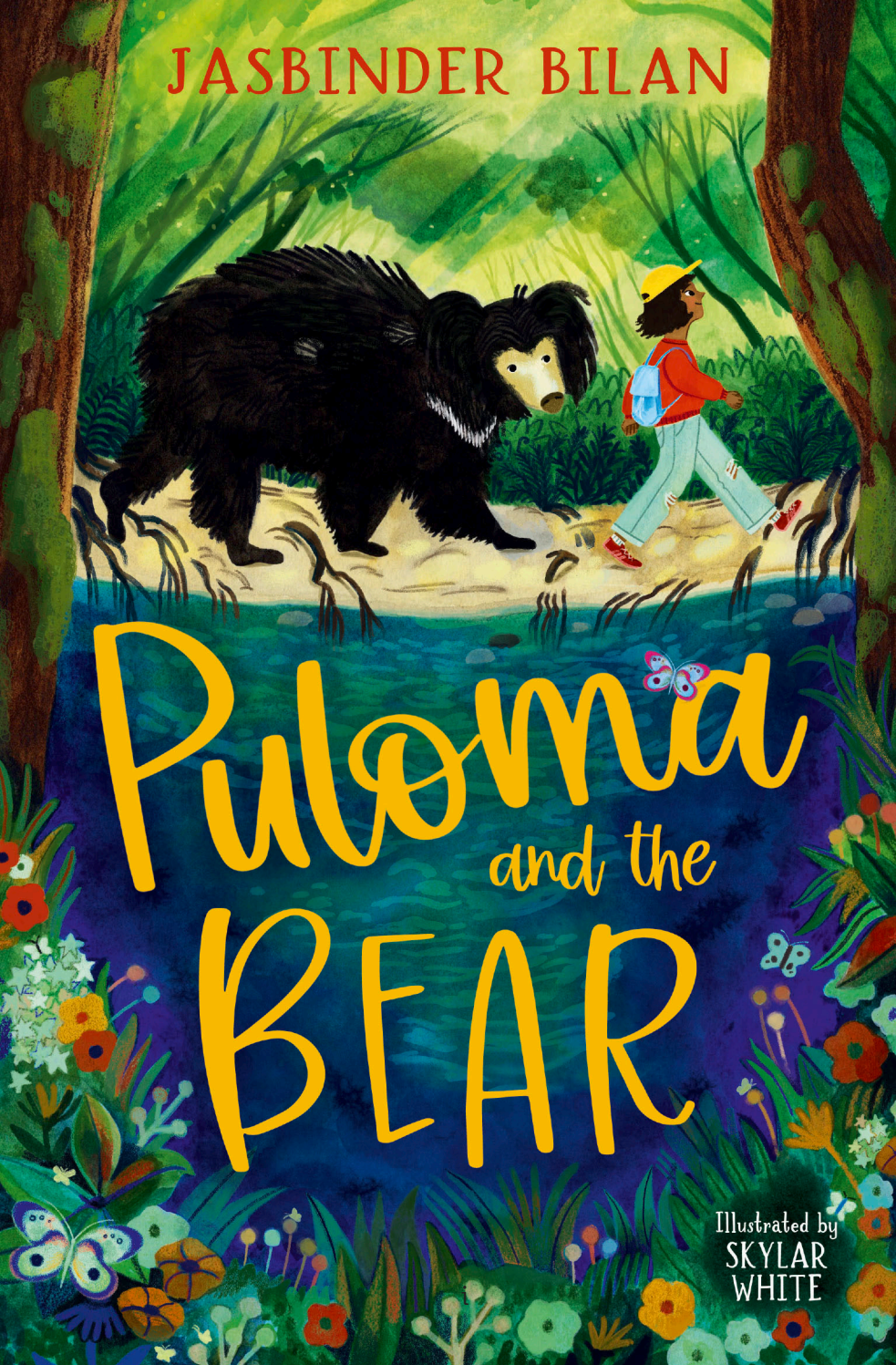
JASBINDER BILAN



Puloma and the BEAR

Illustrated by SKYLAR WHITE

ALSO BY JASBINDER BILAN:

Calling the Whales

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For Saban, who we loved
with all our hearts

CHAPTER 1

Puloma was alone in the tiny kitchen of her uncle Rik and auntie Rita's house. She stared up at the ring of orange marigolds. They were hooked to the wall above a small photo of her parents. The flowers were beginning to lose their brightness. Puloma had hung them there after her parents' funeral, six months ago. Ever since then, she had lived in this house.

Puloma bit her lip. Tears snaked down from the corners of her eyes and she let them fall. She missed her parents so much. To make matters worse, she knew Auntie Rita didn't

really want her here. Puloma was an extra mouth to feed, extra clothes to wash.

Puloma had noticed her aunt gave her less food than her cousins. And at night, when Auntie Rita thought everyone was sleeping, she would complain about Puloma to Uncle Rik. He always told Auntie Rita to keep her voice down. They were Puloma's only family now – where else could she go?

Puloma pulled out a box of matches from the drawer in the table and took a deep breath. She was determined to show Auntie Rita that she could be useful. She would make her a cup of hot fragrant chai – a kind of tea – ready for when Auntie Rita arrived home.

Puloma struck a match against the side of the box. The orange flame danced as she lit the stove. She sprinkled the large tea leaves into the pan and added water and spices.

It soon began to bubble and Puloma added the fresh milk she had got from the cow this morning. She prepared it all carefully, pouring the chai into the special patterned teacup that she knew Auntie Rita liked.

Puloma heard her aunt's footsteps slapping against the concrete slabs outside and picked up the cup. She stood by the door ready to greet her.

Auntie Rita burst into the house, her arms loaded with clothes from the laundry in the village where she worked. She didn't see Puloma and crashed into her. The cup fell to the floor, sending the chai flying onto the clean clothes Auntie Rita was carrying.

"What are you doing?" she yelled, her cheeks red with anger.

"I ... I made chai for you," stuttered Puloma. "I wanted to surprise you."

“Look at the clothes!” Auntie Rita said. “I’m meant to deliver these this afternoon. Now I’ll have to wash them all over again.” She stared down at the broken pieces of china scattered across the floor. “And that was my special teacup. This really is too much.”

Auntie Rita turned to take the washing to the small hut Uncle Rik had built behind the house. “And clear up the mess,” she told Puloma. “Sami and Sana will be back from school soon and there’s dinner to make ...”

Puloma’s heart hammered in her chest. It was no good. She couldn’t do anything right as far as her auntie Rita was concerned. And she wouldn’t put up with it any more. She would run away and try to make her own way in the world. Puloma had thought about doing this many times over the last six months but now she was determined to leave. She knew no one here would miss her.

Puloma changed into her jeans and sweatshirt and shoved her feet into her red trainers. Then she hurried to the corner of the room and bundled her few belongings into a cotton bag. From under the bed, she took out a small red tin. Her ma had used it to save money. Puloma had given most of what was in it to Uncle Rik and Auntie Rita, so there wasn't much left. But it was something.

She unhooked the photo of her parents from the wall and placed it gently into her bag. Puloma didn't know how she would survive. She wasn't sure what the future would hold but she knew she couldn't stay here.

Pulling on her yellow cap, Puloma left the broken cup on the stone floor and stormed away into the hot afternoon.