



## NIZRANA FAROOK

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Nizrana was born and raised in Colombo, Sri Lanka – the wild, exotic landscapes of which feature heavily in her stories. She came to writing by a circuitous route, from a bachelor’s degree in computer science to a master’s in Writing for Young People. She moved to the UK ten years ago and now lives in Watford, Hertfordshire with her husband and two daughters. Nizrana is represented by Joanna Moulton of Skylark Literary.

The *Thief of Serendib* was shortlisted for the 2017 Joan Aiken Future Classics Prize.

### *About The Thief of Serendib*

*What if someone had to die for a crime that you committed? Whom would you choose? Your father, or your best friend?*

Meet Chaya – the twelve-year-old with a big heart and sticky fingers in the island kingdom of Serendib. Her life of idyllic boredom is shattered one day when she almost gets caught by a guard at the royal palace, as she breaks in and steals the Queen’s jewels.

As the daughter of the village headman, discovery means that Chaya’s father would be put to death for her crime. But her best friend Neel is arrested as the robber instead, and sentenced to death.

Father or best friend? Chaya is cornered, and faces the most agonising choice of her life.

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# THE THIEF OF SERENDIB

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## *Chapter One*

Chaya stared at the bronze spear pointing at her neck. ‘Stop right there,’ said the guard.

She 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 had laid a feast for his people.

‘What are you doing up 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. ‘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,’ said the guard. ‘You should be down on the grounds, enjoying the food and the festivities.’

Not her. Chaya 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 commander jabbed the spear towards her. ‘What have you got to say?’

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

The guard sighed. 'Fine. 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 leading into the inner palace complex through the crouching lion's paws.

'Come on now.' The guard gripped her arm, pulling her towards the cobbled walkway sloping downwards. 'I don't want to see you here again.'

The Queen's jewels jangled in her pouch. Sapphires, tourmalines and star rubies, set in heavy, shiny gold. How many jewels did one person need anyway?

Chaya shrugged herself free of the guard and walked down herself. Her arm stung from his fingers pinching into her. She paused near a tamarind tree and pretended to look up at the monkeys on it. Dappled sunshine pricked at her face as she looked at the guard from the corner of her eye.

He had stopped but was watching her. He swore loudly. 'What are you doing now? Get out, girl, before I come and give you a thrashing.'

Maybe she was being greedy. The sensible thing to do was to get out of there as fast as she could. That had been the plan after all. 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.

There was a commotion from above near the Queen's quarters. Sounds of shouting and people running. Wait, had she closed the drawer?

It was time to get out.

Chaya walked down the path as casually as she could. Her heart hammered over the sounds behind her.

She was out of the lion's entrance when she heard the yell.

'Hey, you!' It was the guard.

Chaya speeded up, her bare feet scorching on the cobbles.

'Stop there, girl!'

Chaya looked straight ahead. 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 walkway. 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 running *towards* her from below, shouting at her to stop. She turned and ran sideways blindly, springing up some steps into the Queen's prayer hall, and threaded through its granite columns.

Spears clattered against columns as the guards clomped after her. She got to the edge and plunged down into the foliage, thrashing through it and down the steps into the formal gardens.

She was close to the promenade at last. The smell of frying sweetmeats told her the food tables were just round the corner. The revellers were oblivious, and *veenas* played and bare-torsoed dancers jumped and twirled to the beat of drums. Chaya ran through the band, clapping her hands over her ears to escape the shrill sounds of the swaying flutes.

'Stop her,' someone screamed. '*Stop!*' The dancers paused, one by one, and some of the music petered out. People gawped, looking behind Chaya towards the guards. '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 green 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 skidded to a halt 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 under him. His mahout gave a shout and grabbed her by the plait, 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.

'Stop!' The mahout waved his arms. '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.

Skirting the city, she headed out 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'd lost them.

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

Chaya 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 directing the guards himself. The Queen and her procession of ladies were being guided out of the promenade and 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.

## *Chapter Two*

After going home for a quick change of clothes, Chaya hastened to the edge of the village. She picked her way through the paddy fields to the carpenter's workshop Neel worked at. Over its waist-high walls she could see him bent over something.

'Hey, Neel,' she said, stepping in to the smell of woodchips and polish.

Neel looked up and smiled, then bent down again to the square of teak he was working on. Stacks of wood leaned against walls, and half-finished furniture was strewn all over. 'You're back early. Thought you'd be at the feast for longer.'

Chaya slipped down to a stool next to him. 'I ... had to leave.' She gulped. 'You should have come.'

She craned her neck over the half-walls. The surrounding area was deserted

as always, only a soft breeze sweeping through the paddy and rustling the underside of the thatched roof.

‘We have so many orders to finish. Master didn’t want me to go.’ Neel worked his chisel into the wood, and brown shavings fell at his feet.

