

The Crew

Bali Rai

Random House Children's Books

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About the Author

Also by Bali Rai

Praise for *(un)arranged marriage*

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About the Book

'Mess with one of us - then you have to deal with all of us . . .'

Positive attitudes only. That's the Crew: Billy, Jas, Della, Will and Ellie. And where they live - in the concrete heart of a big city - you need a crew to back you up. Then one day they find a fortune in notes and life suddenly becomes very dangerous . . .

A no-holds-barred thriller set against the gritty reality of life may British kids must face on a day-to-day basis.

From the author of the highly acclaimed *(un)arranged marriage*, winner of three children's book awards and shortlisted for no less than five others.

The Crew

Bali Rai



CORGI BOOKS

one:

the crew

ELLIE IS THE youngest. She's fourteen and she tagged on to me about a year ago after moving to the ghetto from somewhere down south. Her family moved in next door to me but I never spoke to her until I saw her on the ring road that circles the very edge of the city centre - a concrete merry-go-round that separates one part of the ghetto from another.

A couple of youths were chatting her up, eyeing up her mobile phone. They were both older than her - fifteen - and looking to raise a little cash by mugging her. She just thought they were being nice. I watched them from across the road as they reeled her in like some kind of prize-winning prey and, just as one of them made his move, I darted across the merry-go-round, dodging a red Beamer by the width of my thigh, and bounced him down onto the broken concrete pavement with a shoulder barge. The other one made a grab for Ellie's phone and bag - only to feel the full force of one of her feet down his shin and onto his foot. He cried out, cussed her and then, turning to find me staring at him, decided to do a runner. Ellie pulled out her house keys, calling me names that fourteen-year-old girls on TV don't use. I dodged one lunge from her, and another, then grabbed her round her shoulders with a bear hug, telling her to chill out. I was a friend, I told her. I lived next door. She

made to break away a couple of times before she stopped wriggling. And then she started crying.

Ellie never leaves the house without matching the colour of her mobile phone cover, her top and the piping on her trainers. She has three colours at the moment – pink, yellow and blue. I used to laugh at her but it's one of her little 'things' and her trainers are always wicked. Besides, as a man, what do I know about fashion? At least that's what she always tells me.

She has blonde hair and a really pretty baby-face with bright blue eyes that haven't changed much since she was about five, if her dad's photo album is anything to go by. It's why we call her Baby. Some of the other girls round here don't like her and call her 'Stush' and other stupid names because they don't know her and think she's stuck up. The Crew looks after her, though. We don't do business with racism and jealousy and all that. Positive attitudes only. And we look after each other. You mess with one of us – then you have to deal with us all.

Jas is older – sixteen, like me. He lives across the street with his mum. A Punjabi, he's got this really fiery temper that gets him into trouble with some of the older crews round here. His mum is a rarity in that she is an Asian single mum. His dad used to beat her up until, after years of abuse, she left him when Jas was nine. When his parents then got divorced, it was like a major problem for his extended family. Divorce, according to them, brings shame on the family and Jas and his mum get all sorts of shit from them. They totally ignored the violence of his dad – like that stuff is OK as long as the neighbours, the police and the social workers don't find out. How messed up is that, man? One of his uncles drives a taxi round here and told Jas's grandparents that their daughter was working the streets, just because he saw her walking home with a black man. That caused some real problems but his mum just ignored it

all and got on with being a nurse, which is what she does for a job. Oh, and Jas's mum cooks the best curry in the world.

Jas is nearly six feet tall already and he wears his hair in a fade. He's into hip-hop and skateboarding in his baggy, no-ass jeans and hooded tops. I met him in junior school and he protects the Crew, along with me and Will - if we ever need to. I'll tell you about Will later. Jas is a trained kick-boxer and he can handle himself if things ever hit critical. He's on the under-card for a world title fight. His coach is already the best fighter in Europe, and Jas is trying to get his club to take the whole Crew to the fight, which is in Manchester. That's what Jas wants to do. That and making hip-hop music of his own. He's cool.

Della is fifteen - sixteen next month - and she's *wild*. I met her years back when she was only nine, taxing some boys down the end of my street. One of her victims knew her and made a comment about her dad. He paid for it. Trainers, gold chain and two loose front teeth. She's been in care on and off for years and at the moment she lives with her latest and - she says - last foster-mum, Sue. She calls Sue her real mum. Her *only* mum. Della's dad got put in prison when she was eight. He was a pimp. Her mum died a year afterwards. Heroin. Della has grown up the hard way, especially as a young black girl, facing all the negative stereotypes that the social 'services' have. At first they kept on farming her out to middle-class white couples in posh areas. She hated that. Not because her foster-families were white, but because she couldn't relate to them. I mean, Sue's white and Della really loves her. The difference is that Sue doesn't see Della as a problem teenager. Just a teenager with problems.

