



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 towards 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 downwards towards 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.

"Hey! I need to talk to you, girl."

She had to get away fast or everything would be over. Her feet slapped harder on the path and her breath came out in puffs.

There was a scuffle of hurrying feet behind her.

Chaya hitched up her skirt and raced down the path. The sound of thundering feet chased her; heavy sandals pounding on cobbles.

She pulled up with a jolt when she saw a row of guards racing towards her from below. She turned and ran blindly sideways, springing up some steps into the Queen's prayer hall and threading through its granite columns. Spears clattered against columns as the guards tramped after her. She got to the far side of the hall and plunged down into the foliage, thrashing through it and down the steps into the formal gardens.

She found herself close to the promenade where the

feast was taking place. The smell of frying sweetmeats meant the food tables were just round the corner.

Chaya skidded to a halt in front of two boys stuffing rice cakes down their shirts. They looked up in alarm at her sudden arrival, and took off in different directions.

Leaping away from them she pitched into a crowd of dancers and musicians. The revellers were oblivious to the unfolding drama, and cymbals clashed and bare-torsoed dancers jumped and twirled to the beat of drums. She ran through the band, clapping her hands over her ears to escape the shrill sounds of the swaying flutes.

“Stop her!” came a shout. “*Stop her!*” The dancers paused, one by one, and some of the music petered out. People gawped, looking behind Chaya towards the guards chasing her. “The girl! *Stop the girl!*”

A man in the crowd lunged at Chaya but she slipped out of his grasp and ran towards the gates of the royal complex. Coconut-flower decorations tied along strings came crashing down as she ran through them, wrapping themselves around her like a trap. She tore them off and kept running.

Elephants from the temple stood on the lawn ahead of her, draped in their mirror-studded regalia, ready

for the pageant later. In the middle of them stood the King’s Grand Tusker himself, Ananda. He was wearing his special maroon and gold garments, and his tusks were massive and powerful up close.

Chaya ground to a stop on the grass and looked back. She was boxed in.

She sprinted up and ducked under the mighty bulk of Ananda, the world instantly going dark and dank. His mahout gave a shout and grabbed at her plait, yanking her head back, but she broke free and rolled out on the other side. She sprang up to see the mahout turn and yell at the guards thundering towards them, as some of the elephants had started to toss their heads alarmingly.

“Stop!” The mahout waved his arms at the guards. “The elephants are getting disturbed.”

The guards slowed down and Chaya took her chance. She ran to the boundary and dashed out through the gates. She was free.

Skirting the city, she headed towards the patches of wilderness on the east side of the palace, the wind flying through her hair as she sprinted away.

When she got there she stopped and leaned against a tree, catching her breath. She peered through the wilderness and smiled.

She'd lost them.

Chaya shimmied up the tree, hands scratching against the rough bark. She settled herself in one of the high branches and picked out the coconut blossoms stuck in her hair. Lifting her linen pouch over her neck, she dropped the jewels into her lap. They sparkled in shards of bright blue, green and pink against the grey of her skirt.

It had been a huge risk. Her boldest robbery to date. And yet she'd pulled it off.

She picked a *jambu* fruit from a branch nearby and crunched into its juicy pink flesh, peering through the leaves at the royal compound in the distance.

It was pandemonium down there. The crowds were scattered and panicked, clusters of people moving in different directions. The King, standing out in his gold-encrusted waistcoat, had come down from the dais and was roaring at his staff. The Queen and her procession of ladies were being guided out of the promenade up to the palace. The mahouts on the green were trying desperately to calm their confused charges and stop them running amok. In the middle of it all, Ananda lifted up his majestic head and trumpeted loudly into the blue, blue sky.