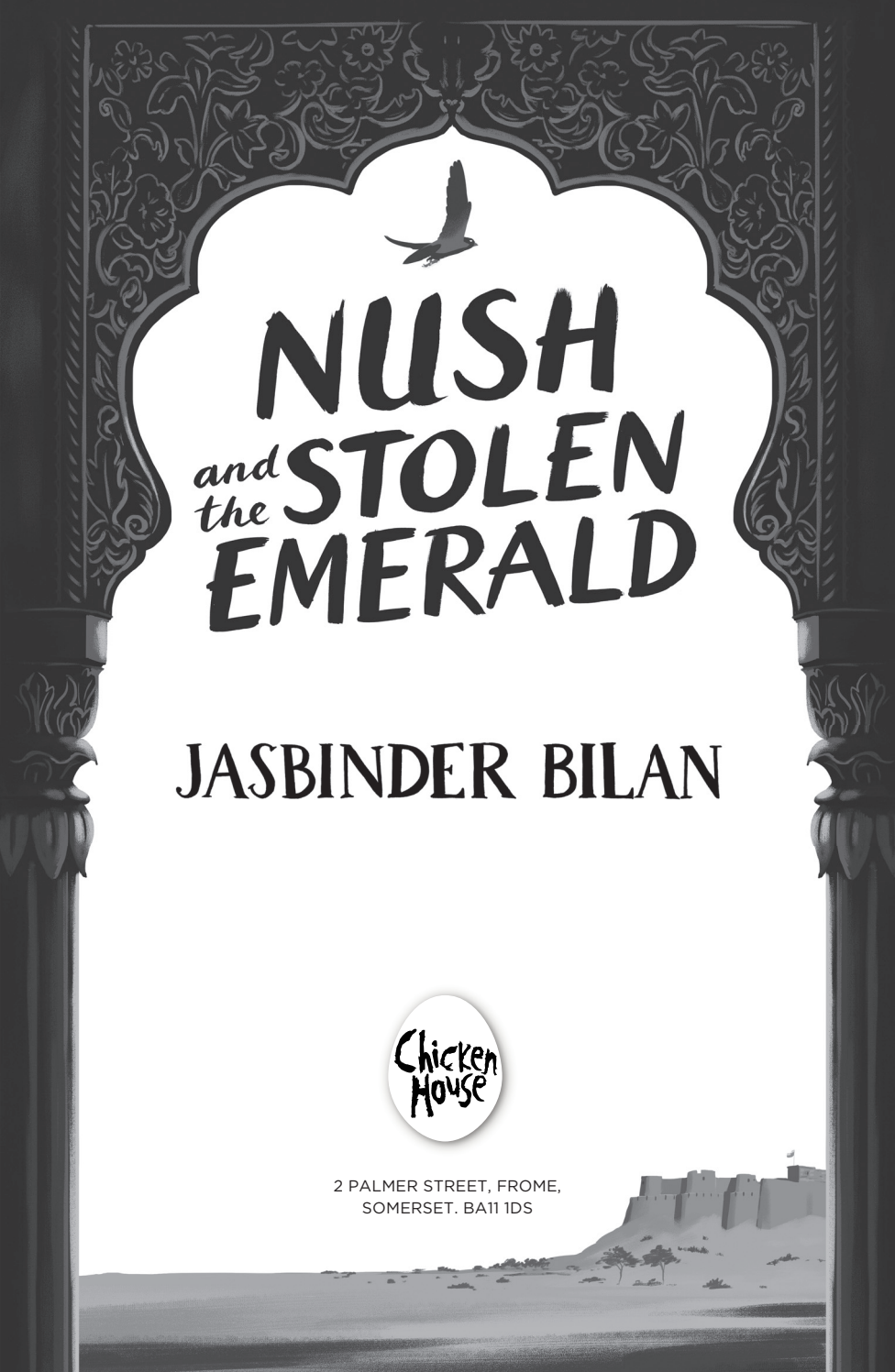


NUSH and the STOLEN EMERALD

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In loving memory of my dearest brother
Balraj Singh Bilan

1

Kingdom of Jaisalmer, India,
in the middle of the nineteenth century

The Thar Desert isn't always hot. At dawn, as the peach sun is still tucked in its bed, the air is ice cool.