Della is about five eight with the figure of a grown woman. She wears cut-off tops and short skirts and stuff to show it off. Her hair is braided and sits just under her jaw line, and her eyes are kind of catlike, bright green in colour. She looks a lot like Lauryn Hill and most of the men round here try it

on with her all the time. But they don't realize that Della is one tough sister. She is as hard as nails on the surface and can cause a man heart trouble when she stares, but on the inside she is softer and more vulnerable. She was wary of Ellie at first, thought she was an impostor. Now she treats Ellie like a little sister. She has a thing for Jas too, which she confided to me one night. I'm not supposed to even mention it, on pain of death. I believe her too.

Will is the same height as Jas but twice as wide. He lives in the next street with his mum and dad. His dad works part-time for the council as a landscape gardener and does building jobs for cash the rest of the time, while his mum used to be a dinner lady. She's housebound now with really bad arthritis and Will takes care of her a lot. His parents are Jamaican and he is really light-skinned with a big, friendly smile. People are still wary of him though because he's massive. Seventeen stone of pure muscle which he pounds into shape four days a week at the local Community Centre gym. And he can get well leery too. He doesn't like being told what to do and he hates people who try it on. He is more than capable of fighting his corner and around the ghetto that counts for a lot.

Will is sixteen too and he loves garage music and R & B. He wants to be a DJ and is trying to save up money from the cash-in-hand building jobs that he does with his old man. He's only got the one deck at the minute but he found an old mixer in a skip, which he took home and fixed up. Man, when he's listening to a garage mix you can't get him to speak, never mind get up off his big ass. He's my oldest friend - we met at infant school - and the Crew is his second family. That's how he sees us all. Believe me, at times it's like having a dad when he gets one on.

And then there's me. My name is Billy, although everyone calls me Sleepy. My mum called me that when I was a kid because I liked to sleep so much, and getting me out of my bed is kind of hard work even now. It's also the nickname of

her favourite reggae artist, Horace Andy. My mum is Punjabi, like Jas's mum, and my dad, who I don't really know as I haven't seen him since I was a little kid, is Jamaican. I live with my mum and her boyfriend, Nanny, a Rastafarian. My mum was always skint before Nanny showed up and at one point she was a working girl, over by the church crossroads. I got loads of shit for that when I was younger but I love my mum and I respect how much she had to sacrifice to keep me in food and clothes. She works with abused and battered women now, including the girls who work the streets, and sometimes she cries about the past and gets moody. I always tell her she should hold her head up high. She's a strong, independent woman, my mum, and nothing she ever did can change that.

One of the things that I missed out on by never seeing my dad as I grew up was learning to ride a bike, which I still can't do. It's one of my biggest secrets and it still embarrasses me. When I was twelve and thirteen everyone round here had bikes of some sort - mostly nicked ones - so I desperately wanted my own too, but instead of letting the other kids know about my shame, I just called them all losers and started nicking cars with some older lads. Joyriding cost me my school place and one of my best friends. It also upset my mum and Nanny, although if it hadn't been for their support and anger, I would have ended up doing time. I don't *blame* my dad for that. I made my own choices. I just wish he had been around.

I'm the same height as Della and I look Indian rather than Jamaican. Della reckons I'm too thin and need to put on a few pounds, but I like being the size I am and I can look after myself as well as anyone around me. Della also thinks that I have a soft spot for Ellie, which I suppose is true, and she teases me constantly. I'm like the unofficial leader of the Crew - but only because we use my bedroom as our HQ. We don't deal with real leaders - everyone gets a say because everyone is equal.

Everyone except Zeus, that is. Zeus is our mascot and has been ever since he turned up outside our house one night, bleeding badly from a gash to the head. He's a Rottweiler and he is the stupidest dog you've ever seen. All he does is lie on his paws, eat too much food and dribble. He's useless as a guard dog and we have to bribe him with Mars bars to get him out of the house for a walk. But he is an honorary part of the Crew and we all look after him, although he lives at my mum's or at Ellie's because none of the others have houses with gardens or yards.

two:

the ghetto

THE GHETTO IS just a nickname for some of the estates round the city centre. They aren't like the ghettos you see on TV - like the ones in the USA or in the developing world (I used to call it the Third World until Nanny showed me what he calls the 'truths and rights': the world is one place - only some countries have more power than the rest). They are ghettos in an economic sense, though. Most of the people are skint all the time and there are certain alleys and streets where drug dealers stand around in the open and you can see all the addicts wandering about looking to get high. Every so often the police raid one or two of the drug houses and for a few nights afterwards the business moves elsewhere. But it always comes back. Always. One dealer just gets replaced by another because there are plenty of kids around here looking to step up their station in life and crime is usually the only way they can do that. Not the Crew, though. We don't deal with no hard drugs.