What was happening at the royal palace at the moment? Would they just give up looking for her?

‘Are you all right?’ Neel frowned.

‘Me? Yeah.’ She pointed to the square of wood he was working on. ‘That looks different. All geometric instead of the normal swirly designs you do.’

‘Oh, this is something we’re making for one of the foreign merchants. Their patterns are all like this. I had to use a ruler ...’

How long would they look for her? They wouldn’t give up easily. Chaya’s head snapped back at a thwacking noise. But it was only a crow hopping along the wall.

Neel put the chisel down. ‘What’s going on?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re all jumpy. What’s happened?’

‘You’re not going to like it.’

‘Tell me anyway.’

‘It’s ...’ Chaya bit her lip. ‘The usual.’

Neel sighed. ‘And what’s it for this time?’

‘It’s this boy, Vijay. You might know him. He was attacked by a crocodile in the river.’

‘I remember you telling me. What can you do for him though?’ Neel blew on the piece of wood, puffing out a cloud of brown dust.

Chaya rubbed her nose. ‘His family have found a medicine man that can treat him, and he might be able to walk again. They need money for the three-day journey, and to pay the medicine man of course.’

‘OK. But I’ve never seen you nervous about stealing before.’

‘Well ... I might have gone a bit overboard with what I took.’

Neel stared at her. ‘Which is?’

Chaya took out the pouch and spilled the jewels on to the intricate carving Neel was working on, where they lodged in various grooves. The sapphire shone the bluest of blues, but a sparkling pink ruby was a close second, with a silvery star shimmering inside it.

Neel shrank back as if he'd been stung. 'Chaya, *what on earth?* Where did you get those from?'

She picked up the sapphire and held it to the light. 'The Queen.'

Neel looked at the jewels, and back at Chaya. 'Please tell me you're joking.'

'It's fine, I don't think they recognised me.'

'Wait a minute, *someone saw you?*'

'Calm down. I ran away. I'm safe.'

'*Calm down?* This isn't like stealing a few coins here and there. This is the *King* we're talking about.'

'Queen, actually.' Neel glared at her, so she hurried on. 'Don't you want Vijay to get better? And anyway, there's someone else I took them for too.'

'Who?'

'You, Neel.'

'*Me?*'

'Your parents can have the money so you don't have to work. You're thirteen. You should come back to school again.'

Neel sighed. 'I've told you, I'm fine. I don't need any charity.'

'But you could even learn Sanskrit and the sciences from the temple. You could have a better life.'

'A better life?' Neel raised an eyebrow. 'That sounds a lot like *your* life.'

Chaya threw up her hands. 'Fine then. But this could help a lot of people in the village.' She gathered the jewels into the pouch. 'I need to get these to Vijay's family.'

'Wait, Chaya. Think. How's a poor farmer going to sell the Queen's jewels? And you said someone saw you?'

She hoisted the pouch back over her neck. 'Just one of the guards. He chased me down to the promenade. It got a bit ... manic. But I got away.'

'So, they'll be *looking* for you?'

'No need to look so horrified. Yes, maybe. I'll give Vijay's father something small that he can sell on the journey, far away from here. I'm going to go keep the rest at home.'

'The King's men are probably searching the villages right now! Don't go *anywhere* with those things on you. We need to hide them.'

'Hide them? Here?' Chaya's eyes swept the room. High shelves lined the far wall of the workshop, filled with tools, pots of polish and wooden trinkets.

‘Everything’s so open. What about that box you showed me the other day? The one you made with the hidden compartment. You still got it?’

‘Yes. Yes, it’s here somewhere.’ Neel went to the shelves and hunted through them. He brought down a small box carved with a two-headed bird clutching a snake in its claws. He opened the lid and lifted out a drawer, and after some fiddling about unlocked a secret compartment at the bottom of the box.

Chaya emptied the jewels inside, which just about fit. Scooping up some wood dust swept into a pile in the corner, she packed it in tightly with the jewels. Neel snapped everything shut and put the box back on a shelf among a few others like it.

‘It’s all right,’ he said, as if guessing what she was thinking. ‘The master takes these every three months to Galle, and he’s only just been, so they’re safe.’

‘Good. This’ll blow over soon. I can get them back then.’

‘Go home now. I’ll go into the city and see what the talk is. You’ll be safe once you’re home. Your father ...’

‘What? What about Father?’

‘Oh, Chaya. If they ever find out you took the jewels your father will be in big trouble.’

‘But Father’s only a minor official to the King. Why would they blame him?’

‘He knows the palace. Layout, access, that kind of thing. They’ll think he set it up. They’ll never believe a girl did this on her own. The King will have him —’ Neel’s eyes darted away from Chaya. ‘Come on. Let’s go now.’

Chaya followed him out, with a backwards glance at the box on the shelf. Neel’s unfinished sentence couldn’t have been any clearer to her.