I grip my fingers tight around the smooth leather reins and cry into the near-morning. 'Wahooo! *Chalo, chalo*, Arian. It's a race to the mountain.'

My twin brother is a good rider, but I'm better and I feel a mischievous smile fly to my lips. The ground is hard and Tanu's hooves thunder against the compacted sand.

I shoot a competitive glance over my shoulder and urge Tanu on towards the mountain. Arian's horse is not far behind, the sound of his snorting reaching

me through the still-dark dawn.

'I'll beat you this time, Anushka.' Arian's words are faint but determined in the whipping wind.

My heartbeat quickens beneath my ribs as I concentrate and pull at the reins – my hair loose and free, billowing like clouds behind me. The smudge of the mountain is still a way off and lately Arian has been improving his time.

I sit low on Tanu's slick back, merging myself with her, and we become a new creature made for speed. The shadow shapes of craggy bushes zip past and we race together, getting closer, until finally we reach the looser sand and plough our way through to the foot of the mountain.

As I turn Tanu around, the golden sun cracks the morning sky and I wave at my brother as he flies towards us, his white horse rippling like a mirage against the sun.

I dismount and press my cheek against Tanu's. 'Bravo, my Marwari queen,' I whisper, wiping sweat from her flanks and leaning in. We take a moment. In the desert, you live by your wits and talent; there are no birthrights here.

Arian arrives noisily some minutes later, his horse breathless and tired.

'I'm catching you up,' he smiles, landing on the

ground beside me.

'Keep practising. And maybe one day we'll come in together.'

'OK, little sis.' He throws an arm around my shoulder.

'Only little by minutes, but we know who's superior.' I elbow him gently in the ribs. 'You should ride bareback, the saddle slows you down.'

'A royal maharaja riding bareback! What would people say!' he mocks.

Now that the sun has risen, the heat of the desert whooshes over us, hot and dry, and we know we have to get back to the palace before we begin to bake.

We lead the horses to the small oasis sheltered by three tall palms, where the water is cool, and we drink together before setting off again at a slower pace.

I squint into the far distance where dark silhouettes brood on the horizon.

'There are the tents again,' I say, holding my hand above my eyes to get a better look.

'They always seem to be there lately,' agrees Arian. 'What do you think they're doing?'

'I'm not sure. Do you think it's the East India Company?'

'Papa's always talking about them,' replies Arian. 'So it could be.'

*

When we arrive home, I use my special hairpin to deftly open the lock on the outer gates. We sneak the horses back to the stables, handing them to the grooms who don't ask questions. Maharani Ma, our mother, has already told us a hundred times that now we're getting older this wildness must stop. And besides, there's the danger of the East India Company soldiers, under the strict control of the Governor of India, Earl Dalhousie.

At least it's safe inside the vast palace, where there's a constant hum of activity. The sounds of early morning duties rise like whispered prayers along the stone-studded corridors and drift through the ornate jali screens.

Arian and I rush to our sleeping quarters. They look out over a cool courtyard planted with shady mango trees and blush-pink roses.

Our ayah, Adah, gives me a frown as she looks at the state of me. 'Hurry and make yourself presentable,' she hisses.

'What about Arian?' I cry.

'Arian is a boy,' she continues. 'He can't help it.'

Arian plants a soft kiss on Adah's cheek and gives me an annoying wink.

'Argh!' I stomp my foot at the injustice and run

into my room to wash and change.

I wriggle into the bright blue dress Adah has laid out on the bed. It's made from light cotton fabric embroidered with tiny silver stars all over. The hem skims the floor as I stride out to where Adah is waiting ready with the comb and pins to tame the loose curls into order before breakfast and lessons.