And then there's the working girls. You would probably call them prostitutes, I suppose, but I've been brought up to treat them as human beings and not criminals. My mum believes that they should be given legal worker status like in Holland and be able to leave the streets, where they get treated like shit by pimps and dealers. I totally agree with her too because all I've ever seen growing up is like this endless succession of screwed-up girls with drug habits on

the corners around my neighbourhood. They look like baby gazelles on an African plain being eyed hungrily by leopards. Once me and Della met a fourteen-year-old girl down by the church. She asked Della if she had a fag and I could see the bruises on her arms and legs. I wanted to take her to see my mum but she refused. Eventually Della and I left her where she was and on the way home Della had tears running down her cheeks. We spent hours at my house talking about how messed up the world was. At one point Nanny came into my room and started talking about Babylon - his name for the capitalist system - and how it was this great big trap, duping the people into believing that material wealth was the only goal worth living for.

'Nuff man don't see the truth until it too late, man. No education, except brainwashing. No real chance ina life. Heads of government nah care and the people dem stay hungry. That's Babylon, man.'

After a while he lost me and Della, and he went off to catch 'a lickle irie meditation'.

I hope I'm not painting too bad a picture of the area that we all live in. It isn't as bad as many people like to make out, but then it isn't exactly a garden full of roses either. Yeah, we get some really bad things happening around here. But, like Nanny is always telling me, positivity comes from within. Nanny's always got a wise old proverb to explain the world's problems - but more about him in a minute.

I love my area and the rest of the Crew do too. None of us are blind to the problems - for us they are just a part of life, like trees in the country or red buses in London. They are like local attractions, only more hazardous to your health. But as well as all the rubbish, there're also these little alleys that come off the streets, where people have planted herbs in window boxes and you can smell basil and coriander as you walk by. There're the big old houses named after Roman and Greek gods. Next door to my mum's house is *Apollo* and up the street we've got *Minerva*. The Romans made her the

goddess of war and education as well as arts and crafts. Nanny told me that, before shaking his head and cussing the Romans for linking war with such positive pastimes. I just laughed at him. The kids round here have to go to war every day just to get an education and then fall at the entrance to uni because it costs too much money. I haven't told Nanny that one yet but I will one day.

Some of the streets are lined with trees, so it's not like a total concrete jungle. Some of the trees are actually green, too. And there is always something happening or someone around. Music thumps out of car stereos and through walls and windows day and night and the young kids see everything as one big adventure playground. I used to when I was a kid. The amount of fun you can have in a derelict house is unbelievable. The dealers and that leave you alone unless you are a punter or you get in their way during their 'runnin's'. In fact the most aggressive people around if you're a kid are the homeless drunks because they get territorial about their particular doorways and benches. I've seen so many kids running out of the little playground at the end of my street, being chased by some stumbling drunken old man with a yellow stained beard. The homeless and the drunks are just another part of our landscape.

Territory is important for the gangs too. Every two or three streets have their own little gang and most of the members are between the ages of nine and seventeen. Some of the gangs are exclusively black or Asian, but mostly they are mixed, with a few white kids thrown in too. Every so often there are street fights, although they aren't too serious most of the time. They tend to be little scuffles which get broken up by some irate parent caught in the middle. I've seen Nanny lecture two groups of youths about 'war in de ghetto' many a time. In fact, one time he took about sixteen young lads up to Victoria Park with a football and got them to settle their differences over an eight-a-side game. All the kids ended up as mates and they eventually formed an even

bigger gang which Nanny got pissed off about. Man, I just laughed at him.

Around here you have to have a crew otherwise you get treated like an outsider and that is not a good position to be in, believe me. You need to have someone to watch your back – someone to go to when shit goes wrong. Most of us can't go to the police or our schoolteachers. Things don't work like that for us. We have to look out for each other. That's why the Crew got together and why we are so close now. No one has a go if they know you are part of a gang. Well, not regularly. It's the older gangs that cause all the real trouble. They can be really dangerous. Most of the older crews are in the streets dealing and mugging, like our local bad boy, Busta, who doesn't like me or any of the rest of the Crew. We tend to avoid him, if we can.

