



NAELI
and the
SECRET SONG
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**Chicken
House**

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SOMERSET. BA11 1DS

First published in the UK in 2025
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Chicken House/Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,
Glasnevin, Dublin D11 HP5F, Republic of Ireland

Text © Jasbinder Bilan 2025
Illustration © David Dean 2025

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EU: www.scholastic.ie/productinformation

Cover and interior design by Steve Wells
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed in the UK by Clays, Elcograf S.p.A



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN 978-1-915947-03-1
eISBN 978-1-917171-19-9

*For Jack, who loves stories and who has
many incredible adventures ahead of him.*



Hyderabad, India
Late Nineteenth Century

Naeli sprinted away from the house and scrambled fast up the jacaranda tree. She swiped the tears from her cheeks, but it was no good, they wouldn't stop falling. She shoved her bare feet into any nook they could find and positioned herself between the branches. Peering through the blurry violet blossom, she strained to see what the neighbourhood ladies were doing now.

Naeli blocked her ears so she couldn't hear their cries, telling her to come down and help with her mother's funeral preparation. She balled her fists and shouted at the top of her voice. 'I want you all to go away and leave. You don't care about us anyway.'

Taking a deep breath of scorched air, Naeli tried to bring the events of the last few weeks to some sort of order. But it was impossible. How could it be that her mama was fine one minute but no longer with her the next? Malaria was a sneaky disease – the Nizam’s physician had said so when he came to see Mama. And he’d done everything he could.

But not enough, thought Naeli as an angry howl burst from her lungs and shattered the sky. She felt the empty hole in the place beside her heart. Mama had left her and she was as good as an orphan now. What would become of her?

She heard the ladies again and knew she couldn’t hide away here forever. She wiped her wet cheeks once more and slid down the rough tree trunk, landing on the dusty ground with a bump. She marched back to face them.

Naeli stormed into the house, sunlight glinting on to the courtyard tiles. The women were buzzing about, measuring gaaz upon gaaz of saffron cloth, mixing turmeric and rose oil and singing prayers.

‘I don’t want you here,’ said Naeli. ‘I want you all to leave.’

‘But Naeli,’ began one of the neighbours, ‘you are so young; you have no idea what to do.’

‘I know my mother better than any of you,’ Naeli

continued, standing tall. ‘And I know she wouldn’t have wanted all of this.’

‘I need to anoint her with rose oil,’ cried the woman mixing the concoction.

‘I’ll do it.’ Naeli tugged the brass bowl from her hands. ‘Now, I want you all out of our house.’

Nobody moved.

‘Do you want me to fetch the Mughal ruler of Hyderabad, the Nizam himself?’ yelled Naeli. ‘You know he would be here in an instant. My mama was his most favoured musician.’

At this, the women began dragging their feet across the hot tiles, huffing and complaining as they went.

‘Don’t come running to us when you need some help,’ said one of them. ‘We know when we’re not wanted.’

Naeli stood by the door and held it wide, allowing the noisy crowd on to the veranda. She watched as they made their way through the garden and out into the street, shifting annoyed glances over their shoulders. A long shadow peeked from one of the narrow alleys opposite but when Naeli stepped closer, it disappeared quick as a blink.

Naeli firmly closed the garden gate and walked slowly back to the house.

Now that they had gone, quiet calm finally

descended. Naeli paused on the veranda and listened to the birdsong as it rang through the palms. Then she gathered her courage and took a few steps into the house towards the darkened doorway where her mama lay. But she couldn't bring herself to go any further.

Her mama was her whole world. What would she do now?

She felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. 'You got rid of them then?' said her ayah, Vanya. 'You're right, your mama wouldn't have wanted them all here . . . If you're ready, we can go in together.'

Naeli took her ayah's hand. 'They were making my head hurt with all their chanting and prayers. And it's not as if any of them really liked Mama.'

Vanya smiled. 'There's nothing to be afraid of.' She offered Naeli a stem of fragrant tulsi. 'It's really important that you place this close to your mother. She will see you and hear your final words of farewell and carry them to her next life.'

Naeli felt her stomach fold in on itself as she unwillingly stepped into the room.

Her mama was wrapped in layers of saffron cloth, her beautiful face peeking out from the fabric. She looked so peaceful – like she was sleeping. Naeli couldn't believe that she wouldn't just open her eyes

and tell her this was some terrible mistake.

‘It’s all right, my beta,’ said Vanya. ‘It’s better to see her one final time.’

The stem of tulsi was fresh and green. It shook as Naeli awkwardly placed it on her mama’s chest.

Vanya nodded and handed Naeli the brass pot with the golden oil, fragrant with attar of roses. ‘Just dip your finger in and then touch your mama’s forehead.’

The oil was warm against Naeli’s index finger, and she studied her mama’s oval face as she touched it lightly between her arched eyebrows.

‘I love you, Mama,’ she whispered. ‘Why did you have to leave me?’

‘Jemandee,’ said Vanya, a tear snaking down her face. ‘You had so much more to give.’

A gentle knocking at the door startled Naeli.

‘It will be the Nizam’s men,’ said Vanya, moving out of the still room and gesturing for Naeli to follow. ‘They will take over now. Say your last goodbyes.’

It was too soon. Naeli lay her head on her mama’s chest, as she had done every day of her life, and sobbed.

‘You know how much the Nizam adored your mother,’ Vanya assured her. ‘He will make certain everything is done perfectly.’