'Sit.' Adah beckons me over to the low stool and begins to tug the comb through my tangle of hair.

'Ouch!'

'If you will go gallivanting with your hair loose, what do you expect!' Adah tuts, continuing to drag the wooden comb through the strands. She sprinkles jasmine oil along their length. 'This will help,' she says more gently.

'I might decide to cut it all off – then there'd be no need for any of this.'

Adah laughs as she weaves my hair into two neat sagar choti plaits, each one looped along my scalp. 'In a few years, Anushka, you will be glad of your beauty. You'll make a good match one day, my girl. A high marriage, to some maharaja from another kingdom – Nagpur perhaps, or Indore.'

I pull a face. 'And what if I'm not bothered about that. What if I want something else, something

just for me?'

Adah sighs.

Arian comes out of his bedroom and sits beside us on the floor. 'What are you both talking about?' He's changed into a cool, cotton kurta finished with fine gold thread.

'Two peas in a pod,' smiles Adah. 'Do you remember when you were little, you used to dress in each other's clothes to confuse me.' She touches the small round beauty spot on Arian's cheek. 'But you always forgot about this.'

We both put our arms around her. 'Dear Adah, always going along with our games.'

Our fun is interrupted as one of the servants arrives. 'Breakfast in the main dining room,' he announces, bowing low.

We all look at each other in surprise. We usually just have breakfast here in the courtyard, followed by lessons. Maharaja Papa must have some news for us.

Adah quickly hides the frown that ghosts her face and concentrates on plaiting my hair. She threads in a green sparkling ribbon and cups my face in her palms. 'There, ready.'

Together Arian and I make our way back down the corridor, past the noisy quarters where our

younger brothers and sisters sleep and spend their days playing and fighting, until we reach the grand dining room.

Papa is sitting at the head of a long table, the morning sunshine glinting from the gold trays laden with fruit of all colours. Fragrant pastries piled high on platters cram the embroidered tablecloth. As usual, he has a short length of thick string which he twists and threads, making his beloved knots.

Mama sits at his side and our grandmother, Maharani Majee, at the other. Along the far wall are his advisors, including Zayn Bora, his special advisor, with his northern blue eyes and fair skin, neatly trimmed beard and moustache. He's called the Lahoria for the time he spent in the Punjab courts.

And then there are the others, lined up like statues not daring to speak out of turn, but listening carefully and watching everything. This clearly isn't just a family breakfast.

Arian and I stride stiffly to Papa.

'Come, sit.' He kisses each of us and nods to our places either side, where two elaborately carved chairs, decorated with glittering precious stones, are pulled out for us.

'Let's see how quickly you can make the Indian

Bridle Knot,' he challenges, placing two long pieces of string on the table.

Mama nervously wrings her hands. 'Let them eat, at least.'

This is our little bit of fun. Ever since we were young, we've played at tying knots and Papa likes to time us against each other.

'Of course,' huffs Papa. 'Eat, eat. We can play knots after. And I have something important to share with you.'

Perhaps we're to have another maharaja visit or make a trip to escape the summer heat.

A servant brings us trays brimming with pastries and breakfast treats – quail eggs cooked with fragrant masala and topped with crisp fried onions, hot kulchas stuffed with delicate milk paneer fresh from the tandoor and bowls of creamy rice pudding scattered with bright pomegranate seeds.

All this bluster has made a tight knot in my stomach and all I can manage is a sip of iced water. Even though I'm hungry after the race this morning, I suddenly don't think I could eat a thing.

Arian bites into his pistachio-filled pastry, oozing with honey, and washes it down with glugs of cinnamon-spiced milk.

'I have to make a diplomatic trip,' booms Papa in

his important maharaja voice, ignoring Mama's plea. 'To England.'

'Oh!' I blurt in surprise. This wasn't what I was expecting.