One of the older lads that I was knocking around with a while back, David, started out in one of those older gangs. He's the one who taught me how to break into cars and how to drive. Thing is, once he'd had enough of the cars he moved on to running errands for a local dealer and eventually he got so hooked up in all the heroin and speed he was dealing he didn't even look like the same person. He ended up robbing grannies and school kids in broad daylight and made his girlfriend work out by the church. She got taken into care and David overdosed in the back of an abandoned car down by the front line. He was eighteen when he died but everyone round here had seen it coming for years before it actually happened. Life can be kind of tough round here to begin with, but people like David stack the chips against themselves from day one.

As for me, I know that the easiest thing for me to do would be to just go with the flow and end up selling 't'ings' or robbing and that. But I ain't no sheep and no one round here is leading me. I'm going to lead myself. Straight out of here, if I have to. I don't know what I'm going to do yet. I wouldn't mind going back to college, only that costs money,

something I ain't got. Thing is, not knowing what I want to do doesn't stop me from dreaming about escaping. I will, too, even though I don't really like the idea that I will probably have to leave my home area one day. I won't hesitate if it means I'm going to keep my freedom or my life. Like I keep saying: life around here is harsh, man.

However, little rays of sunshine do light up the concrete jungles. They break through the gloom of grey skies and never-ending problems. One of the biggest rays of sunshine in my life has been Nanny. He's been around since I was a little kid and he's the actual father that my real father never was. Nanny is like a best mate and a teacher rolled into one. He's about six feet tall and his dreadlocks reach halfway down his back. He's slim, but strong as an ox. He lifts free weights at home and goes jogging every morning. My mum has even got him doing yoga, although I think he does it just to keep her quiet. He's been with my mum since a few years after my old man left us, and she told me once that he was the reason she was able to stop being a working girl. Nanny shared all his money with her when she had it really hard after being arrested years back. We got evicted from our flat and he took us in, even though he only lived in a one-bedroom place in a high-rise. When my mum went through college and uni, it was Nanny who brought me up, making me breakfast and taking me to school and stuff. He used to make the dinner too, and do all the cleaning around the house, which is pretty much how things have stayed ever since. Nanny has never had what my teachers would call a 'proper job' ever, but he has his reasons.

Nanny is a Rastafarian. Not like the ones that you see stereotyped in Hollywood films, all high on crack and shooting people and shit. Nanny is a true Rasta. He doesn't eat meat or shellfish and never touches booze. The only tobacco he smokes is the hand-rolled stuff he uses to build spliffs, and you can't even use the word 'drugs' around him. Drugs, for Nanny, means things like crack and heroin.

Alcohol, even. But not weed. He calls his weed a spiritual tool – one that helps him to meditate and achieve peace with the world around him. It's not like he smokes all day long either. Most times he smokes in the evenings, after he has done all his duties for the day.

Weed is the thing that frees his mind from the mental slavery of Babylon and I don't reckon it seriously harms him – or anyone else for that matter. I've seen men round here get beaten and cut up by drunks, but I've never seen anyone get angry after smoking a spliff.

I respect Nanny's beliefs. As a Rasta, he believes that Babylon is corrupt and he chooses not to participate in what he calls 'wage slavery' – having a job. Instead he sorts out a little weed for his mates, enough to get his own for free, and my mum shares her money with him. She calls it his 'wages' for the work he does around the house. Like housekeeping, I suppose. He's an electrician too, doing little jobs for the people we know as and when they need him. Nothing regimented. It's not like he is self-employed and that. He just fixes stuff for a small fee sometimes, or in exchange for things we need.

It might sound like a weird notion but I reckon his beliefs are just as valid as other views and I love to sit and discuss things with him. I don't necessarily agree with everything he believes in, like the idea of Haile Selassie as God but, at my age, I just want to be open to all sorts of ideas before I decide what I do and don't believe. I do see the Babylon system that Nanny talks about. I see it every day. The rich control the poor and the poor just follow like sheep. 'Mental slavery' is what Nanny calls it.

'Dem brainwash de yout', dem man. The yout' kill each other jus' ta wear the criss trainers but dem don' realize is the trut' dem disconnect from. The trut', man.'

