



# THE GIRL WHO STOLE *an* ELEPHANT

NIZRANA FAROOK



# Chapter One

Chaya looked at the bronze spear pointing at her neck.

“Stop right there,” said the guard.

Chaya took a step back and held up her hands. The linen pouch under her blouse clinked. The chatter of the crowds floated up from the promenade below, where the King’s annual feast was taking place.

“What are you doing here, girl?” The guard waved the spear at her. From below them, the melody of the veenas drifted up. The musical show was starting.

Chaya shrugged, the pouch pressing against her chest. She rubbed her palms down her skirt and tried to keep her voice level. “I’m just looking around.”

Her voice brought two more guards to the top of the stone steps cut into the hill. This was how the royal palace was built—a network of buildings at the top of the mountain, every rock and ledge forming courtyards and pools for the royal household while they ruled from above.

“You’re not allowed here,” the guard said to Chaya. “You should be down below, enjoying the food and the festivities.”

Not Chaya. She much preferred breaking into the Queen’s rooms and stealing her jewels. There was a particularly nice blue sapphire in her pouch at that moment.

“Well?” The man jabbed his spear toward her. “What have you got to say for yourself?”

“I wanted to get a little closer to the palace. See what it’s like. It looks so pretty from down there.” She pointed in the direction of her village and made her face go all wistful.

The guard sighed. “Fine. Just make sure you don’t do it again.” He put his spear down. “Anything past the lion’s entrance is strictly out-of-bounds to the public.”

Chaya looked back and nodded meekly, as if noticing the giant lion statue for the first time, even though

it could be seen from villages miles away. The stone stairway carved between the crouching lion's paws led into the complex of buildings that made up the inner palace.

"Come on now." The guard gripped her arm, making her wince. He pulled her to the cobbled walkway sloping downward and toward the celebrations below. "I don't want to see you here again."

The Queen's jewels jangled in her pouch. There were sapphires, tourmalines, and star rubies, set in heavy, shiny gold. How many jewels did one person need, anyway? And these were just the ones from the drawer in the rosewood table by the bed. Pity she'd had to leave so quickly when she heard voices outside the door. And then to be seen when she was halfway down to the promenade was just bad luck.

She shrugged herself free of the guard and set off, her arm stinging from where his fingers had pinched her.

In spite of everything Chaya found herself gasping at the view from up there. The kingdom of Serendib spread out around her as far as the eye could see, thick green forests and strips of silver rivers, with the King's City below and clusters of little villages beyond.

But she wasn't ready to leave yet. Chaya paused near a tamarind tree and pretended to look up at the monkeys

on it. Dappled sunshine prickled her face as she looked at the guard out of the corner of her eye.

He had stopped walking but was still watching her. She heard him swear loudly. "What are you doing now? Get out, girl, before I come and give you a thrashing."

The sensible thing to do was to get out of there as fast as she could. But the Queen's rooms were calling out to her. It was as if she could hear their whisper, right there in the warm sun. The softness of the velvet rugs, the gauzy bed curtains dancing in the breeze, and the promise of more riches within the ebony and teak cabinets.

Suddenly a commotion came from above her, near the Queen's quarters. She heard shouting and the sound of people running.

Chaya thought back quickly. Had she forgotten to close the drawer in her rush?

She sneaked a quick look over her shoulder to see a figure running down the cobbled path behind her.

It really was time to get out.

Chaya carried on walking as casually as she could. Her heart hammered at the sounds behind her.

She was just passing under the stone lion when she heard a yell.

"Hey, you!"

Chaya sped up, her bare feet scorched by the cobbles.