That's a typical piece of what Nanny calls his 'reasoning'. He knows loads of facts and figures which he uses to argue his point – stuff he has bothered to go and research down

the library or on the Internet, although he's not the biggest fan of the Web. Says that it's too sinister when the government can see exactly what you are downloading. He thinks that they compile files on everyone or something - just from what they look at on the Net. He's like the ghetto professor and everyone knows him. Sometimes me and the rest of the Crew listen to him for hours.

three:

friday

'THAT BLOKE WAS down the end of the alley again tonight.' I was telling Billy and Della, but they both looked at me in the same way. As if to say 'What's Ellie on about now . . .?' I looked straight at Billy and then, feeling myself starting to blush, I looked away again. Sometimes I hate being the youngest member of the Crew. I feel like I have to prove myself all the time and I don't like that. So instead of continuing my story I started to sulk - pouting, because I knew it would wound the other two up. It worked too. It always does.

'Ellie, look, it's not like we don't believe you . . .' started Billy.

'But there are loads of other gardens that back onto that alley and—' That was Della.

'—and maybe the bloke you keep seeing is just some new neighbour,' Billy finished the sentence off. I mean, what were they? Twins?

I looked at them both in turn, pouting some more, but eventually I relented - I could always put it on again later. If I had to.

I wasn't lying to them. I don't do lies. Well, all right, maybe tiny little white ones now and then. But not serious ones. I mean, why would I lie to Billy or Della? They're my best friends. Especially Billy. I ain't never told him how much I love him for rescuing me back when we met and

introducing me to the rest of the Crew. I can't tell him. It's like whenever I think about it, I get all choked up and want to cry. And I'm not crying in front of him. Besides, he's a typical bloke - never says the right thing. Anyway, I'm telling them all about the weirdo, and Billy thinks I'm gonna cry 'cos he's upset me! I mean, how stupid is that?

What happened was this.

I was walking Zeus, which is a major thing for me because I really don't like animals. I especially don't like stupid, fat ones that moan at me when I get forced to walk them. It was my turn though and Zeus was in my garden. I took him up and down the street a few times, pulling him along behind me. He moaned and whined all the way too.

I had to dodge a couple of boys who were running full pelt down the street, being chased by an older guy, an ugly bloke who I'd seen around. He had these dirty, matted dreads and two gold teeth and he was always sweating, like drug addicts do. The lads he was after got clean away and he decided to give me a load of grief, which was all I needed on top of having to walk the laziest beast in the world.

He came right up to me and started giving it the large one. 'Yow! You, gal. Wha' yuh a seh?' which I think meant, 'Hi, how are you?'

'Why don't you get lost, you smelly bast—' I shouted at the top of my voice, only I was cut short by Nanny, who appeared out of thin air almost, and stood between me and Mr Butt Ugly.

'Yes, mi bredda? Somethin' I can help the I wid?' Nanny was calm as you like. Polite even.

The bloke looked at Nanny, confused. Then he looked back at me. Funnily enough, he stopped smiling at that point too.

'Wha'?' he said. 'She wit' you, my dread?' He looked at Nanny again.

'Not with me, bwoi. She's my daughter.'

I could see the disbelief in his eyes. He was just standing there on the pavement like a bloated boil on a nasty arse, looking between me and Nanny. Not surprising really. I mean, I couldn't look more different to Nanny if I tried.

'What's up, man?' said Nanny, his tone of voice becoming suddenly harsh. 'I can't have a white daughter? Yuh have two white sisters of yuh own.' He smiled. 'Yah father called Dennis, true?' he said. Mr Ugly couldn't speak. He just nodded lamely, like a toddler being told off. 'Tell yuh father that Nanny said hello.'

I started to giggle at the way the youth had suddenly lost all the air in his chest. He couldn't even look at Nanny by then. All he did was look down at his dirty, baggy jeans, which looked to me like a parachute wrapped around a couple of bamboo shoots.

Nanny spoke up again. 'And, bwoi, get yuh skinny backside out of here before I kick a whole heap a dirty gold toot' down yuh t'roat.'

The guy just skulked off up the road, taking his pea brain and his rancid breath with him.

'Thank you, Nanny,' I said, trying not to cry.

Nanny smiled his big, fat friendly smile. 'It's cool, Ellie,' he said. 'You is a princess but let me tell you - that bwoi deh ain't no prince.'

As Nanny headed off to the shops, I dragged Zeus back towards home, turning into a side street, heading for the entrance to the alley. The ugly bloke had frightened me and I needed to get back nearer home to feel safe now.

The alley runs parallel to our street and it is our Crew's territory, silly as that sounds. We are the only gang who use it. As we walked along it towards my back gate, we had to dodge dustbins and rubbish bags, cardboard boxes and even an old, rusting pram. A ginger tom cat flashed past us, not even getting a second look out of Zeus but making me jump. The alley has a chain of high walls that run along the back of the gardens on our street, each house linked by a